

Acts 20:11 in the Navajo Bible

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Áádóó nidziiztáá nít'éí góde Paul hanásdzáago bááh dílzingo yidánígíí niyiizti'go dajíyáá' áádóó bił ahił dahojilne'go hoos'iid, áádóó índá hats'áá' dah diiyá. (Acts 20:11)¹

Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. (Acts 20:11, NIV)²

Introduction

In Acts 20 Paul is visiting with the church in Troas. He had many dear friends there and spent a week with them. The part of the story we're dealing with here is what happened at the end of the week. It would seem that he let an opportunity slip to resume his journey at the beginning of the week. This would only make sense if the first day were a day of rest and worship. Otherwise why would he wait until evening to meet with his fellow believers? Actually, he did wait until a day of rest and worship was over in order to resume his trip. But it wasn't the one you might have in mind. We'll discuss a couple of things about this passage, just for interest, and then come back to the matter of when these things happened.

The Nature of the Parting Meal

There are a couple of interesting things about this passage in Navajo. In the Navajo, and in some English translations, the act of breaking bread at midnight in this passage is interpreted as a celebration of the Lord's Supper. It probably was, but not in the sense of performing a ceremony. The Lord's Supper, at this time in history, was not a ceremony. It was a meal.

The fact that Paul and his companions undoubtedly had the Lord in mind as they ate their supper does not in itself justify translating the way NLT (New Living Translation) does: "Then they all went back upstairs, shared in the Lord's Supper, and ate together." (Acts 20:11, NLT)³ It is not justified because one could carry a wrong idea away from reading such a translation. And it is not justified because it seems to imply that two things were happening rather than one: (1) sharing the Lord's Supper, and (2) eating together. These two things were one and the same.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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The Navajo does a better job of translating the passage than NLT when it says, *bááh dílzingo yidánígíí niyiizti'go dajítýáá'* ("having broken the sacred bread, they ate"). It is an improvement because breaking bread and eating the bread that was broken are brought together and represented as one act, as it undoubtedly was. The Greek says, *klasas ton arton kai geusamenos eph hikanon* ("having broken bread and tasted a sufficient [amount]"). Breaking bread in this context is directly connected with eating it.

When Jesus ate His last meal with the disciples before the crucifixion, that was not a ceremony. It was a meal. "[H]e took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (Luke 22:19). Always after this, sitting down to a meal reminded Christ's followers of what that last meal had meant to His disciples. Having said this, it is clear that in Navajo the word *dílzingo* ("sacred") is added. This was not "sacred" bread, if what we mean when we say that is something like communion wafers. It was bread. The Greek does not say "sacred" and it does not say "Lord." It says those present broke bread and ate it. But as they did so, they undoubtedly thought about Christ eating the Last Supper with His disciples.

The Nature of the Gathering

Another point to notice has to do with what happened after the meal. The Navajo suggests that people talked back and forth with each other until sun up. Again, this isn't totally wrong. There must have been some give and take. But this doesn't correctly capture the focus of what was happening. The Greek says *homilēsas* ("after speaking"). That word specifically refers to the action of one person.⁴ It is grammatically singular. Navajo *bił ahit dahojilne'go* ("talking with each other") is distributive plural.

If I had been in Troas that Saturday night (not Sunday night), knowing that Paul would be leaving the next day, and not knowing whether a similar opportunity would ever present itself again, I like to believe I would have spent most of my time listening.

When Did All of This Occur?

Now we consider the interesting question of when the events occurred. Verse 7 says, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight."

If the first day of the week (Sunday) were a day of rest and worship, it would be only natural for Paul to until afterward to resume his journey. In this model the church in Troas worships on Sunday ("the first day of the week"), Paul speaks until midnight (vs. 7), and on until dawn (vs. 11), then travels on Monday. Is this model right or wrong? It's wrong! And why is it wrong? Because the days in Bible times began at sunset, not at midnight or at dawn. When the text says the believers gathered for an evening meal on the first day of the week, that was Saturday night.

⁴ We have a word in English that refers to preaching. The word is "homiletics." This Greek word is where our English word "homiletics" comes from. This would be consistent with saying that mostly what Paul was doing between midnight and sun up was preaching.

Paul spent Sabbath (Saturday) with the church, resting according to the fourth commandment just as the ladies who went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body had done earlier (see Luke 23:56; 24:1) – after the cross. I've been keeping the seventh day Sabbath for over sixty years and that's long enough to recognize what was happening in our passage. As the Sabbath comes to an end a group gathers for sundown worship. After worship it's not uncommon to share a meal. This is the context for Paul's speaking until midnight. Then at midnight a young man named Eutychus falls to his death from an upper window (Acts 20:9) and Paul restores him to life. Everyone goes back upstairs and they eat a light meal. (Supper was at least six hours ago by then.) After this Paul talks on until midnight and then leaves on his trip bright and early – not Monday morning, but Sunday morning.

The dark hours of the day come before the light hours in the Bible. This is true of both Old and New Covenants. We say "Sunday" and we say "the first day of the week" and we think of these as being identical, but there is a subtle difference. Sunday, as we think of it today, begins in the middle of the preceding night (midnight Saturday night). In Bible times the first day of the week did not begin in the middle of the preceding night, but at the beginning of the preceding night (sundown Saturday). Paul left on Sunday because he had been with the church in Troas all day celebrating the Sabbath. The events we read about which took place during the night time hours of the "the first day of the week" took place on Saturday night and were followed, not by the second day of the week, but by the daylight hours of the first day. Paul resumed his trip Sunday morning.

Conclusion

The Navajo translation of Acts 20:11 is not wrong what it says, but there's more to say. The meal Paul ate on Saturday at sundown in vs. 7 was undoubtedly eaten with the events of the Lord's Supper in mind, as every meal was for followers of Jesus at this time, and yet it was a real meal. The people who shared it were honoring the Lord, but were also satisfying hunger. So that's one point. The other one is that, while there was undoubtedly a loving exchange of words while the church in Troas enjoyed Paul's companionship for what was possibly the last time, it is also true that the Greek places the emphasis on what Paul said. In the original the word for speaking is singular. Paul was speaking (for the most part) and all the others were listening (for the most part).

These are mere quibbles in the broader scheme of things, but it is important to realize that – whatever happened that night – the time when it happened was not Sunday night, but Saturday night. That's the evening part of the first day of the week, as the Bible uses these terms. The first day of the week is the day after the seventh day of the week, i.e., the day after the Sabbath.