

Hebrews 9:25 in the Navajo Bible

Copyright (c) 2009 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

T'áá nináháhááh bik'eh aláahgo náá'íihniihii éí hodiyingo haz'áá góne' doo t'áá bí bidíł néidiyoołnih biniyé yah anádaah da nít'ée', nidi Christ éí doo łáadi náá'ádiisnii' da. (Hebrews 9:25)¹

Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. (Hebrews 8:8-12)²

Introduction

Hebrews 9:25 makes a point of saying that Christ was not "to offer himself again and again" (*łáadi*, "many times"). The claim is then repeated for emphasis: "so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (vs. 28). Not "again and again"; "once."

The Claim that Some Make

Some feel that, in their religious services, Christ is offered more or less continually – on altars around the circle of the globe, in every land and at every hour of the day. He is or is not. At issue is what happens, or does not happen, during the course of such services. If the service is so real that the bread actually becomes the body of Christ, it follows that in such services Christ is actually offered "again and again" (vs. 25; see also Hebrews 10:11). If the bread is a symbol that reminds us of what Jesus did "once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:27; see also Romans 6:10; Hebrews 9:12, 26; 10:2, 10), then that would be consistent with what we're reading here. So is Christ bodily present in the wafer? Some say He is.

And thus all the merits of Calvary are constantly placed within our grasp at Mass. Not that the death with the shedding of His Blood is repeated; Christ, for ever in glory, dies no more. But the Mass is a sacrament which makes present what happened on the Cross; the separation of the Body and Blood of Jesus, represented by the separate bread and wine, is effected anew by means of the transubstantiation – the whole substance of the bread is changed into that of His Body, the whole substance of the wine into that of His Blood. It is therefore indeed the divine Victim Himself that the Mass makes present among us, in His immolated state.³

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 Dom Gaspar Lefebvre, O.S.B. and the Monks of St. Andrew's Abbey, *Saint Andrew Daily Missal* (Bruges, Belgium: Biblica, 1968), p. 775.

An Opposing Position

Thursday vs. Friday

Bear in mind that the communion service was instituted, not when Jesus died on the cross, but the night before. Assuming Christ died on Friday (see Luke 23:55, 56; 24:1), the first communion service took place Thursday night. On Thursday night Christ gave His disciples not one thing but two – bread and wine. He called these two things "my body" and "my blood" (Matthew 26:26, 28), although His body is what was handing the bread to them, and not the bread itself. No one who was present on Thursday night would have had any doubt on this point. In any event, if on Thursday night the bread and the wine were introduced separately, but Christ's body and blood were still united, then what we are dealing with are symbols of a reality which had not yet taken place. His body and blood were separated and thus became two on Friday, not Thursday. And yet He referred to them as two on Thursday. This is symbolism. Otherwise, what is symbolism?

No suffering

The above author states that, "the whole substance of the bread is changed into that of His Body, the whole substance of the wine into that of His Blood. It is therefore indeed the divine Victim Himself that the Mass makes present among us, in His immolated state."⁴

The word "immolate" means to "offer as a sacrifice by killing or by giving up to destruction."⁵ Christ's body and blood did not become separated in a moment (a point to which we return below), but over a number of hours. He did not merely cease to breathe; He suffered the most exquisite pain. If the bread and the wine are Christ's actual body and blood, does the bread suffer? If it does not suffer, it is not the same body that hung on the cross.

No process of separation

The author states that what the bread and the wine represent (his word) is "the separation of the Body and the Blood of Jesus, . . ."⁶ In the case of bread and wine there is no process of separation. Christ's blood came out of His body on the cross, but wine does not come out of bread. How, then, can it be the same as the blood which came from His body?

"Again and again" vs. "once"

It is not wrong to celebrate communion on a thousand altars around the circle of the globe. Communion can be repeated endlessly and there's no problem. But Christ suffered only and precisely once. The passage we started with makes a point of saying, "Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, . . ." (Hebrews 9:25). "[S]o Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; . . ." (Hebrews 9:28). There is no way to make "again and again" mean the same thing as "once." Christ suffered once; the bread and wine of communion are offered again and again.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=immolate>.

⁶ "[T]he separation of the Body and Blood of Jesus, represented by the separate bread and wine, . . ." (ibid.).

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:25)

The key words here are, "whenever you drink it, . . ." The symbol is repeated, the thing symbolized is not.

Do the Elements Used in Communion Take Away Sin?

Christ takes away sin. Under the assumption that the bread becomes flesh and the wine becomes blood, Christ is physically as well as spiritually present in the elements. The elements become Christ. If that were true, one could be excused for thinking that what takes place at communion (or mass) has saving value in itself. But it does not. Bread is bread; wine is wine. What saves us took place once – on Calvary. The Bible is very clear on this point (see Hebrews 10:11-14). Bread and wine are reminders that focus our faith on what Christ did long ago. As for the bread and wine, taken in and of themselves, they fall within the same category as the blood of bulls and goats.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. (Hebrews 10:11)

The celebration of communion does not take away sin, but points our faith to the One who can and does take away sin. Symbols are not the same as the realities they symbolize. Actually this comparison is instructive, because it provides a reason for studying how animal sacrifices were offered anciently. The ancient ceremonies pointed people forward to Jesus, just as celebrating communion points people back to Jesus. The direction of faith is not so important as the presence of faith. In either case people look to Jesus and it Jesus who saves – not the ceremonies or mysteries that remind us of Him. Ceremonies and mysteries are not realities; they are shadows and reminders of realities. The reality, in both cases, is Christ.

Discussion

What I'm saying here is that the bread used in communion services is not Christ's actual body; it is a symbol representing Christ's body. And the wine is not Christ's actual blood; it is a symbol representing Christ's blood. When Christ says, "Take and eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26), that does not contradict what I just said. There is a term for the figure of speech Jesus uses in this verse. It is called "metaphor." The Bible is filled with language that has the intent of conveying an idea, some of which is quite obviously not literal, and this is one example.

Similarly, when Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28), His blood was all still in His veins. It had not yet been poured out. There was not one drop of blood in the cup He offered to His disciples, but the words, "This is my blood of the covenant," were entirely appropriate. Everyone present knew that His meaning was spiritual and that they were not drinking blood. They did not know exactly how the meaning would be unfolded to them, but they knew His words were filled with spiritual, rather than literal, meaning.

If someone wishes to suggest that I'm being too physical, too literal, and that I'm missing the spiritual mystery in Christ's words, that brings us to the very heart of the matter. My problem with the author's position has to do precisely with his claim to a physical, literal transformation of the bread and wine. If a transformation occurs, and if it is claimed to result in certain physical properties, they should be evident through physical inspection. If the bread remains bread, the meaning is real but it is conveyed to us through symbols. We can have it one way or the other, but not both.

Conclusion

The bread and wine were offered to the disciples separate from each other on Thursday night, but Jesus' body and blood were not separated from each other until Friday. Christ suffered; communion wafers do not suffer. Christ's body bled; there is no way to get wine out of bread and thus there is no process of separation, as there was with Christ's body. Hebrews 9:25 specifically tells us that Christ does not offer Himself "again and again," while the bread and wine used in communion services is offered endlessly. These are differences, not similarities. Bread and wine are symbols representing what Jesus did for us on the cross. They are not the realities themselves.

Saying this does not mean that the bread and wine have no meaning. They have the most profound meaning. But they do not have the meaning that some suppose. Instead they have the meaning Christ originally gave them when talking to the disciples – very much still alive – on Thursday night, when the only meaning His words could possibly have had was symbolic. Let us not mistake shadows and mysteries for the realities they reflect and point to. "[B]ecause by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14). Christ is the reality behind all of the mysteries that Christians hold dear, to the extent that those mysteries are biblical. Our faith must be in Christ.