

Galatians 5:1-4 in the Navajo Bible

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Jew dine'é bibee haz'aanii biyaa sii'níl yéé bits'aa á honílee' biniyé Christ nihá honílee'go ánihiilaa! Éí baą yéego nisoozı. Binaalte' dasoolıı' nıt'é'ígıı t'áadoo baa ánidadiyoh'aahı. 2 ¶ Jó'akon, shı Paul ánihidishní: Nihaał nıdahidınóolghish ádanihi'diilyaa ládáá', Christ éı t'áadoo biniyéhi da nilı. 3 Diné t'áá'á'ı jınıtınıgo haah nıdahineeshgizhıı éı bee haz'aanii t'áá át'é ts'ıdá bida'jıl'ıı dooleetgi t'áá aanıgóo bee hoł náadahashne'. 4 Nihı éı bee haz'aanii bıdahwıınółnıhıgıı bee ts'ıdá t'áá ákogi ádaniit'éego nihá hada'doodzih danohsinıı éı Christ doo danoozıı' dago Diyin God bibee ajooba' bits'áhisoohkai. (Galatians 5:1-4)¹

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ² ¶ Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:1-4)²

Introduction

When Paul says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (vs. 1), what does he mean? It is clear that he wants his Galatian converts to be free, but free from what? Approached with the wrong set of assumptions, or put in the wrong context, this could be taken very wrongly indeed. If we claim that Paul wants the people he's writing to, and us, to be free from all law, that would compromise the well-being of all society. This can't be what he means. But if not, then what does he mean?

Bear in mind that when Paul talks about law he is not primarily talking about the Ten Commandments, although the same principles would apply there, but these do not all receive the same emphasis. There is background and there is foreground. What Paul brings to the foreground – repeatedly and with emphasis – is circumcision. So when he urges his Galatian readers to be free from something, all other things being equal, this is what he's talking about.

I repeat, the Ten Commandment are not excluded here, but they are not Paul's focus. And yet granting this much, why does he mention Mt. Sinai in Galatians 4:24 ("One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar"), and again in vs. 25? Circumcision had been practiced for centuries by the time

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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Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to Sinai on their way to Canaan. What is the connection between circumcision and Sinai, if there is one? If there is not, what does Paul have in mind? Is this a veiled reference to the Ten Commandments after all?

First Impressions

Section heading

Our first impression of where Paul might be taking the argument and where it actually goes might be two different things. The section heading at the beginning of chap. 5 says, "*Christ éí bee haz'áanii yits'aa nihééda'iisnii*." A literal gloss of this heading would be, "Christ has delivered us from the law." It does not say "the Jewish law" or "the law of circumcision," just "the law." Period. This would be a pretty bold statement in any context. The heading, of course, was added. Paul did not write section headings in his letters.

Added phrase

The impression given by this heading is helped along by the addition of a phrase ("*Jew dine'é bibee haz'áanii*") to the text of vs. 1. This phrase means, "the Jewish law":

[*Jew dine'é bibee haz'áanii*] biyaa sii'níl yéé bits'aa á honídee' biniyé Christ nihá honídee'go ánihiilaa! (Galatians 5:1)

Thus, the verse in Navajo begins approximately as follows: "It was to be free from the Jewish law we were under that Christ set us free!" NIV says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." The NIV section heading says, "Freedom in Christ."

Paragraph break

At vs. 2, in both the Navajo and NIV, there is a paragraph break. This leads the reader to think there is a break in the thought as we go from vs. 1 to vs. 2, i.e., a disconnect between the ideas of freedom from something on the one hand and circumcision on the other, as though circumcision were some new topic unrelated to the material in the preceding verse.

Discussion

Taking all three of the above items together, one could come away with the impression that the law is bad (in another place Paul says it is both "holy" and "good," see Romans 12:7) and that our salvation depends on staying away from it, as we would from any other source of danger. By this I mean one could come away assuming that the Ten Commandments are bad and that our salvation depends on avoiding the Sabbath. If people wish to avoid any of the commandments, this is generally the one.

In any event, while I have been urging restraint and arguing that we need to thread our way carefully through Paul's argument, so as to understand every distinction he makes, and capture the differences between what he is and is not saying, the Navajo

translators are giving the initial impression I have described about as strong a push as it would be possible to give without actually adding things to the text. What am I saying! They did add the phrase, "*Jew dine' é bibee haz' áanii*," to the text. It is an Evangelical translation, so perhaps this sort of direction and emphasis are to be expected.

Pressing Forward

Headings

As we put up sections headings it would be well to keep in mind who Paul was writing to. He was writing to people who were being drawn into Judaism. I know of no Jewish presence on the reservation. Why would a person coming from Old Way religion or peyote need embellishments to an already strongly worded argument to stay away from God's law, if that is what Paul argues? Such people have already lived their whole lives away from it. Let the text say what it says. This is holy Scripture. Let us not obscure any part of it. But on the other hand we should not go beyond the argument to make it say more than is implied.

Paragraph breaks

I submit that there is *no* break in Paul's thought at vs. 2. Verse 1 talks about freedom and vs. 2 specifies what he wants us to be free from, i.e., circumcision. He returns to this point in vs. 3, and 6, and 11. There is a pattern here. Let us not miss it. Paul is not trying to separate the ideas of freedom and circumcision, but is at pains to show the opposite nature of the relationship between them.

The thrust of the argument

As we review the argument in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and in many of his letters, there is a recurring theme. Some form of the word "circumcise" occurs 18 times in Romans,³ three times in 1 Corinthians,⁴ ten times in Galatians,⁵ three times in Philippians,⁶ four times in Colossians,⁷ and once in Titus.⁸ Just to place this fact in perspective, here now is the corresponding list of passages where Paul mentions some form of the word "Sabbath": Colossians 2:16. That's right. The ratio is 39 to 1. In 28 verses, spread across six of the twelve letters that claim to be written by Paul, he mentions circumcision 39 times, and in those same twelve letters he mentions the Sabbath once – if his use of the word really is a reference to the weekly seventh-day Sabbath in Colossians 2:16. There is a question whether it does.⁹

³ Rom 2:25, 25, 26, 26, 27, 27, 28, 29, 29; 3:1, 30; 4:9, 10, 11, 11, 12, 12, 12.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:18, 18, 19.

⁵ Galatians 2:3, 12; 5:2f, 6, 11; 6:12, 13, 13, 15

⁶ Philippians 3:3, 5.

⁷ Colossians 2:11, 11, 11; 3:11.

⁸ Titus 1:10.

⁹ Colossians 2:16 is not my topic in this paper, but if anyone would like to examine it more closely there is a book I can recommend by Dr. Ron Du Preez entitled, *Sabbath Put to Rest: A Scriptural Study of Colossians 2:16* (Berrien Springs, MI: 2007). If you would like a copy of this book, go to Contact Us on www.thebooklet.org and let me have your address. I'll send it to you. This is one of

I submit that circumcision was front and center in Paul's thought. He didn't like it. He wanted people to avoid it because it competed with faith. The Sabbath was not on his radar screen at all. It was not an issue for him. And why not? Because at this early time in the church's history there was no movement toward worshiping on another day. That came gradually, developing special momentum in the second century. Sunday keeping was not an apostolic innovation. If it was, why didn't any of the apostles talk about it?

Holding Back

Some sincerely believe that the church started keeping Sunday as a day of rest and worship from the time of Christ's resurrection onward. Not so! Let me share some of my reasons for saying this.

Consider the first seven chapters of the book of Acts. These chapters cover a period of about three and a half years, from the crucifixion in the spring of A.D. 31 to the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, sometime in A.D. 34. As we talk briefly about this group of chapters, bear in mind that Sabbath breaking was a capital offense. If the apostles had stopped being Sabbath keepers immediately after the cross, they would not have lived long enough to preach at Pentecost and receive the Holy Spirit. With this background in mind, let's look at those first seven chapters of Acts.

The first years in Jerusalem

When Peter spoke on the day of Pentecost, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41). In Acts 3-4 Peter heals a cripple through the power of the Holy Spirit and he, along with John, are brought before the authorities.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. (Acts 4:13-15)

If Peter and John had been Sabbath breakers, the leaders would have had something to say. They wanted some pretext that would give them an excuse to punish these men, but couldn't think of anything. Sabbath breaking would have been perfect for this purpose. For that, they could have been put to death.

The common had no trouble deciding how to relate with the apostles. At one point "people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by" (Acts 5:15).

the most thorough treatments of any topic I know, and one of the most thorough treatments of this particular topic I can imagine.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

Even at his trial in Acts 7, the rulers did not accuse Stephen of Sabbath breaking. They listened to his defense until he spoke of seeing Jesus at the right hand of God (vs. 56). At this they covered their ears so as not to hear any more and dragged Stephen to be stoned. There was no judicial verdict at this trial. Stephen's execution was a lynching. But what about the earlier verse that says,

They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. (Acts 6:13)

There it is right in this verse. It says "the law." I agree. It says that. It also says "false witnesses."

Later years and other places

Up through Acts 7 the apostles were held in high esteem by a city full of people who took their Sabbath keeping very seriously. Consider two more passages. We're not through. Years later, toward the end of Paul's ministry, he came to Jerusalem one last time, delivered the offering he had gathered in Macedonia and Achaia, and met with the leaders of the mother church to share with them what God was doing in other places.

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. (Acts 21:20)¹⁰

I've focused on the church in Jerusalem so far but as the gospel spread, those in outlying congregations were also Sabbath keepers. In Damascus, for example, Paul says,

A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. (Acts 22:12)

So it wasn't just the first three and a half years, and it wasn't just the church in Jerusalem. Early Christians at the end of Paul's ministry and in the church at Damascus were also "zealous for the law" and "devout" in ways that were "highly respected" even by the surrounding Jewish community. This zealousness and devoutness would have included Sabbath keeping. So from the facts we know, the Sabbath was kept by the church as a whole during the apostles' lifetime.

A switch did eventually occur. There is no question about this. But when? It was at least after the deaths of the apostles, and probably after a series of rebellions against Rome by unbelieving Jews starting in the late first century and extending through the

¹⁰ Notice the next verse as well: "They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs" (Acts 21:21). The specific custom that Paul had opposed was the one mentioned earlier in this same sentence – circumcision.

late second century. As these rebellions made Jews increasingly unpopular within the Empire, Christians started trying to distance themselves from Judaism and found convenient theological reasons for the changes they wanted to make, especially during the second century.

Discussion

Reading "Sabbath" when Paul says "circumcision" does not fit the times when the letter to the church in Galatia was written. Our preoccupations with law have to do with the Sabbath, but Paul's did not. Eventually the change from Sabbath to Sunday became almost universal, but that shift did not occur during Paul's lifetime.

The Sabbath has been kept by some in different places for the past 2000 years. It was kept in Ethiopia from the sixth century until the fifteenth or so. Celtic Christians kept the Sabbath in Ireland and Scotland for centuries. Some Waldensian groups kept the Sabbath in the alps of northern Italy. There were Sabbath keepers (Subotniks) in Russia before they were persecuted out of existence. Anabaptists worshiped on the seventh day during the time of the Reformation, and Seventh-day Adventists inherited that practice from Seventh Day Baptists in the nineteenth century, confirming its validity through their own study of Scripture. Today it is kept by these and other Christians around the world.

Conclusion

Circumcision preoccupied Paul because it was not an expression of heartfelt obedience to God's commands. Instead it had become a means of obtaining God's favor. As such it competed with faith, and that made it wrong. On the other hand, resting by faith on the seventh day in the knowledge of what Christ has done for us, is not in the same category at all. It is a response to salvation, rather a means of obtaining it.

First impressions can be lasting ones, but they are not always accurate. Let us treasure every word Paul actually said, but not interpret those words outside the context he intended.