

Acts 26:11 in the Navajo Bible

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T'áá ahágh kin bii' álah nída'adleehí naaznilgóó atídaash'íí nít'éé', áádóó Jesus dayódziih dooleetgi nidi ch'éeh ádéíl'íid; bich'í t'áá iiyisí ádéé hoodzíidgo náánála' dine'é bikin hadas'aágoo nidi ałdó atídaash'íí nít'éé'. (Acts 26:11)¹

Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. (Acts 26:11, NIV)²

Introduction

The background for this verse is that Paul is being held prisoner in the city of Caesarea and is making his defense against Jewish accusations before Festus, the Roman governor, and before King Agrippa. He is explaining that before he came to know Christ for himself he opposed Christ just as actively as his accusers. In his zeal against the church he went to different towns and from one synagogue to another to find those who believed in Jesus, and when he found a believer he would try to make him or her say . . . well, that's the question. What did he try to make them say?

In the Navajo translation Paul says, *áádóó Jesus dayódziih dooleetgi nidi ch'éeh ádéíl'íid*, "I tried to force them to blaspheme against Jesus." In NIV it says, "I tried to force them to blaspheme." The Navajo translation has undoubtedly given us one important meaning of the passage, but more is involved.

In what follows we will be talking about Paul at two different times in his life – before and after he accepted Christ. When he was a young man he opposed the church and persecuted Christians. When he was older he did everything he could to build up the church and to get people to believe in Jesus. It's like he was two people, and this could be confusing because we will be referring to Paul in both ways. So for clarity I will use the name "Saul" when we're talking about Paul's early life without Christ, and "Paul" to refer to him after he became a Christian. But please understand that this is the same person, just at different times.

Another thing I should explain is that the word "blasphemy" is a Greek word borrowed into English. It means disrespectfully about God, or about a representative of God. Blaspheming is like cursing.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

² All 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.

What Was Saul Trying to Do?

It is true that Paul (then known as Saul) wanted the believers he found to say something against Jesus. For him, at this early time in his life, getting them to disown Christ would represent one level of success. But if they would not do this, he had other things in mind for them.

Ironically, by adding words, the Navajo translation does not add meaning. Instead it diminishes the meaning of the passage by focusing too narrowly on only one part of what it says. No Jewish court would ever condemn someone for saying bad things about Jesus. But if believers could be led to say bad things about Moses, for example, or about the temple, or whatever, that would be something that could be used against them in a court of law. In this way these believers could be tried, condemned, and punished. If they would not speak against Jesus, Saul wanted them punished, and if this didn't work he wanted them dead.

Why Was His Task so Difficult?

Notice that making Christians blaspheme is something Saul had to *try* to do. In the Navajo one gets the impression that he was either unsuccessful or had to try very hard. What it says is *ch'éeh ádéít'iid*, "I exerted myself trying," or "I tried unsuccessfully." The Greek does not specifically say this (it just says "I compelled them to blaspheme"), but the Navajo captures an important insight here. Making these early Christians blaspheme would not be an easy thing to do. It was something Saul had to work at. It took effort. One reason for this was that there was nothing in Christian belief that any person of good will could construe as being blasphemous. As Paul himself would later say, "I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14). So did the Christians he was trying to persecute.

Recall that back in Acts 6 people had tried to catch Stephen in his words, and that when they were unsuccessful they accused him of saying horrible things that he never actually said. "They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law'" (Acts 6:13). Notice that the witnesses who said these things about Stephen were "false witnesses."

If I could pause to point out just one thing in passing, neither Saul nor those who accused Stephen would have had to try very hard to condemn Christians if they had been Sabbath breakers. Sabbath breaking was a capital offense. This was something you could be executed for. So this one thing would have been enough to give Saul everything he wanted – i.e., a pretext for condemning Christians to death. But in fact they weren't Sabbath breakers. They were devout worshipers of God who attended all the same services that the others did. Notice Paul's words again: "I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished" (vs. 11). He is not describing Wednesday night prayer meetings. He's talking about Sabbath morning worship services. If Christians were all busy in their shops on Sabbath morning, why did Saul go to synagogues in order to find them?

At this very early time in the church's history (following the death of Stephen in A.D. 34) Christians were simply Jews who believed in Jesus. Some did, some didn't; these were the Jews who did. For some time there was no separate name for Christians. The word "Christian" would come later (see Acts 11:26).³ These people believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but as far as belonging to some other religion, they didn't. And why should they? By believing in Jesus they were maintaining and carrying on the faith that Israel had always had. Israel had always looked forward to a Messiah. So how were they denying their faith by saying Jesus was the One who was to come? Such beliefs made them nothing other than good and loyal Jews. In their minds believing in Jesus (the Son) was perfectly consistent with believing in God (the Father). It still is.

When Paul says he believes "everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets," he is saying he believes everything written in the Bible of his day. The Law and the Prophets just meant the Bible. That's how people referred to it then.⁴ Sometimes this description was lengthened to include "the Psalms" (or Writings).

He [Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." (Luke 24:44)

When Jesus made the above statement about "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms," He was not excluding the book of Proverbs, taking this as one example. He was referring to the Hebrew Bible, or what we would now call the Old Testament. For Him "the Law" included Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; "the Prophets" included Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 and 2), Kings (1 and 2), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets; and "the Psalms" included Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel,⁵ Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles (1 and 2).⁶

On another occasion Paul says, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do" (Acts 26:27). To this Agrippa replies, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (vs. 28). Notice what's happening here. When Paul mentioned believing the prophets, King Agrippa thought Paul was trying to get him to be a Christian. Being a Christian meant believing the prophets. Believing the prophets meant believing what the prophets predicted would happen, and believing what they predicted meant believing in Jesus, i.e., being a Christian. The two ideas were inseparable. So how do you get a person who believes such things to blaspheme? There's nothing in such a belief system that's even remotely blasphemous.

³ In Acts 26:11 Paul is describing events that had taken place years before. In Acts 26 Paul was a Christian. He is describing how he persecuted Christians before he himself became a believer.

⁴ This was before the books of the New Testament were written, so "Bible" in the mid-first century means "Old Testament." That was the only Bible the early church had.

⁵ Actually this is not where Daniel was originally located. See discussion below.

⁶ See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Books_of_the_Bible#Tanakh_or_Old_Testament. Jewish editions of the Hebrew Bible are called Torah ("Law"), Nebiim ("Prophets"), and Ketubim ("Writings"), or T (Torah) + N (Nebiim) + K (Ketubim) = TNK, pronounced "Tanakh." Thus, the term Jesus used in Luke 24:44 is still used by Jews today.

Discussion

Below I hope to show that the changes that eventually drove Jews and Christians apart did not occur because Christians gradually separated from the faith of Israel and the Jews had to reject them. On the contrary, the changes took place on the Jewish side. Christian teaching did not take some new course that made it pull away from past revelation and existing Scripture. Instead Jewish teaching reacted against and set aside things that had been written down for centuries. In terms of who lived where, Jews stayed in Judea and Christians went elsewhere. But where we live has nothing to do with what we believe.

By now we have 2000 years of history to deal with. I'm not saying Christians are Jews, or that we should be Jews. I'm saying that Christian belief is consistent with Scripture. The prophecies that talked about Jesus after He went back to heaven were already there before. Continuity lies with Christianity, not with Judaism.⁷ Let me offer four illustrations of what I mean.

Daniel 9:25

In modern printed Hebrew Bibles it is common for the layout of the lines to follow that of great manuscripts from the past. In Daniel 9:25 we have an example of this. The verse says in part, "From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'weeks', and sixty-two 'weeks'" (margin). Seven weeks and 62 weeks make 69 weeks. Taking a day for a year, a week would be seven years. Seven times 69 years is 483 years. From the time when the Persian king allowed Jerusalem to be restored to its status as a provincial capital and be rebuilt after the Babylonians destroyed it, to the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of His earthly ministry, was 483 years. Jewish scholars wanted people to think of someone at a different time in history when they read this passage, so they rearranged the words as follows. They of course were writing Hebrew. I'm giving you the corresponding English.

"Know and understand this: there will be seven weeks,'
From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes,
and sixty-two weeks.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. (Daniel 9:25, margin)

Notice that the words, "there will be seven 'weeks,'" are placed above the second line and that the words which immediately follow ("and sixty-two 'weeks'") are placed below the second line. The point is, Don't put these two phrases together! Why not? Because if you do, you'll see Jesus in them. The reason why I say this is that He began His ministry after the 62 "weeks." There was plenty of space on the first line. Why leave the middle part blank? This would not have been necessary, but in order to avoid bringing the "seven 'weeks'" and the "sixty-two 'weeks'" together, they are placed on different lines. In this way the scribes hoped that people would look after the seven "weeks" for someone who had been anointed – not for the Messiah, but for someone other than Jesus. The person they had in mind was a particular high priest.

⁷ At this early time in history continuity lay with Christians. Over time Christians did some changing of their own. That's what the Protestant Reformation was all about, i.e., rolling back unwarranted changes, getting back to what the Bible actually says.

But the next verse says, "After the sixty-two 'weeks,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing" (vs. 26). After the sixty-two "weeks"? Nothing of any prophetic significance happened after the seven "weeks." So what good did it do to rearrange the words on the line? Doing so merely shows that the scribes didn't like going where the text takes them. My question is, What would the text mean if you just let it say what it says? What it would mean is all too clear, that's why they rearranged the placement of the words on the line. This is one example.

The book of Daniel

The book of Daniel is a book of the Old Testament that points forward to the Messiah so forcefully that Christians won arguments with Jews by appealing to it. After a few centuries of this Jewish scholars moved the book from the second section of the Hebrew Bible (the Prophets) to the third section (the Writings).⁸ The evidence from ancient translations, from Qumran, from Josephus, and other early sources all place Daniel among the prophets. Only after about A.D. 500 does he start to appear among the Writings. Obviously some person or group of persons moved the book from where it once was to where it is now.

You have to understand that Jews were especially drawn to Daniel as a person – for two reasons. First, they were drawn to his great wisdom. And second, they could relate with him because they were often persecuted and Daniel himself underwent hardship. Consider two statements from the Babylonian Talmud.

Lord of the Universe, if all the wise men of other nations were in one scale of the balance, and Daniel, the man of pleasant parts, in the other, would he not be found to outweigh them all?⁹

Rab said: If he [the Messiah] is of the living, it would be our holy Master [R. Judah the Nasi]; if of the dead, it would have been Daniel the most desirable man.¹⁰

I offer these quotations merely to show that Jews had great respect for Daniel. He was thought to "outweigh all the wise men of other nations," and to be the sort of person they would like to have for a messiah. However, when it became clear that the book Daniel wrote could be used against them to show that Jesus was the Messiah, Jewish scholars moved it from its place of honor in the second division of Scripture (the Prophets) to another place toward the end of the third division (the Writings). They now took the position that the book of Daniel was written late (not by Daniel himself) and that is was not on the same level with other books of prophecy such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Why did their attitude toward the book of Daniel change? Because it led people to think that Jesus was the Messiah.

Today in modern printed copies of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) the book of Daniel comes after Esther, toward the end of the Writings. But it was not always there. Its position changed over time for the reasons I have described.

⁸ Klaus Koch, "Is Daniel Also Among the Prophets?" *Interpretation* 39:2 (April 1985), pp. 117-30.

⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino, 1935), Yoma 77a (p 375).

¹⁰ *Idem*, Sanhedrin 99a (p. 669). The reference in brackets is to Rabbi Judah the Prince. "Nasi" (*nāši*) means "prince."

Time prophecies

In the Babylonian Talmud, compiled about six centuries after Christ, a curse is pronounced on anyone who studies the time prophecies pointing forward to the Messiah. Here's what the curse says:

Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end. For they would say, since the predetermined time has arrived, and yet he has not come, he will never come. But [even so], wait for him, as it is written, Though he tarry, wait for him.¹¹

Actually, the Messiah did come – right on time, but Jews do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. So even though Jesus came at the right time to fulfill the prophecy, they continue looking for someone else. And because the time prophecies bring them to a period of history that makes people think of Jesus, the Talmud suggests not studying them.

Old Testament theology

There is more. In a recent book,¹² Gershom Ratheiser accuses Christians of reading the Old Testament irresponsibly. He says that when Christian scholars do Old Testament theology they apply passages to Jesus, and he doesn't like this. His suggestion? Don't do Old Testament theology. Abandon the enterprise. He's not saying we should stop studying the Old Testament, but recommends that we study it from an ethical, rather than theological, point of view.

Think for a moment about what Ratheiser is saying. What is the nature of the limitation he imposes? To answer this question we must understand his terms. What does he mean by "ethics"? Ethics is what governs our relationships to other people. If you cheat someone, you are not acting ethically. And what does he mean by "theology"? Theology is that area of study which includes the human effort to understand God. In every sense, God is above us. So our efforts to understand God are on a vertical scale. If we were to draw a line between God and us, it would go up and down. Our relationships with other people are on a horizontal scale. If we were to draw a line between us and other people, it would go side to side.

I know Ratheiser would disagree with me on this, just as I disagree with him – and that's fine, this is America –, but I see him as approaching Scripture without reference to God – on a horizontal scale only. No vertical scale. No theology. Just ethics. Just people dealing with other people. And why does he say we should limit ourselves in this way? Because when people try to understand God as He is revealed in the Old Testament, they start saying things about Jesus. This is something he wants to avoid, so he suggests not doing theology. The only way Ratheiser can be entirely sure of not encountering Jesus in the Hebrew Bible is by not considering theological questions at all. So he abandons this entire field of study, and asks us to do so as well.

¹¹ *Idem*, Sanhedrin 97b (p. 659).

¹² Walter Brueggemann, review of Gershom M. H. Ratheiser, *Mitzvoth Ethics and the Jewish Bible: The End of Old Testament Theology*, *Review of Biblical Literature* [<http://www.book-reviews.org>] (2008).

Returning to an earlier point, when Saul tried to get believers to blaspheme, it was not Christians who were moving away from the Bible and needing to be brought back. Instead, Jews were moving away from parts of their own Bible (our Old Testament) because of what it said about Jesus. They didn't take anything out – the words were too sacred for that – but they did put words in different places and they did put books in different places. Rearranging the way the words of Daniel 9:25 are arranged in lines is a small change. Moving Daniel from the Prophets to the Writings is a bigger change. Avoiding the study of time prophecy is a change. Rejecting the entire theological enterprise is a major change, and one that surprises me. On the other hand, the prophets have always said what they say. When Christians accept the prophets' words at face value, that is not a change. That is continuity. It is staying the course.

If people have to take so many unusual steps to avoid seeing Jesus in the Old Testament, it seems this might be a very good reason why Christians should study it – and study it carefully. We should study the Old Testament because there is every likelihood we will see Jesus in it. That's the reason why I study the Old Testament. For that matter, it's also the reason why I study the New Testament.

Conclusion

Now let us shift to another way of thinking, entirely different from what we have been dealing with so far. Consider the following statement by one of my favorite writers. If this statement is correct, there is no part of the Old Testament a Christian can study without seeing Jesus. Wherever we look, He is there. Here's the statement:

In every page, whether history, or precept, or prophecy, the Old Testament Scriptures are irradiated with the glory of the Son of God. So far as it was of divine institution, the entire system of Judaism was a compacted prophecy of the gospel. To Christ "give all the prophets witness." Acts 10:43. From the promise given to Adam, down through the patriarchal line and the legal economy, heaven's glorious light made plain the footsteps of the Redeemer. Seers beheld the Star of Bethlehem, the Shiloh to come, as future things swept before them in mysterious procession. In every sacrifice Christ's death was shown. In every cloud of incense His righteousness ascended. By every jubilee trumpet His name was sounded. In the awful mystery of the holy of holies His glory dwelt.¹³

New Testament Christians should study the Old Testament, as well as the New. The Old Testament was the only Bible the earliest church had, but that's not the best reason for studying it. The best reason is that Christ is in it. By studying it, we learn about Him. So let us learn to see the Son where He is, and be drawn to Him wherever we find Him. I know this has been a long paper, but my point is, study your Bible – the whole book. Don't limit yourself to only one part of it. In every part you can see Jesus and by beholding Him you will become changed.

¹³ Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 211-12.