

Revelation 22:14 in the Navajo Bible

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Ha'ée' dadzizgisii hoł dahózhó. Éí iiná tsin sikaadii baa dahizhdookahgo, áádóó kin haal'áagi ch'é'étiin góne' yah adahizhdookahgo bee há nahaz'á. (Revelation 22:14)¹

"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city." (Revelation 22:14)²

Introduction

Some translations of Revelation 22:14 say "keep his commandments," while others say "wash their robes." These different English readings are not merely different ways of translating the Greek. They are reflections of two equally legitimate Greek textual variants that go back to the earliest Christian centuries.

Most English versions today say "wash their robes" (Christian Standard Bible [CSB], English Standard Version [ESV], New International Version [NIV], New Jerusalem Bible [NJB], New Living Translation [NLT], New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]). By contrast the King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) say "keep his commandments". So who's right? They both are. Neither reading is either right or wrong. Both are equally acceptable.

Two Alternative Readings

Some might object to my saying this. In his companion volume to the United Bible Society's Greek Text,³ Metzger gives "wash their robes" a B grade, which indicates a high level of certainty. Both the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek text and the fourth edition of the UBS Greek text⁴ give "wash their robes" as their text reading, with "keep his commandments" in a footnote. The Navajo Bible follows this same practice.

The text reading in the Navajo is *Ha'ée' dadzizgisii* ("The one who washes his clothes") and the margin is *Bibik'eh ó'oo'níitii yik'ehgo deikáahii* ("The one who walks according to His commandments"). Metzger gives two good reasons for preferring "wash their robes."

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 Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: UBS, 1979), pp. 767-68.

⁴ Starting with the fourth edition of UBS and the 26th edition of Nestle-Aland the two have agreed to share the same text and to differ only on punctuation and the choice of what material to put in footnotes. See http://www.ubs-translations.org/cat/biblical_texts/greek_scriptures_and_reference/new_testament/.

First consideration

The latter reading appears to be a scribal emendation, for elsewhere the author uses the expression χ (12.17; 14.12). "Moreover, the prepossessions of the scribes would have favoured χ " (H. B. Swete, *in loc.*).⁵

These are not frivolous arguments. They represent sound reasoning by experienced textual scholars. So why would I say that both readings have equal authority. There are a couple of things to consider. First, the fact that Revelation 12:17 and 14:12 use the word "commandments" does not mean that he couldn't use "commandments" again. Metzger is addressing the question of how a scribe or copyist would think. But that's not the only thing to consider. There's also the very different question of how a writer (an author) would think.

If an author uses a word once, that fact does not make him less likely to use it again. On the contrary, it makes him more likely to use it. Identically the same reasoning applies to the copyist. If he sees something once, that might cause him to write it again, even if the text before him uses another word. People get tired. They miss things. The copyist sees X but writes Y, because he's tired and has Y in mind from the earlier reference.

When the author uses a word twice, that doesn't mean he made a mistake. It means the word is important to him. When the copyist uses a word twice, that means that, yes, he made a mistake. Textual critics are accustomed to dealing with text. That's what they do. What is a text? It's something people copy. When this copying process takes place the copyist makes mistakes and textual critics are trained to notice what mistakes those might be. It's harder to know whether a given reading actually does represent a mistake than it is to know what alternative is more likely to be a mistake.

I grant that it is more likely that a scribe would see "robes" (*stolas*) and write "commandments" (*entolas*) than it would be for him to see "commandments" (*entolas*) and write "robes" (*stolas*). But it's not impossible, and the textual scholar doesn't know for sure which way the error went. He only knows with a degree of confidence which way the error was likely to go. In this case Metzger might well be right. But there's also a possibility that he isn't. This brings me to my second consideration.

Second consideration

The second thing to consider when weighing the textual alternatives in Revelation 22:14 is that both readings date from the same period. But wait, someone will say. "Keep his commandments" is supported by some very late and unreliable manuscripts. True. The entire $\mathfrak{A}1$ group is quite unreliable and all of these support "keep his commandments," so this reading has some very shallow support. I grant it.

The fact that "keep his commandments" has bad support, however, does not prevent it from also having good support. The first manuscript in which "keep his commandments" appears dates from the third century. The first manuscript in which "wash their robes" appears also dates from the third century. So which is the earlier reading? The manuscript which supports the one reading is not Greek, but neither is the one which supports the other reading.

⁵ Metzger, *ibid.*

For an overview of which manuscripts and text traditions support which reading in Revelation 22:14, see table 1 (below).

Table 1
Textual Sources Support the Two Readings
of Rev 22:14

Source	Description	Date
"Keep His Commandments"		
Ⲛ	A large number of later minuscule (small letter) manuscripts ⁶	IX-XVII+ ⁷
gig	Codex Giga (Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic) ⁸	XIII (1229)
sy ^(h)	Syriac	VII (616)
bo	Coptic (Bohairic dialect)	IX+
Tert	Tertullian (Latin, church father from Northern Africa)	III
"Wash Their Robes"		
Ⲛ	Codex Sinaiticus	IV
A	Codex Alexandrinus	IV
1006	(One of the 20 monasteries at Mt. Athos, Greece)	XI
1841	(Limonos Monastery; Lesbos, Greece)	IX/X
2050	(El Escorial; Spain)	XII (1107)
2053	(Messina; Sicily)	XIII
2062	(Rome; Italy)	XIII
pc	Latin <i>pauca</i> ("a few"), without being specified	n.d.
vg st	Codex Stoneyhurstensis (Latin Vulgate)	VII
sa	Coptic (Sahidic dialect)	III
Fulg	Fulgentius of Ruspe (Latin, church father from North Africa)	V/VI
Apr	Apringius Pacensis (Latin, church father from Portugal)	VI

In table 1 notice that the dates for sources supporting "keep His commandments" run from III (the third century, i.e., A.D. 201-300) to XVII+ (the seventeenth century and beyond, i.e., A.D. 1601-1700), while sources supporting "wash their robes" run from III (A.D. 201-300) to XIII (the thirteenth century, i.e., A.D. 1201-1300). Thus, manuscripts supporting the first reading were being copied until a time 400 years later than those supporting the second reading, and yet both readings can be documented from about the same starting point (the third century A.D.). So neither reading can be said to be earlier than, or precede, the other. Both come down to us in manuscripts from a very early date.

⁶ Hundreds of manuscripts (80% of all minuscules, or small-letter manuscripts) are included in this broad category.

⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majority_text#Other_manuscripts.

⁸ The 26th edition of Nestle-Aland (1979) says this manuscript is in the "Kgl. Bibl." ("Kungliga Biblioteket"), where it was the Swedes expropriated it in 1648, but on September 24, 2007 it was moved to the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Gigas for an overview of the manuscript's history, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Gigas#Return_to_Prague for an account specifically of its return to Prague.

Discussion

Earlier witnesses

When we move out of the third column of table 1 and consider what we find in the first two columns, it becomes dramatically less likely that "keep his commandments" is the original reading in Revelation 22:14. Both third century source supporting this reading are not in Greek. One is Latin (Tertullian, one of the church fathers), the other Coptic (Sahidic dialect). The church fathers often give us only passing references to the verses they quote, while the Coptic source is a New Testament translation in which the integrity of the text is what the translation primarily has in view.

Once we move beyond the third century, we come to Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus from the fourth century, which together offer powerful support for the reading, "wash their robes." Next comes a second church father from North Africa. Whereas Tertullian (writing in Latin, coming from North Africa) supported "keep his commandments," Frugentius of Ruspe (writing in Latin, coming from North Africa) supports "wash their robes." Frugentius was active in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Moving on now to the seventh century, we have the Harkleian Syriac New Testament supporting "keep his commandments" and a Latin Vulgate manuscript supporting "wash his robes."

Later witnesses

The vast \mathfrak{A} group of Greek manuscripts can't be evaluated by their numbers alone. They must be weighed rather than counted. The \mathfrak{A} group of Greek manuscripts consists of some 1153 individual copies and all of these support "keep his commandments." The distribution of these manuscripts is summarized in fig. 1 (below). The Latin Vulgate is available in innumerable copies and these support "wash his robes" (*Beati qui lauant stolas suas*).

In doing this, the 2000 *Diyin God Bizaad* follows the lead of other responsible translations, such as CSB, ESV, NIV, NJB, NLT, NRSV, who include both readings, but while putting "wash their robes" in the text, "keep his commandments" in the margin.

If I could say just one more thing about this, please bear in mind that studying a translation which places "keep his commandments" in the margin does not make Christians free to treat God's law with less respect than those studying a translation which places it in the text. There are other passages which talk about the importance of obeying God. Here we have only been discussing one passage out of many. The doctrinal importance of obedience to our Creator does not rest on the question of which Greek manuscripts support this or that reading in an isolated verse at the end of the book of Revelation.