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THE DAY, ITS DIVISIONS AND ITS LIMITS, IN BIBLICAL THOUGHT

by ROGER T. BECKWITH

MR. BECKWITH, Librarian of Latimer House, Oxford, has lately been devoting some study to the Jewish and Christian Calendar. Some by-products of his study have already appeared elsewhere—e.g. "A New Calendar and Lectionary" in *THE CHURCHMAN* for Summer 1970, and "The Modern Attempt to Reconcile the Qumran Calendar with the True Solar Year" in *REVUE DE QUMRAN*, No. 27 (Nov. 1970). *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY* is glad to publish a further by-product, the more so because this investigation was prompted by a re-reading of C. Sandegren's summary of K. Bornhäuser's book "Zeiten und Stunden in der Leidens- und Auferstehungsgeschichte" (1921) which appeared in our review pages in October 1952. Our readers need hardly be reminded of the permanent relevance of this subject for the interpretation of the Bible, especially of the Gospels; today it is being animatedly discussed also in relation to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

I. THE DAY AND ITS DIVISIONS

IN the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments, as in the English of the twentieth century, the same term is used for the "day" in the sense of the complete circuit of the sun and in the sense of the period of light (as distinguished from the period of darkness) included within that circuit. The basic division of the "day" in the broader sense, is thus into the "day", in the narrower sense, and the "night". The "day", in the narrower sense, is itself divided by the Old Testament into three periods, "morning", "noonday" and "evening". That "noonday" is a period and not just a point of time appears from the phrase in Isa. 16: 3 "in the midst of the noonday", though the point within it at which midday was reached would be roughly indicated by the position and shadow of the sun. The "night" is similarly divided by the Old Testament into three periods, or "watches", of which the second and third, the "middle watch" and the "morning watch", are named (Ex. 14: 24; Jdg. 7: 19; 1 Sam. 11: 11); and the expression "midnight" is also used, to indicate the middle point of the night and of the middle watch. No subdivision of the three periods of day or night into "hours" is traceable in the Old Testament, unless the reference to the "ten degrees" on the dial of Ahaz (2 Ki. 20: 9-11; Isa. 38: 8) implies it.

The name of the first watch of the night is not given in Scripture, but it may be that, by way of correspondence with the "morning watch", it was called the "evening watch" or the "second evening". If so, this would explain the mysterious phrase "between the evenings" (Ex. 12: 6; 16: 12; 29: 39, 41; 30: 8; Lv. 23: 5; Nu. 9: 3, 5, 11; 28: 4, 8) which has caused so much controversy both in ancient and in modern times. A consideration of the passages cited shows that the hour in question was for the Old Testament lawgiver night-fall, since it was the time at which the lamps in the tabernacle were to be lit, and also the time at which the passover was to be slain, which we know from Dt. 16: 6 was sunset. It was likewise the hour at which the evening sacrifice and the incense were to be offered, and as such was a suitable time for prayer (1 Ki. 18: 36; Ps. 141: 2; Dan. 9: 21; Judith 9; Luke 1: 10). Since it was a time between day and night, it could with equal propriety be reckoned as the end of one or as the beginning of the other.¹

In intertestamental times, we find the division of the day and night each into three periods being maintained by the Book of Jubilees and by the related literature of the Dead Sea community (see Jub. 49: 10-12; S. Talmon, "The Manual of Benedictions of the Sect of the Judaean Desert", in *Revue de Qumran*, Nov. 1960). The threefold division is also reflected in the Book of Judith (12: 5). It is not, however, mentioned in the New Testament, where we read only of midday and midnight, not of noonday and the middle watch, and find the Roman division of the night into four watches substituted for the Jewish division into three (Matt. 14: 25; Mark 6: 48; 13: 35f.; Acts 12: 4). Since this fourfold division is found not only in narrative but in a discourse of Christ's, as also in Josephus (*Antiquities* 18: 9: 6), it is likely that it was in common use among the Jews in New Testament times. Another innovation, probably of Greek or Egyptian origin, which is found in the intertestamental literature, the New Testament, Philo and Josephus, is the sub-

¹ By the time of our Lord, the slaying of the passover had probably been moved to a time earlier in the afternoon, for Philo says that it took place between midday and evening (*De Specialibus Legibus* 2: 145) or, more precisely, between the ninth hour and nightfall (*Quaestiones in Exodum* 1: 11), and Josephus, still more precisely, that it took place between the ninth hour and the eleventh (*War* 6: 9: 3), i.e. between about 3.0 and 5.0 p.m. Similarly, the offering of the evening sacrifice had, according to the Mishnah, been advanced to a time between half past the eighth hour and half past the ninth hour (*Pesahim* 5: 1), or, as Josephus has it, a time round about the ninth hour (*Antiquities* 14: 4: 3); and the New Testament tells us that in apostolic times the Jewish hour of evening prayer was the ninth hour (Acts 3: 1; 10: 30).

division of the day and night into hours.² In the New Testament, periods of three hours, two hours, one hour and half an hour are mentioned, and on a score of occasions the time at which an event took place is given by the number of the hour, some fifteen of which occurrences refer to different events on different occasions. Since the occurrences are as numerous as this, it is of interest to note that in no instance is the hour given a higher number than eleven, or is any statement made whether the hour specified is before or after noon. These facts must be taken in conjunction with the statement of John 11: 9f. that there are twelve hours in the day (here distinguished from the night), with the clear inference in Matt. 20: 3-12 and Acts 2: 15 that the hours are numbered from daybreak to nightfall, and with the absence of extra-biblical evidence (Jewish or non-Jewish) which does anything other than confirm this mode of numbering the hours. Altogether, the evidence makes it highly precarious to attempt to reconcile John 19: 14 with Mark 15: 25 by postulating that in the fourth gospel the hours are numbered from midnight, either on a twenty-four hour clock, or on a twelve-hour clock which begins again from noon. It cannot be said that Bornhäuser's arguments have made this contention any more credible than it was. However John and Mark are to be reconciled, therefore, it can hardly be in the manner he proposes. What makes this even more certain is the evidence, at which we shall later look, that the fourth gospel begins its day not from midnight but from nightfall and daybreak—times which are perfectly normal for the books both of the Old and of the New Testament.

Of the method by which time was actually determined in the biblical period, we know a little. The division of time into hours was a late refinement, which can only have become general when the use of some sort of sundial or hourglass became general. Before this, the day was divided simply into three broad periods, and the night likewise, and these were doubtless determined simply by observing the heavenly bodies. Morning began with the beginning of the day, evening ended with the ending of the day, and noonday began and ended as the sun approached and declined from its zenith, being also marked as the period of intense heat. Since the moon and the stars "ruled" the night, just as the sun "ruled" the day (Gn. 1: 16; Ps. 136: 7-9), it seems more than likely that time was measured at night by the moon and stars. The fixed points most readily ascertained would be daybreak, nightfall and midday: Bornhäuser's

² For the intertestamental literature, see Letter of Aristeas 303; Testament of Joseph 8: 1; 3 Macc. 5: 14. For Philo and Josephus, see the passages cited in note 1, together with Josephus, *War* 6: 1: 7; *Antiquities* 6: 14: 6; *Life* 54.

assertion that the only fixed point readily ascertained would be mid-day is quite gratuitous, and his deduction that the "day", in the broader sense, began from midnight (a point which would not be so easily ascertained) is not only gratuitous but inconsequential.³

II. THE DAY AND ITS LIMITS

The problem when the "day", in the broader sense, began and ended, can only be answered by careful attention to the language of Scripture. Theoretically, it could have begun and ended at any ascertainable juncture—at daybreak, midday or nightfall, or even at the beginning or end of noontide, at the beginning or end of the middle watch, or at midnight. The actual evidence, however, converges on two of these times, daybreak and nightfall.

The evidence is of four kinds. In the first place, there are statements that the day, in the broad sense, begins or ends at a particular juncture—either at daybreak or at nightfall. In the second place, there is language reflecting the order in which "morning" and "evening" occur within the limits of the day. In the third place, there is language reflecting the order in which "day" and "night" occur within the same limits. In the fourth place, there are expressions like "today", "tomorrow", "yesterday", "the same day", "the next day", from which it can sometimes be seen whether the night belongs with the period of daylight preceding or with the period of daylight following.

(a) *Evidence of the day beginning and ending at nightfall*

In Exodus 12: 18 we are told that the seven days of the *festival of unleavened bread* run from the evening of Nisan 14 to the evening of Nisan 21, thus beginning and ending in the evening. It follows that the one-day festival of the *passover*, which falls on Nisan 14 (v.6), and thus immediately precedes the festival of unleavened bread, also ends in the evening. It does not end early in the evening, since it lasts until the time "between the evenings" when the passover is slain (*ibid.*), and this expression, as we have seen, means sunset. On the other hand, it does not last after sunset, since after sunset comes night, the time for eating the passover with unleavened bread (Ex. 12: 8; Nu. 9: 11f; Dt. 16: 3-7), which consequently falls within the festival of unleavened bread. From one point of view it seems strange that the sacrifice should be on Nisan 14 and the feast upon the

³ On the question discussed in this paragraph, see E. W. Maunder, *The Astronomy of the Bible* (ed. 3, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), pp. 269-282.

sacrifice on Nisan 15, but the fact that the feast includes unleavened bread provides the explanation. The night which began Nisan 15 was in addition the time of the Exodus (Ex. 12: 29-42), and this is specifically stated to have occurred "on the fifteenth day of the first month", on the "selfsame day" as (the first day of) the festival of unleavened bread, but on the "morrow after the passover" (Ex. 12: 17; Nu. 33: 3).⁴

Like the festival of unleavened bread, the *day of atonement* also runs from evening to evening (Lv. 23: 32). Doubtless it begins and ends at the same hour as the festival of unleavened bread, i.e. at sunset.

Evidence that the *sabbath* begins and ends at this hour does not begin so early, but it later becomes very abundant. The Old Testament seems to give a hint of it in Neh. 13: 19, and the New Testament gives clear indications of it in the references to the time of Jesus's burial in Luke 23: 54 and John 19: 31, 42. Intertestamental evidence is supplied by 2 Macc. 8: 25f. and Zadokite Document 10: 14ff., and Jewish evidence from the first two centuries A.D. is to be found in Josephus (*War* 4: 9: 12; *Antiquities* 16: 6: 2; *Life* 32) and in the tractate Shabbath of the Mishnah.

Bornhäuser seems to hold that only on special occasions like the day of atonement does the celebration run from evening to evening: he does not even allow the sabbath to be such a case. We come on now, however, to evidence which does not concern holy days of any kind, but which nevertheless reflects the same conception of the beginning and end of the day.

Two of these pieces of evidence concern the *order in which morning and evening are mentioned*. Normally the Bible mentions morning before evening, this being the order in which they come in the waking and working day, and nothing therefore can be deduced from this order as to whether the "day" (in the broader sense) begins from daybreak or from nightfall. When, for example, in the law of the continual burnt offering the morning sacrifice is mentioned before the evening sacrifice (Ex. 29: 39-41), this is simply to be expected. Likewise, in the Mishnah, when the three hours of daily prayer are given in the order morning, noonday, evening (Berakoth 4: 1), this is entirely natural. What is surprising is that Dan. 8: 14, 26 tells us that the period for which the continual burnt offering is to be interrupted

⁴ In the New Testament, Nisan 14 and not Nisan 15 is reckoned the first day of unleavened bread (Matt. 26: 17; Mark. 14: 12; Luke. 22: 7), but this doubtless reflects the later custom, recorded in the Mishnah, of preparing for the feast of unleavened bread by removing all leaven from the house on the fourteenth (Pesahim 1: 1-5; 3: 6; 5: 4).

will extend to 2,300 "evening-mornings", and that the psalmist in Ps. 55: 16f. says that he will offer his daily prayers "evening and morning and at noonday". The order here is not natural, and seems to imply something about the hour at which the day begins, i.e., at the hour of the evening sacrifice and evening prayer, in other words at sunset. Of course, the order in which evening and morning (or, for that matter, day and night) are mentioned will not inevitably have this significance, as the context may supply a clear reason why one may have mentioned first, e.g. because for present purposes it is more significant (cp. 3 Macc. 5: 11), because it was already under discussion (cp. Job 24: 13f.), because a period between two limits is being marked out (cp. Nu. 9: 21), because the first of certain events in question occurred at the one time rather than at the other (cp. Ex. 16: 6-8, 12-15), or because both really belong to a sequence which began earlier (cp. Gn. 1: 3-5). But where none of these conditions is present, it is a fair inference that the order "evening, morning", "night, day", implies something about the hour at which the "day", in the broader sense, begins; and the same is true of "day, night", which is not, like "morning, evening", a more natural order than the reverse, for night is not only the time of rest after the toil of the day that is past, but also the time of refreshment for the toil of the day ahead.

Passages in which "*night*" is mentioned before "*day*", though there is no clear reason present why either order should be preferred, are much less common in the Old Testament and inter-testamental literature than passages in which "*day*" is mentioned before "*night*". The former kind does, however, occur: see Dt. 1: 33, 28; 66, 1 Sam. 25: 16; 1 Ki. 8: 29; Est. 4: 16; Ps. 91: 5f.; Isa. 27: 3; 34: 10; Jer. 14: 17; Song of the Three Holy Children 47. In the New Testament, on the other hand, passages of this kind are both more numerous and more widely distributed than passages of the other: see Mark. 4: 27; 5: 5; Luke 2: 37; Acts 20: 31; 26: 7; 2 Cor. 11: 25; 1 Thes. 2: 9; 3: 10; 2 Thes. 3: 8; 1 Tim. 5: 5; 2 Tim. 1: 3. There is also a passage of the kind in Josephus (*Antiquities* 16: 8: 5). Such passages are suggestive of a reckoning whereby the day begins and ends at nightfall.

The same reckoning is probably implied in the many passages of the Mosaic Law where a single day's ceremonial uncleanness ends at evening (Lv. 11 *passim*; 14: 46; 15 *passim*; 17: 15; 22: 6; Nu. 19 *passim*), i.e. at sunset (Dt. 23: 11). The purpose of setting this end to the period of uncleanness can hardly be a reluctance to exclude anyone from the camp overnight, since in some cases uncleanness is extended to seven days or even longer, and it is

noteworthy that in such cases also uncleanness ends at evening (Nu. 19: 19), which is therefore the end of the day.

One final passage may be mentioned, which like two of those cited in connection with the festival of unleavened bread uses the language of "*the same day*", "*the next day*" etc. This is 1 Sam 11: 9-11, where the morning watch (i.e. the third part of the night) and the morning, up to the time the sun is hot, are both included in the "morrow", which therefore begins not at daybreak but at the previous nightfall.

(b) *Evidence of the day beginning and ending at daybreak*

The evidence of a second and different reckoning is not so full and distinct as that which we have been considering hitherto, but it cannot be ignored. With the exception of one passage, it consists wholly of statements in which the "day" precedes the "night", or in which "the same day" "the next day" and similar phrases are used in such a way as to include the night with the period of daylight preceding, not with that following.

Passages in which "*day*" is mentioned before "*night*", though there is no clear reason present why either order should be preferred, are numerous in the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature: see Gn. 1: 14, 16, 18; 8: 22; 31: 40; Nu. 14: 14; 2 Sam. 21: 10; 1 Ki. 8: 59; 1 Ch. 9: 33; Neh. 1: 6; 4: 9; 9: 12, 19; Ps. 22: 2; 42: 3, 8; 55: 10; 74: 16; 78: 14; 88: 1; 136: 7-9; Isa. 28: 19; 38: 12f.; 60: 11; 62: 6; Jer. 9: 1; 16: 13; 31: 35; 33: 20, 25; 36: 30; La. 2: 18; Tobit 10: 7; Judith 11: 17; Wisdom 10: 17; Baruch 2: 25; 2 Macc. 13: 10. For the Dead Sea literature, see Talmon, *op. cit.* In the New Testament, however, such references are confined to the book of Revelation and the writings of St. Luke: Luke 18: 7; Acts 9: 24; Rev. 4: 8; 7: 15; 8: 12; 12: 10; 14: 11; 20: 10.

Passages in which significant use is made of expressions like "*the same day*", "*the next day*" are Gn. 19: 34; Lv. 7: 15; 22: 30; 1 Sam. 19: 11; 28: 8, 19; Judith 6: 21-7: 1; John 6: 22; Acts 4: 3; 20: 7-11; 23: 32. In each of these places, it will be observed, the night is reckoned with the previous day, and in some of them it is the complete night that is so reckoned, not simply the period up to midnight, as Bornhäuser supposes. This applies to 1 Sam. 19: 11, where "tonight" refers to the whole of the night, at any point in which David can make his escape, whereas "tomorrow" is equated with "in the morning"; to Judith 6: 21-7: 1, where it is explicitly stated that the Jews prayed for deliverance "all that night" before their enemies advanced "the next day"; to Acts 4: 3, where the imprisonment of Peter and John "unto the morrow" clearly means imprisonment for the night; to Acts 23: 32, where the march to Antipatris (a march of about thirty miles, begun at the third hour of the night) must have taken almost

until daybreak; and perhaps to John 6: 22, where the disciples had rowed three or four miles against a contrary wind since evening, which very likely implies that Jesus did not come to them till a time like that given by St. Mark, i.e. the fourth watch of the night (Mark 6: 48). It has sometimes been supposed that the Acts of the Apostles reflects the Roman legal reckoning, whereby the day began and ended at midnight (though it does not appear that the Romans numbered the hours from midnight); but in view of Acts 4: 3 and Acts 23: 32 it seems fairly certain that what is actually reflected is a Jewish reckoning, whereby the day began and ended at daybreak.

There is a passage of the same kind in the writings of Josephus, and one of particular interest because it concerns the *passover and the festival of unleavened bread*. It is hardly conceivable that Josephus was ignorant of the fact that, according to the Pentateuch, the dividing line between the passover and the feast of unleavened bread, and between the seven days of the latter, falls in the evening. Josephus is very clear that the sabbath begins and ends in the evening, and, if the tractate Pesahim in the Mishnah is anything to judge by, Pharisaic tradition (which Josephus, as a self-confessed Pharisee, would have accepted) was equally clear that the same is true of the passover. Yet when Josephus comes to record the law that the flesh of the passover lamb is to be wholly consumed during the night, and none of it left till the morning (Ex. 12: 8-10; 34: 25; Dt. 16: 4), the way he puts it is that none is left "till the next day" (*Antiquities* 3: 10: 5). This shows that Josephus is equally happy with a second way of reckoning the days of these festivals, according to which they begin and end at daybreak.*

All the foregoing evidence for a second mode of reckoning is of an implicit rather than an explicit kind, but there is one passage in the New Testament which may be an explicit endorsement of it, Matthew 28: 1. According to one interpretation, the verse states that the women came to the Lord's empty tomb "late on the sabbath day, as it began to dawn towards the first day of the week". If this is right (and ὀψέ with the genitive certainly can mean "late on . . ."), what Josephus says implicitly of the passover is here said explicitly of the sabbath, that it ends at daybreak. The verb 'to dawn' (ἐπιφώσκειω) cannot here be used of the first day figuratively, as it is of the sabbath in Lk. 23: 54. This is not so much because the other gospels are emphatic that the women came to the empty tomb at

* Since the tradition of the Mishnah requires the passover meal to be finished by midnight (Pesahim 10: 9; Zebahim 5: 8), it is just conceivable that Josephus is thinking of midnight as the hour at which the new day begins, but this is very unlikely, since the Mishnah itself explains that the rule is only a precautionary measure, and that "the same day" in such cases ends at daybreak (Berakoth 1: 1).

daybreak, not just before nightfall, but because St. Matthew himself is emphatic that the tomb was not empty until the third day (Matt. 12: 40; 16: 21; 17: 23; 20: 19; 27: 63f.), which would not even have begun before nightfall on the Saturday (see 27: 62). St. Matthew is therefore stating, according to this interpretation, that the sabbath ends at daybreak, but is also implying that by another reckoning, which he likewise accepts, the sabbath ends at nightfall.

It is not certain, however, that this is what St. Matthew means, for it is equally possible to translate his words "*after* the sabbath day, as it began to dawn *on* the first day of the week" (a fact which was not fully appreciated at the date when Bornhäuser wrote).

(c) *Evidence of the co-existence of the two reckonings*

The cases of Josephus and, it may be, St. Matthew show that the two reckonings were not in rivalry with each other, but could co-exist harmoniously within the mind of a single writer. If one looks back over the evidence which we have been examining, it will at once become clear that St. Matthew and Josephus are not alone in this. Both reckonings are found in the Pentateuch, the books of Samuel, the books of Kings, Nehemiah, the Psalter, Isaiah, Jeremiah, 2 Maccabees, the Dead Sea literature, the writings of St. Luke and the gospel of St. John. This may at first sight seem a very surprising conclusion. However, a little consideration reduces one's astonishment. For, in the first place, there is no clear reason why, in the uninterrupted succession of days and nights, the order "day, night" should be preferred, or *vice versa*. Night, as was remarked earlier, provides both rest after toil and refreshment for toil. In the second place, since the greater part of the night is consumed in sleep, for most practical purposes it makes little difference whether the night is reckoned with the period of daylight preceding or with that following. It is true that acts of manual labour or worship during the hours of darkness are possible, and that on special occasions the former may be prohibited and the latter prescribed. Consequently, when a day and night or a definite number of days and nights are being set apart from manual labour for religious purposes, it is necessary to decide which nights are being set apart in this way as well as which days. This was especially true of the passover, when the main celebration took place by night, but even in this case the special circumstances made it as natural for Josephus to think of the new day as beginning after the night was over as before it began, since he cannot have failed to see that the lamb connected the night as intimately with the day preceding as the unleavened bread did with the day following. The night was a less significant part of the sabbath celebration, and though, at the time of the Passion, the

night to which the sabbatical prohibition of labour actually applied was the night after Christ died, the fact that the normal duties of the working week did not recommence until after the night following the sabbath must have made this also, in the minds of contemporary Jews, an effective part of the sabbath rest. It was not therefore difficult—indeed it was natural—for St. Matthew to think of the sabbath as ending both before the second night and after it. But what applies to the sabbath applies *a fortiori* to the ordinary days of the week, for in this case there was no prohibition of labour, and any acts of worship which pious individuals might perform in the hours of darkness could equally well be regarded as preceding or following those performed in the hours of daylight.

Latimer House, Oxford.