

# Colossians 2:16-17 in the Navajo Bible

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Éí baa daadánii áádóó doodlǫ́lǫ́, índa áda'azǫ́d áádóó dah néitǫ́hgo nahadláii índa háá'áyǫ́h jí dólzinií bida'ol'í nihinǫ́go diné ła' yee nihaa náot'ǫ́' lago. <sup>17</sup> Éidíyee' t'áá aaníinii baa hodoolzhishígíí bichaha'oh t'éiyá át'é, nidi Christ t'áá aaníinii nilǫ́. (Colossians 2:16-17)<sup>1</sup>

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

This is a difficult passage – not impossible, but difficult. The Navajo translators offer a footnote to vs. 16 which approximates to, "The Colossians were being drawn by both Jews and pagans to join in a mixed form of worship." But what we discuss below can be accounted for on the basis of an entirely Jewish model. In regard to ceremonial observances Paul was dealing with a Jewish problem, just as the issue of circumcision in his letter to the Galatians was a Jewish problem. If there were pagan influences in the Colossian church, we will not be dealing with them here.

Throughout this paper I am heavily indebted to my friend Ron du Preez, author of the book, *Sabbath Put to Rest: A Scriptural Study of Colossians 2:16*.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the most exhaustively thorough treatments I know of on any topic. As I write this, du Preez is using the above research as a starting point for his third doctoral dissertation. As I say, he's thorough.

## Three-Part List of Terms

### Religious festival

The word translated "religious festival" in Colossians 2:16 is *heortēs* (from *heortē* "feast"). Forms of this Greek word occur 25 times in 23 New Testament passages and are consistently translated into Navajo as *hodǫ́lzingo áłah ná'ádlee* ("sacred gathering or assembly"), with suffixes -í, -ígi, -ígíí, -ígóó, and so on, or no suffix at all. Once the form is *hodǫ́lzingo áłah adooleet* (John 13:29), but this is a superficial difference. The word *ná'ádlee* refers to repeated activity; the word *adooleet* refers to future activity.

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

<sup>2</sup> English Bible quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>3</sup> I use the eighth edition, available from Omega Media, P.O. Box 46, Weimar, CA 95736. Alternatively, used contact the author by e-mail at [faithethics@yahoo.com](mailto:faithethics@yahoo.com).

In Colossians 2:16, however, the word *heortēs* is translated with a different Navajo word – *áda'azjíd*. The meaning is similar to that of the other verses, since *hodílzingo* refers to something holy or sacred and so does the verb stem *–zjíd*, but anyone reading all 25 examples would be struck by the difference in wording between Colossians 2:16 and the other passages. I should point out that the same thing happens in English. In 24 out of 25 cases *heortē* is translated "Feast" in NIV, but here it is translated "religious festival."

Before going on let me point out that *hodílzingo átah ná'ádleeh* is an especially appropriate way to translate the Greek word *heortē* ("feast") into Navajo, because it corresponds to a Hebrew word from the Old Testament that uniquely refers to the joyful pilgrim festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, when all Israel had to gather or assemble in Jerusalem. Navajo *átah ná'ádleeh* has to do with periodically coming together, which captures the meaning of the term "pilgrim" festival exactly.

### New Moon celebration

The New Moon celebration is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 8:13, along with the three joyful feasts introduced above.

according to the daily requirement for offerings commanded by Moses for Sabbaths, New Moons and the three annual feasts– the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. (2 Chronicles 8:13)

Below I offer another reference to New Moons, which might be a better example, because it lists the same things that we find above and in Colossians 2:16 and puts them in the same order

I will stop all her celebrations: her yearly festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days– all her appointed feasts. (Hosea 2:11).

A number of Old Testament passages give a four-part list of observances similar to the one Paul offers,<sup>4</sup> but in a different order. Only Hosea offers a three-part list in the same order as Colossians 2:16. So if Paul has an Old Testament passage in mind as he writes, it is not one of these, but Hosea 2:11. This proposed fact brings a flood of insight into what Paul was saying in Colossians and it also explains his rather unusual use of the word "Sabbath."

### Sabbath

Everyone knows what "Sabbath" means already, so it won't be necessary to spend much time discussing the word here. True or false? It is true that many people think so! Actually "Sabbath" has a range of available meanings.

Below I quote passages where "Sabbath" means "week," passages where "Sabbath" means "year" (the seventh year), and passages where "Sabbath" refers to the solemn feasts of Trumpets and Day of Atonement. Oh, and yes the word "Sabbath" can also refer to the seventh day. So which of these four possible meanings does Paul have in mind in the passage under

<sup>4</sup> See Numbers 28:1-29:40; 1 Chronicles 23:29-31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 8:12-13; 31:3; Nehemiah 10:33; Ezekiel 45:13-17. See also Ezekiel 46:1-15.

review? It's perfectly obvious! He means . . . . Or is it obvious what he means? Perhaps we should discuss this after all. We begin with examples where the Greek word for "Sabbath" means "week." (In saying this I don't mean that it means "week" in a lexical sense, but that in context this is what the word is being used to describe.) See table 1.

Table 1  
Places Where "Sabbath" Means "Week"

Reference	Text
Matthew 28:1	After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week [ <i>mian sabbatōn</i> ], Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.
Mark 16:2	Very early on the first day of the week [ <i>mia tōn sabbatōn</i> ], just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb
Mark 16:9	When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week [ <i>prōtē sabbatou</i> ], he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.
Luke 18:12	"I fast twice a week [ <i>dis tou sabbatou</i> ] and give a tenth of all I get."
Luke 24:1	On the first day of the week [ <i>mia tōn sabbatōn</i> ], very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.
John 20:1	Early on the first day of the week [ <i>mia tōn sabbatōn</i> ], while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.
John 20:19	On the evening of that first day of the week [ <i>tē mia sabbatōn</i> ], when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"
Acts 20:7	On the first day of the week [ <i>tē mia tōn sabbatōn</i> ] 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.
1 Corinthians 16:2	On the first day of every week [ <i>kata mian sabbatou</i> ], each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

Next consider examples where "Sabbath" means "year" – the seventh year, when the land could not be cultivated. See table 2.

Table 2  
Places Where "Sabbath" Means "Year"

Reference	Text
Leviticus 25:2	"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD.'"
Leviticus 25:4	"'But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.'"
Leviticus 25:6	"'Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you-- for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you,'"
Leviticus 26:34a	"'Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies;'"
Leviticus 26:34b	"'then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths.'"
Leviticus 26:35	"'All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it.'"
Leviticus 26:43	"'For the land will be deserted by them and will enjoy its sabbaths while it lies desolate without them. They will pay for their sins because they rejected my laws and abhorred my decrees.'"
2 Chronicles 36:21	The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

In still other places the word "Sabbath" means "(solemn) feast," as in Leviticus 23:24 where it refers to the feast of Trumpets, and in Leviticus 23:24 where it refers to the Day of Atonement. See table 3.

Table 3  
Places Where "Sabbath" Refers to Solemn Feasts

Reference	Text
Leviticus 23:24	"Say to the Israelites: 'On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest [ <i>šabbātôn</i> ], a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts.'"
Leviticus 23:32	"It [the tenth day of the seventh month, see vs. 27] is a sabbath of rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath."

We need to be very clear on the fact that the joyful feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles are never called *šabbāt* (or *šabbātôn*). These feasts are always called *ḥag*. By contrast, Trumpets and Day of Atonement were solemn occasions and these are never called *ḥag*, but occasionally they can be called *šabbāt* (or *šabbātôn*), i.e., "Sabbath." There is a clear distinction between the two groups of feasts.

So when Paul says "religious festivals" in Colossians 2:16 (which goes back to Greek *heortē*, and beyond that to Hebrew *ḥag*), that term cannot be understood to include the feast of Trumpets or the Day of Atonement. And yet, why would Paul exclude them? This question is even more pressing when we realize that Hosea 2:11, which was specifically in his mind as he wrote the passage, twice emphasizes that all the feasts are included. The fact is that Paul does

not exclude anything. Both groups of feasts are represented, but two different terms are used to describe them. Paul does not call the solemn feasts "religious festivals" (from *heortē*). Instead, he calls them "Sabbath day[s]." The Greek word *sabbatōn* (from *sabbata*) is plural; "sabbaths" or "sabbath days" would be an appropriate way to translate it into English.

The above meaning is soundly biblical, as documented in table 3 (above), and Paul's unusual but learned use of the Greek word in this passage shows just how careful his rabbinic training was. Only a person well versed in Old Testament usage would think of doing this. The rest of us might think that if the word is "Sabbath," the meaning has to be "seventh day." But this is not the case, as Paul well knew.

## Hosea 2

*The sequence of the three terms.* I have suggested that when writing Colossians 2:16 Paul had Hosea 2:11 specifically in mind. We can be sure of this because in the other Old Testament passages which appear to give the same list of items (feasts, New Moons, Sabbaths), the sequence goes in reverse order (Sabbaths, New Moons, feasts). Another difference is that they mention four things instead of three (Sabbaths, New Moons, feasts, and some fourth term). Hosea 2:11 is the only Old Testament passage that gives the same three-part list in the same order Paul uses. In the passage from Hosea God is speaking through the prophet and He says,

I will stop all her celebrations: her yearly festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days— all her appointed feasts. (Hosea 2:11)

Notice this verse begins with "all her celebrations" and ends with "all her appointed feasts." So there is the matter of emphasis. Twice God makes the point that no feast days are being left out. It is an inclusive list.

Notice also that the two phrases, "all her celebrations" and "all her appointed feasts," provide a frame around the central list. This speaks to the matter of symmetry. See fig. 1.

- A "all her celebrations"
- B "yearly festivals," "New Moons," "Sabbath days"
- A' "all her appointed feasts"

Fig. 1. Hosea 2:11 (first time), showing mirror image symmetry with a frame around the central list.

The fact that Hosea's list occurs at the center of a frame like this offers a clue as to how the list itself should be interpreted. The presence of an ABA' frame around the list raises a question whether the same structure might characterize the list itself. I believe it does.

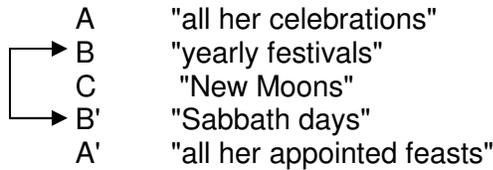


Fig. 2. Hosea 2:11 (second time), showing mirror image symmetry between two types of annual feasts.

The word "all" in line A of fig. 2 corresponds to the word "all" in line A', and "yearly festivals" in line B corresponds to "Sabbath days" in line B'. This does not mean the two terms ("religious festivals," "Sabbath days") are identical in meaning. There is a clear contrast between them (the one group of feasts is joyful, the other solemn), but they are alike at least in this regard, that they both describe events which occur annually. The reference to monthly celebrations comes between them. There is some nice symmetry here.

In Colossians 2:16 we don't have anything that corresponds to the outermost lines ("all" [A], "all" [A']) of figs. 1 and 2, but we do have a correspondence between "religious festival" and "Sabbath day," where it would follow that both terms refer to annual events. Thus, where Hosea 2 has "yearly festivals" and "Sabbath days," Colossians 2 has "religious festival" and "Sabbath day."

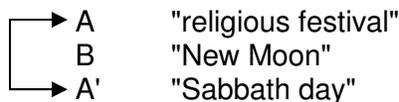


Fig. 3. Colossians 2:16, showing mirror image symmetry between the two types of annual feasts.

The terms "Sabbath days" (Hosea) and "Sabbath day" (Colossians) look more different than they actually are. In Greek translation Hosea says *sabbata* (plural) and Paul says *sabbatōn* (plural). The two words are not identical in Greek, but they are both plural. So the difference of number that we see in NIV between "Sabbath days" (Hosea) and "Sabbath day" (Colossians) really isn't there when we examine the sentences more closely. In context both terms should be translated as plurals.

*The choice of words.* If the Greek word *heortē* ("feast") never refers to the solemn feasts of Trumpets and Day of Atonement,<sup>5</sup> neither does Hebrew *ḥag* ("feast"). That's the word Hosea uses, because he's writing in Hebrew; Paul uses *heortē* because he's writing in Greek. But the meaning is the same in both cases. Both words refer only to joyful pilgrim feasts.

In the case of solemn feasts, the term "Sabbath" *is* used in the Old Testament to describe both Trumpets (Leviticus 23:24) and Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:32). So if Paul uses the same term the same way, that is consistent with Old Testament usage and fits

<sup>5</sup> In the New Testament Greek *heortē* refers to Passover in Matthew 26:5; 27:15; Mark 14:2; 15:6; Luke 2:41, 42; 22:1; 23:17; John 2:23; 4:45, 45 (there are two references in vs. 45); 6:4; 11:56; 12:12, 20; 13:1, 29; and Acts 18:21. It probably refers to Pentecost in John 5:1. It refers to Tabernacles in John 7:2, 8, 8, 10, 11, 14, and 37. These are the only occurrences of this word in the New Testament. Greek *heortē* (Paul's word in Colossians 2:16) is never used to describe the solemn feasts of Trumpets and Day of Atonement. Never.

perfectly with what we read in Hosea 2:11. Actually it's not a matter of fitting the earlier passage; Paul's wording is drawn directly from it. What he says could be called a quotation.

*The thrust of what's being said.* Paul's intent in Colossians 2:16 is that, in Christ, all the feasts of Israel have now come to an end. Some might still celebrate them, but the significance they once had is gone.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

In Hosea God was promising to bring the feast days to an end, and in Christ He did it. It is not that the feasts were against us formerly and have been taken away because of their hostility. On the contrary, the feasts in their day were entirely good and useful – up until the cross. After the cross their function was at an end. They were no longer useful, but a positive hindrance. Israel's annual feasts (both joyful and solemn), and its monthly feasts, were all shadows looking forward to Christ. In Christ even the feasts that pointed to His second coming (Trumpets, Day of Atonement) are rendered obsolete. What we have is not a phased withdrawal, but an event which renders them all obsolete at a single stroke. This might seem too bold a statement, but it is precisely the point that God makes, speaking through the prophet Hosea. When He came, Christ was the reality that the feast days had foreshadowed. They looked forward to Him. He fulfilled them.

## Exodus 20

If the feast days looked forward to Christ, the seventh-day Sabbath of the fourth commandment looks back to Christ – as the Creator of our world in union with the Father (see John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:1-3).

In this context, consider the first few words of the Sabbath command: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Think about this. When was the last time you remembered something that was still in the future? It doesn't work that way! When you remember, your mind goes the opposite way – to things that have already happened. There's a difference between future and past, and that is the difference between the annual "Sabbath day" of Colossians 2 and the weekly "Sabbath day" of Exodus 20. (Think about getting your monthly pay check. It really does make a difference whether you're waiting for something that hasn't come or whether you have it already.)

The fourth commandment does not foreshadow Christ's coming. Instead it refers back to His role in creation ("For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them"). The creation of the world is not a future event. God has already done it. So is Paul referring to the seventh day Sabbath when he says that certain "Sabbath day[s]" are "a shadow of things to come"? Not for a moment. He does not say in Colossians 2:16 – or in any other passage – that the weekly Sabbath, kept from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, was being done away. It is just as valid and just as binding now as it was at any time following God's act of bringing our world into existence. Let me add that it is just as refreshing and restful too.

## Conclusion

Salvation might be free, but being a Christian is certainly not a free ride. Don't expect God to just bless you and leave you alone. In order to bless everything you do, God must touch everything you do. He wants to come close. If any part of your life remains off limits, you have not yet given your heart to God, you are still unconverted, and you are still in your sins. When God transforms you, He transforms everything about you. None of this has anything to do with Jewish ceremonies, but it has everything to do with faith.

Faith is not a ceremony and neither is the seventh-day Sabbath. People have said that the Sabbath is Jewish until they believe this, but it is not true. Was Adam a Jew? If he was, we are all Jews and there is no distinction. In that event, what was Paul saying in Ephesians 2:14 about removing the dividing wall of hostility? No. Jews descend from Abraham, and he lived many centuries after creation, so there were no Jews at the time when the Sabbath came into being. The only man was Adam and the only woman was Eve. All of us without distinction are their children. This is why Jesus says, "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath is not Jewish. It was made for all mankind.

The reason why Jews kept the Sabbath is that they worshiped God. So should we worship something else in order to avoid appearing to follow their example? It is true that Jews kept the Sabbath – and for good reason, because their God was Creator of heaven and earth – but that doesn't make the day Jewish. The association is not between the Sabbath and Jews, but between the Sabbath and God, who made all things. The Jews' link to the Sabbath was that they worshiped the One whose work it celebrates. So do we. It is not the Sabbath of your friends, or of your family; it's the Sabbath of the Lord. You don't keep it for them, you keep it for Him.

The feast days that looked forward to Christ have now fallen away, because we now look back to Christ. He came. But the Sabbath of the fourth commandment has not fallen away because it never looked forward in the first place. The cross did nothing to change the fact that God is the Creator of the world or that Jesus is His Son.