

Revelation 1:13 in the Navajo Bible

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[Á]ádóó bee hool'iní bá yadaa'áhígíí bitahgi ła' Diné Dzizlǫ́'ii nahojílingo hoołtsá, t'áá hazhdiil'ée'go óola sis hajéits'iin gónaa binázt'i'. (Revelation 1:13)¹

[A]nd among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. (Revelation 1:13)²

Introduction

In Navajo the expression "Son of Man" is *Diné Silǫ́'ii* ("The One Who Became a Man"), which goes all the way back to 1956 and the first Navajo New Testament.³ Here, however, we do not find *Diné Silǫ́'ii* exactly. (*Silǫ́'* ["he became"] is third person.) Instead we have *Diné Dzizlǫ́'ii*. (*Dzizlǫ́'* ["one became"] is what linguists call fourth person.)

Discussion

Fourth person allows one to speak (1) more generally than usual and (2) with greater respect or deference than usual. Saying "one" is more general than saying "he," and under the right circumstances it can convey a greater sense of respect.

In Revelation 1:13 the goal is to convey clearly the idea that the term "one like a son of man" refers to Jesus, but without saying so in the same words the reader has come to expect elsewhere. The Greek words *huios to anthrōpou* lack the definite article ("the"). English translators convey this fact by using the indefinite article ("a") and by using lower case letters (not "the Son of Man" but "a son of man"). In Navajo the use of fourth person brings about the same effect, but with ever so slightly different implications.

The Navajo retains a sense of uniqueness, lost when the indefinite article is used in English. It shows that "Son of Man" is exactly who we have in mind, but without exactly repeating the words. And with subtly different wording, it is no longer necessary to use lower case letters. Upper case letters can be retained with no loss of meaning, which in turn shows the desired level of respect. It is an elegant solution.

The passage has developed over time. In 1956 the translators said simply *diné* ("man") (*ła' diné nahojílingo hoołtsá*, "I saw one like a man"). While not a great rendering, this is not wholly

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 not otherwise marked 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 *God Bizaad: Bee'aha'deet'á Ániidíí* (New York: American Bible Society, 1956).

inaccurate. In the 1975 New Testament the wording becomes what we have now, *Diné Dzizlǫ́'ii* ("One Who Became a Man"), and this vastly improved rendering was kept in both the first complete Navajo Bible of 1985 and in the current 2000 revision.⁴

I should point out that the subtlety of the difference between *Diné Silǫ́'ii* and *Diné Dzizlǫ́'ii* is such that it doesn't come through readily in English translation. Both expressions can be rendered "One Who Became a Man," unless we force a distinction by translating the first as "He Who Became a Man" ("He" rather than "One"). But that sounds strained. Or perhaps we could distinguish them by translating the first as "The One Who Became a Man" (with "The") and the second simply "One Who Became a Man" (without).

All men become men in the sense that they were once boys, but only One in all history has become a man in the sense that He existed earlier with God. So we must maintain the sense of uniqueness as well as respect, hinting at the term *Diné Silǫ́'ii* ("Son of Man") and yet not simply reusing it. The Navajo translation does all of this with magical effect.

Conclusion

The 2000 Navajo *Diyin God Bizaad* (and its predecessors going back to 1975) offers a graceful and evocative rendering of Revelation 1:13, worthy of the most careful study.

⁴ All four versions – the two Navajo New Testaments (1956, 1975) and the two Navajo Bibles (1985, 2000) – were published in New York by the American Bible Society.