

Ephesians 3:6 in the Navajo Bible

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Jó, na'nitin doo bééhózin da yéę éí doo Jew dine'é danilíinii índa Jew dine'é danilíinii hane' yá'át'éehii bik'ehgo Christ bee t'áá'á'í dadzizlǫ́'go, Diyin God bibee ak'idahojidlíii t'áá aheelt'éego hóó' dadooleeł, índa Diyin God yee nihoní'áanii Christ Jesus bee ałts'áá' da'dziłk'iiz. (Ephesians 3:6)¹

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 3:6)²

Introduction

The expression *doo bééhózin da yéę* ("not known before") exactly captures one aspect of what Greek *mystērion* ("mystery") means. The idea of a "mystery" in the New Testament is that something needs to be studied out or revealed in order to be known. It is not something that can't be known, but merely something which wasn't known before.

In the present case, the nature of the mystery Paul is talking about is that both Jews and Gentiles inherit "the promise in Christ Jesus" together. And what is "the promise in Christ Jesus"? Paul doesn't tell us here. For that we must go to another passage in another letter.

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. ¹⁷ What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. (Galatians 3:16-18)

All that we read in the New Testament about faith and grace – all of that was given to Abraham on behalf of Christ. He received it specifically for Christ. And Christ received it from Abraham specifically for us. He and we are heirs together. We all inherit the same promises in Christ.

Discussion

What Paul says in the above passage comes close to being the very heart of his gospel. Yes, he talked a lot about grace, and he spoke out against circumcision, but one reason why these things were so important to him is that he wanted his Gentile converts to be accepted fully into the church – not as second class citizens, but as genuine Christians alongside others who

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

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were already Christians previously. This is why he reproved Peter when Peter visited Antioch (see Galatians 2:11-14), and it might also have been one reason why he gathered an offering from his Gentiles for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26).

In another paper I suggest that Paul collected this offering in order to undo some of the harm he had caused to the churches in Judea. I still believe so. But another reason may have been to remove barriers that he knew were still present between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. If the Gentile churches could make a gift to the Jewish churches, any willingness in Judea to accept the gift would serve to balance the roles of these two communities in relation to each other. Accepting a gift places one in something other than a dominant role. Receiving instead of giving would therefore erode the superiority that Jews naturally felt toward Gentiles. Paul had more than one reason for doing what he did.

Grace

Paul wanted Christ to be first, and last, and best in the gospel he preached. One reason for this is that if Jews are saved, not because they're superior, or special, but because God's grace is a free gift, and if Gentiles are saved the same way, it follows that Paul's Gentile converts were on the same spiritual level with those Jewish Christians who were in Christ before them. Seen in this context, many of Paul's seemingly anti-Jewish statements are actually not anti-Jewish, but pro-Gentile.

Circumcision

When we talk about anti-Jewish statements, none are more hostile than those with regard to circumcision in his letter to the Galatians. Why is this? Because circumcision drove a wedge between Jew and Gentile and because it drove a wedge between both groups and Christ. First, if Jews were saved because of circumcision, and others weren't circumcised, then maybe these others weren't saved. If one group is saved, and the other is not saved, then maybe one group is better. This type of thinking divides people. Second, if our focus is on circumcision instead of on Christ, this separates us from Christ. Whichever way we approach this, Paul did not want his churches practicing circumcision. Instead, he wanted them to come together and he wanted their focus of attention to be on Christ.

An Example

Navajos might be tempted to think of Christianity as a religion for the *Bilagáana* (Anglo), not for Native Americans. But in the present context, what exactly is the difference between *Bilagáana* and Navajo? Are Anglos Jews? Generally not. Are Navajos Jews? No. So where is the difference? You could say there are many differences and you might be right, but not in this context, i.e., not in the context of one group having some sort of special relationship with God. As a rule, Anglos are Gentiles. Navajos are Gentiles. If I'm a Gentile and you're a Gentile, we're both Gentiles. My ancestors didn't descend from Abraham and neither did yours.

If Navajos think Anglos espouse Christianity because they grew up with it, or because their background inclines them to Christianity, it doesn't. Jewish Christians in Paul's day would say we are strangers and outcasts if the question is who descends from Abraham and who doesn't. Actually, we *would* be strangers and outcasts – and so would you – if it weren't for

Jesus. But when I come to Christ by faith, and you come to Christ by faith, we're both in the same place for the same reason. So if we're talking about spiritual things, there's no difference between Navajo and *Bilagáana*. That's what faith does. It brings people together who would otherwise be quite different and makes them one in Christ. This is what Paul was trying to accomplish. He didn't want people saying, I'm this kind of person and you're that kind. That's what Judaism did. Instead he wanted all Christians to know that Christ makes us one.

Conclusion

When we hear people speak of Israel as God's special or covenant people today, by contrast with the church, which is largely made up of Gentile Christians (like you and me), that is simply not biblical. It might have been at one time, but not after the cross. Making distinctions like this is no part of Paul's gospel. Everything Paul stood for was opposed to drawing such distinctions, and when he himself appears to support the idea of a contrast between Jew and Gentile, the comparison is not always favorable to Jews.

In saying this, we need not bear any ill feelings toward Jewish people who have not received their covenant promises from Christ, which is the only way anyone has of receiving them today. When Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6), He doesn't mean that He is one way among many. His is the one and only Way. Period. You'll never hear Paul say anything different. We need not harbor bad feelings toward those who disagree, but at the same time we need bend our teaching to accommodate theirs. Jesus is the one and only Way to the Father, and the only way to receive the blessings God promised Abraham.

Those who receive the promises from Christ as a free gift are not cutting corners. They are genuinely receiving these blessings and are getting them from the only Source that can offer them. No one who does this is either better or worse than anyone else who receives same promises in the same way. This is exactly the point Paul is making in the present passage, and this is not the only place where he says such things.³

³ See Romans 2:28-39; 3:21-31; 11:25-32; Galatians 3:26-29.