

Ephesians 1:23 in the Navajo Bible

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Da'oodláńí t'áá ła' bizhi'ee hats'íís nilíigo bee hadaalt'é dzizlǫ́í', áádóó t'áá ałtsoní hólónígíí hwee hadaalt'é daazlǫ́í'. (Ephesians 1:23)¹

which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:23)²

Introduction

There is a nice contrast in Ephesians 1:23 between the church being the fullness of Christ and Christ being the fullness of the church. In NIV, "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way," is all one clause. We read this and it sounds good, but it would be easy to miss what's actually being said. In Navajo the two thoughts are brought out separately and the intent is impossible to miss.

The Grammar of the Passage

A rough approximation of the Navajo text of vs. 23 would be, "The church (His body) by means of it He is complete, and all things that exist by means of Him they are complete." The fundamental contrast here is between *bee hadaalt'é dzizlǫ́í'* ("by it [or them] He is complete") and *hwee hadaalt'é daazlǫ́í'* ("by Him they are complete").

Bringing this out still more, we have 3rd person (*bee*) then 4th person (*dzizlǫ́í'*) in the first clause, and 4th person (*hwee*) then 3rd person (*daazlǫ́í'*) in the next clause. Less forcefully, but considering the context, we have plural (*bee*, referring back to *da'oodláńí t'áá ła' bizhi'ee* "all believers")³ then singular (*dzizlǫ́í'*), and singular (*hwee*) then plural (*daazlǫ́í'*).

Table 1
Grammatical Contrasts in Ephesians 1:23

First Clause			Second Clause		
bee	3rd person	(plural)	hwee	4th person	singular
dzizlǫ́í'	4th person	singular	daazlǫ́í'	3rd person	plural

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

² 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.

³ The absence of distributive plural *da-* is not evidence that a Navajo word is not plural. Strictly speaking, the position 3 prefix *da-* in Navajo does not mark plurality, but distribution. Its actual meaning is closer to "each one, severally."

This is nice word-smithing on the part of the Navajo translators. Is the thought conveyed in this way as sound as their syntax? I think it is.

The Theology of the Passage

"The fullness of him"

Does the church give Christ fullness? Does it represent the fullness of Christ? Paul says it does. What was the inspired writer saying in Psalm 22:3? Well, I guess there's a question about that too. Let's look at the verse and at some of the translations of the verse.

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. (Psalm 22:3, NIV)

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. (Psalm 22:3, NRSV)

NIV offers a reading that might be possible grammatically, although I don't think it makes the best sense of the Hebrew. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)⁴ does a better job with this verse. God is "enthroned on the praises of Israel." This means that as we accept Him by faith and praise Him, the number of His subjects increases and this is to His glory. As we learn to praise God through Christ, we increase the scope of His kingdom and therefore the scope of His kingship. Where would a king be if He had no subjects? And so it is true, as the Psalm says, God is "holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (NRSV).

This verse does not exclude Christians. Although it is not the subject of this paper, let me make just one further point in this regard before moving on.

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. (Galatians 3:16)

When Paul says the promises were not spoken to Abraham and his "seeds," meaning many people, who are the "many people" he has in mind? In the present context this could only mean the Jewish people. The promises spoken to Abraham were *not* for the Jewish people as such. The promises were given to Abraham and to Christ (Abraham's "seed," singular). Having said this, Christ in turn offers those promises to everyone who will come to Him in simple faith, whether that faith looks forward (before the cross), or back (after the cross). So literal Jews are not excluded, but they are not the only ones in view. The focus is not on Jews; it is on Christ. This means that, if you belong to Christ, the promises God gave to Abraham are for you. Through Christ the church inherits those promises. Which part of Galatians 3:16 would indicate otherwise? We are spiritual Israel today. God is enthroned on the praises we bring.

⁴ Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Another aspect of "the fullness" Paul refers to in Ephesians 1:23 is that Christ's spiritual body goes beyond the confines and human limitations of His physical body. Christ's physical body is one; His spiritual body is many. And so in a spiritual sense the one goes beyond the other. The one completes the other. Christ is the Head of the church; the church is the body of Christ (see Ephesians 1:22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18).

"Who fills everything"

If there is a sense in which we are the fullness of Christ (above), It is also the case that Christ is our fullness.

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (Colossians 1:18).

As "the body without the spirit is dead," in James' words (James 2:26), so the church without its Head, or without its Spirit, is dead. There can be no life in the church without Christ. It is not enough for us to put the right wording into our creeds. The truth about Christ must be close to our hearts and find utterance as we talk with each other before and after services, as well as hearing about Him from the pulpit.

Whatever we say on a given occasion was for that moment the most important thing we had on our minds. It is not enough to believe the right things. We must bring our beliefs to the surface and let them find expression. We should talk about Christ. Only in this way can the fragrance of Christ fill the church and our little part of the world outside the church.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. (2 Corinthians 2:14)

Conclusion

I like the way Ephesians 1:23 reads in Navajo. Could the passage be misunderstood? Yes, like so many others, it would be possible to get it wrong. When we think of the church as the fullness of Christ, we could misunderstand and think of ourselves as being more important than we actual are.

But if it's possible to get Paul's meaning wrong (it often is), it's also possible to get it right. The idea he's working with is that we have a relationship with God through Christ. A relationship always works both ways. This does not mean we can give God anything He doesn't already have. "And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:26). What it does mean is that His focus of attention is on us, just as our focus of attention must be on Him. He takes pride in us, just as we must take pride in Him. He gives Himself to us in sacrifice, just as we must give ourselves to Him in service. We mean the world to Him, and He also must mean the world to us.