

Galatians 4:10-11 in the Navajo Bible

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Jó yookkálgíí áádóó nídahidizíidii, áádóó dahwéelzhíishiida índa niná-háháahiida nihíł dadiyingo ádeínóhsin lá! 11 T'áadoo yee' ałdó biniyéhígóó nihinshishnish yíshí nisingo ɓah shíni'. (Galatians 4:10-11)¹

You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. (Galatians 4:10-11)²

Introduction

In this series of papers I often include a topic because there may be some aspect of the translation that is problematic. In this case I include it because the passage is translated so well – and because it raises some important questions.

The Passage

Galatians 4:10-11 is a difficult passage. The problem Paul faced in Galatia was that his converts were being told they needed to be Jews in order to be Christians. This sounds strange now, but back then it did not sound strange at all. Some people were accepting circumcision and, from the verses quoted above, it is clear that they were accepting other features of Jewish life.

Some context

Paul's list of time related observances should be taken in the context of other similar lists that he gives from time to time in his other letters. In Romans, for example, we find the following:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

"Neither death nor life" is clear enough; "neither angels nor demons" could be literally true. "Neither the present nor the future"? Alright. What about "neither height nor depth"? Paul might be expanding his list of opposites with easily understood illustrations

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.

in such a way as to make his real point, which is that nothing at all – nothing we can imagine – will ever be able to separate us from God's love. He is making a point rather than giving us a list of factors that, under other conditions, might separate us from God.

Some specifics

In the present case, we know that first century Jews observed special fast days. They fasted on Mondays and Wednesdays, so one early Christian document (outside the New Testament) suggests that Christians should fast on Tuesdays and Fridays – to avoid the appearance of doing things in a Jewish manner.

On the level of months and seasons, there was a cycle of annual feast days including Passover (usually in April) and the Day of Atonement (usually in October). Pentecost was 50 days after Passover. On the level of years, every seven years the Jews had to leave their crops untended and let the land lie fallow. Every 50 years they had to return any land they had purchased to its original owner. So there were certain chronological cycles that Jews observed.

The Sabbath

If we wish to say that the Sabbath was a special day and that Paul condemns the Galatians for keeping it, that is a sword that cuts two ways. Sunday occurs no less often than Saturday. Paul does not condemn the Galatians for keeping the wrong day, but for observing "special days and months and seasons and years" (vs. 10). So if someone feels that Christians were worshiping on Sunday at this early time in the church's history (they were not), how could we aim Paul's condemnation at Saturday in such a way that it would not include Sunday as well?

A weekly Sunday

Actually, it took a bit more time for Sunday keeping to take root in the church, and as this started happening, it was often kept in conjunction with the Sabbath – an early form of the two-day week-end. Saturday developed into a day to fast, while Sunday was a day to start eating again, so over time Saturday fell out of favor while Sunday gained in popularity. It was a gradual process and the reasons for it are primarily historical rather than doctrinal. Doctrinal explanations were added after the fact. When Christ died on the cross, not one of His followers thought of him- or herself as being anything other than Jewish.

This is one reason why the church in Jerusalem was so intent on getting Paul's Gentile converts in Galatia to accept circumcision. They did this because in their minds, being a Christian meant being a Jew. So of course when many Gentiles started becoming Christians in Galatia as a result of Paul's work, some back in the mother church thought that these new converts should finish what they had started and become Jews.

In Acts 15 the church discussed this question and decided that people did not have to be Jews in order to be Christians, but the people who caused so much trouble

for Paul might not have agreed with the council's decisions. They took matters in hand and did what they could to make sure that, whatever the council may or may not have decided, Paul's converts should become Jews anyway.

We can get a pretty clear understanding of what these people from Judea were saying from our record of how Paul responded to them. His response to their activity clarifies the nature of the activity he was responding to. So what were they telling people? Keep the Sabbath? No. Be circumcised! It was taken for granted that anyone who worshiped God would also keep the Sabbath at this time in history. So much has changed over time, but in Paul's day, the fact that God created the world went together very naturally with worshiping on the day that reminded people of His creatorship.

A yearly Sunday

Over time the church shifted two celebrations to Sunday. One of these was a yearly celebration (Passover/Easter) and the other was a weekly celebration (Sabbath). One reason for these changes was that Jews were doing things which made them very unpopular in the Roman Empire. Within the span of about 70 years there were no fewer than three major Jewish uprisings or revolts.

The **first Jewish-Roman War** (years 66–73), sometimes called **The Great Revolt** (Hebrew: הגדול המרד, *ha-Mered Ha-Gadol*), was the first of three major rebellions by the Jews of Iudaea Province against the Roman Empire (the second was the Kitos War in 115–117; the third was Bar Kokhba's revolt, 132–135).³

Secular history. It's important to realize that, despite these facts, Judaism was a legal religion in within the empire. King Herod's father, Antipater the Idumaeon (d. 43), had the singular good judgment to support Julius Caesar against his rival Pompey and Caesar never forgot this kindness. He passed a number of laws favoring the Jews. Eventually this period of good will was forgotten on both sides. The Jews hated the Romans for being in their land, and the Romans for their part punished the Jews mercilessly for not submitted to their authority. Eventually Jewish resistance achieved such proportions that Rome came and destroyed the city of Jerusalem (A.D. 70). That was the first Jewish-Roman War, or Great Revolt, mentioned in the quotation above.

The Jews rebelled again in what is called the Kitos War (115-117), and yet again during Bar Kokhba's revolt (132-135). In the years leading up to all these rebellions Jews did something (we don't know what) that made Claudius expel them from Rome (see Acts 18:2). In this atmosphere Christians naturally wanted to be seen as something other than Jewish.

Church history. There was a problem in pulling away from Judaism and a problem in remaining associated with it. As we just said, Judaism was a legal religion. When Christians started seeing themselves as being something other than Jews, the Romans started seeing their religion as being something other than legal. Religions that were illegal could be persecuted. So being free from Judaism was both desirable and dangerous at the same time. Anyway, over time Christians started seeing themselves as

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish-Roman_War. Links removed.

being different from Jews and, as they did this, they started finding reasons to worship on a day other than the Sabbath.

This is a point we should spend just a bit more time on. Recall that Jesus was crucified at Passover time. Passover was a yearly celebration. So for some time Christians celebrated His death and resurrection on a yearly cycle in connection with Passover. Yearly celebrations, such as Passover, can fall on any day of the week. To illustrate this point let me ask, what day of the week is your birthday? Well, you might have been born on a Tuesday, but the next year your birthday might fall on a Monday. It can be on any day. One's birthday is not a day of the week; it's a day of the year. That's the way Passover was, and still is today.

One problem with this was that Christians were embarrassed to ask Jewish scholars when to celebrate Passover. (There were complex rules for calculating when it should occur.) So eventually they quit allowing their celebration of Christ's death and resurrection to float like this and tied it to one particular day of the week – Sunday. This yearly Sunday is what we now call Easter.

When the Jews made themselves so obnoxious to Rome that it became dangerous for Christians to be known as Jews, they gradually started fasting on Saturday and added Sunday to it as a day of celebration. So they kept both days, and finally dropped the Sabbath altogether. In this way two things changed, so that now we have both a weekly Sunday and a yearly Sunday, where the Jews had neither.

Discussion

The problem with this solution is that God had not authorized it (see Daniel 7:25). He didn't tell us to remember the Sabbath unless doing that was really inconvenient. Sometimes Christians are called upon to do inconvenient things. Changing the Sabbath to Sunday was not the right thing to do. It was wrong then and it's wrong now. The fourth commandment still says today just what it did in Paul's day, namely:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Paul

Paul never once condemned anyone for obeying God. We should all obey God. But we can't obey God without doing what He says. When Paul condemns the Galatians for "observing special days and months and seasons and years!" (Galatians 4:10), he was not talking about the Sabbath, but about the complex round of activities that make up the Jewish ceremonial year. These celebrations point forward to Jesus; the Sabbath points back to creation. Let us not confuse the one with the other.

But how can we be sure Paul didn't have the Sabbath in mind after all? Is there a way to know? Yes, there is, but to understand the answer we need to know some history. Paul died in perhaps A.D. 64. About that time Nero burned down a large part of the city of Rome so he would have space to build a nice palace for himself. This made people furious and he didn't want them to turn on him, so he blamed the Christians and put many of them to a horrible death. Paul probably died at about the time of Nero's persecution. An important point to notice is that no one expected Nero to burn Rome. This act and the persecution that followed took everyone by surprise. So the effect on public opinion from all of this could only come later.

The First Roman-Jewish War, or Great Revolt, took place in A.D. 66-73, starting perhaps two years after Paul's death. This was the *first* revolt. The second revolt, or Kito's War, took place in 115-117. The third revolt, or Bar Kokhba's revolt, took place in 135-137. The gradual shift from Sabbath to Sunday gained momentum from these events. That was the second century. Paul died in the first century. During Paul's lifetime the question of which day to observe was not an issue yet.

Peter

There is one other thing to consider. Do you remember how Peter refused to eat with Gentile Christians in Antioch during Paul's lifetime? (See Galatians 2:12-13) And how Paul rebuked Peter publicly for doing this? (See vs. 14.) Peter was bending to Jewish pressure (vs. 12) because Jews did not eat with Gentiles. Would a person refuse to eat with Gentiles in order to maintain his connection with an earlier Jewish way of life and at the same time turn his back on the Sabbath, which was not just a matter of tradition but represented a direct command from God? I don't think so.

During the apostles' lifetime no change occurred in the Sabbath. The change came later and it came gradually, as a result of historical pressures on the early church and also a general weakening of the church's standards. The second century is sometimes called the age of heresy. When Paul was writing his letter to the Galatians none of this had occurred. So we'll have to find some other explanation. Paul was clearly, definitely, not condemning the Galatian Christians for worshiping on the seventh day of the week.

Conclusion

The pressure that Jewish Christians from the Jerusalem church put on Paul's converts in Galatia was to adopt Jewish practices and become Jews. Their concept of Christianity was that it was merely a branch of Judaism. But any questions that would eventually arise about observing the first day rather than the seventh came later. They had not surfaced yet during Paul's lifetime. So the Sabbath is not the issue he's dealing with in Galatians 4:10-11. It can't be. Instead it has to do with observing Jewish festivals such as Passover and Pentecost, along with the more somber Day of Atonement. It could also have included observing certain days during each week for fasting.