

Acts 2:9-11 in the Navajo Bible

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Párthiyadéé' dine'é, Míidiyadéé' dine'é, Íílamdéé' dine'é, áádóó Mesopotéimiyagi kéédahat'ínígíí, Judíyagi áádóó Kapadóshiyagi, Pántasgi áádóó Éízhagi, ¹⁰ Fríjiyagi áádóó Sairíinii binaagóó, índa Romedéé' Jew dine'é índa Jew dine'é binahagha' yihidiikaígíí, ¹¹ Kriitdéé' dine'é áádóó Arébiyadéé' dine'é daniidlíí nidi, t'áá nihí danihizaad bee, Diyin God ayóó ádaat'éego yaa naagháhígíí yaa yádaalti'go dadiits'a'. (Acts 2:9-11)

Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs- we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:9-11)

Introduction

Not all of what makes this passage interesting lies on the surface. It's not all something you could get by merely noticing what words are used.

Background

The background for Acts 2:9-11 and for what happened on the day of Pentecost in general begins in 336 B.C. when Alexander the Great became king of Macedonia. Macedonia was a Greek-speaking country. When Alexander led his armies into Persian territory and conquered the entire Persian empire in just ten years, most of the soldiers who fought for him spoke Greek as well.

One thing you need to understand about Greeks is that they were excellent fighters. And because they were so good at fighting, they spent most of their time doing it. They fought people from other lands and they fought each other. All of this fighting required lots of soldiers, but where to get them? They didn't want those they had conquered to join the army, because then they would have to give those conquered people special privileges they wanted to keep for themselves. So they only allowed Greeks to serve in the army. To get them they had to bring them from the homeland. When these fighters got older some settled down in the territories they had conquered, married foreign wives, and raised families.

This process had the effect of spreading the Greek language widely in the eastern Mediterranean, from southern France (Marseilles was once a Greek colony) eastward to Judea, Syria, Mesopotamia and beyond. By the time Jesus was born Greek had become firmly established as an international language in places like "Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene" (vss. 9-10). It was also spoken by many people in Parthia, Media and Elam; "Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia" (vs. 9), not to mention Crete. It is just possible that every person present in Jerusalem from these lands on the day of Pentecost could have followed Peter's sermon pretty well if he had delivered it in Greek.

So why did God pour out His Holy Spirit giving the disciples the ability to speak in other languages? If there was a widely known international language in place already, what purpose would this serve? They already had what they needed. or did they? Actually it wasn't enough by any means. Causing Greek to be widely understood – just as English is today – was an excellent step in the right direction, but God was not satisfied with people merely being able to follow a sermon. He wanted the apostles' message to burn its way into people's souls and change their lives. For this purpose, international languages were not enough. God gave His followers the gift of tongues (or languages) to enable them to speak in the language of the heart wherever they ministered.

By now some things have changed. People learn languages by studying them, and the gift of tongues no longer has anything to do with speaking intelligible languages. By now it has become merely a means of expressing religious excitement. But however this might be, the idea God planted at Pentecost lives on in the fact that we have a complete Navajo Bible today. It's not enough to have English Bibles. God wants Navajos to have a Navajo Bible, and to use it.

Languages at Pentecost

Notice the text doesn't say, although it might also be true, that everyone in Jerusalem representing, say, Mesopotamia spoke Mesopotamian. There is no such thing as a language called Mesopotamian. The word "Mesopotamia" refers to a place, not a language. What languages did people speak there? The text doesn't tell us. (It was mostly Aramaic in the first century A.D.)

Actually, different languages have always been in contact with each other in the same places. Wherever you go you're going to find people speaking more than one language. In California almost 40% of the population speaks a language other than English at home.¹ New York is a cross-section of the world, with many of earth's languages spoken there - some of them in large numbers. According to the 2000 census, almost four million people in New York City speak only English at home. But almost two million use Spanish.² After this comes Chinese, Russian, Italian, French (and French Creole), Yiddish, Korean, Polish, Greek, Hebrew, and on and on. So what language do people from New York speak?

Perhaps it wasn't this way in antiquity. Perhaps New York is a special case. Cities have always attracted travelers and travelers don't all speak the same language, coming as they do from faraway places. Let's take an actual example. We know that the citizens of Lystra (a small town in Asia Minor, or modern Turkey) spoke Greek and at least one other language. Assuming Paul addressed them in Greek, we know they spoke Greek because they understood him. And apart from this, we know they spoke at least one other language because the New Testament tells us they shouted to each other "in the Lycaonian language."

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" (Acts 14:11)

¹ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>.

² http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/chapter01_files/sheet011.htm.

There is a question which language "Lycaonian" was. Some think it was merely a local dialect of Greek, but I would rather say it was Celtic.³ The territory of Galatia (to which Paul wrote one of his epistles) got its name from the Gauls (or Celts), who were present there from at least the third century B.C. What we now know as France was once known as Gaul, because relatives of these same Celtic people lived there. The language of Scotland is Gaelic (a form of Celtic), and the reason for this is that the Irish brought it to Scotland. Irish is a form of Gaelic (or Celtic). So I submit that Lycaonian was a form of Celtic. Anyway, it was not Greek. This is one example of multiple languages being spoken in one place.

My point is that the people who were present at Pentecost came from many places, and that at each of these places more than one language would probably have been spoken. So although fifteen places or ethnic groups are mentioned in our passage, the disciples could have been speaking in more than fifteen languages.

Conclusion

On the Navajo reservation there's a place for using the Navajo language as Christians share the gospel with Navajos. There's no Bible verse that says we have to use English, or another international language (such as Spanish), or even a national language in order to spread the gospel. The gospel will be spread faster if we use the languages people actually speak.

We have a wonderful Navajo Bible. It was lovingly and carefully done over the course of many decades⁴ and deserves to be closely studied.⁵ It should be used in public worship and in private devotions. If this is the language you know best, it's the language of the heart for you and that's the one you should use when reading God's word. From Pentecost all the way to the present God has wanted the gospel to be understood. He wants His message to penetrate the heart and not be just something we understand with our minds.

By the day of Pentecost there was a near-universal international language already in place through much of the eastern Mediterranean. For some 367 years (336 before Jesus' birth and 31 afterward) God had been preparing the world for the gospel by spreading a knowledge of Greek all over the ancient world. But He wanted – and wants – His followers to use more than just international languages. English is good, but not enough.

³ There is a question how to pronounce the word "Celtic." Some pronounce it as though it were spelled "Seltic." The word comes Greek, where it is spelled with a /k/, so I prefer to say "Keltic."

⁴ Faye Edgerton and Geronimo Martin began work on the 1956 Navajo New Testament back in 1944. When their New Testament project was at last completed, Faye Edgerton moved a few miles farther south and started work on a Western Apache New Testament, which was published in 1966. But Geronimo Martin stayed on. Working now with David Tutt, he and others produced a revised Navajo New Testament, together with Psalms and Proverbs, in 1957 and a complete Bible in 1985. Geronimo Martin lived almost long enough to see it completed. He died in 1984, having given 40 years of his life to the task of translating God's Word for his people. Tutt went on to publish a revised Navajo Bible in 2000.

⁵ Visiting in Carson, New Mexico, below Farmington I once came across a family who owned a copy of the 1956 Navajo New Testament. It was heavily marked in black, red, and green ink, and in pencil. I asked them if they would sell it to me and offered to replace it with a new copy, but it was too precious to them. I praise God because of these faithful Navajo Christians who, for many years, had nourished their souls on the precious Word, as translated by Faye Edgerton and Geronimo Martin. They were God's true children and we will see them in the kingdom.

