

Revelation 1:10 in the Navajo Bible

Copyright (c) 2009 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

Bóhólníihii biháá'áyíh jíí góne' Níłch'i Diyinii nashiláá nít'ée', shikéédéé' dilnigi át'éego ayóó úits'a'go iinéé' diséts'áá[.] (Revelation 1:10)¹

On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet[.] (Revelation 1:10)²

Introduction

In Revelation 1:10 the Navajo translators add a word so as to clarify the meaning of a key term. In doing so, they create a parallel with another passage (Mark 2:27-28). This parallel sheds a flood of light on both passages.

Old Testament "Day of the Lord"

The terms ""Lord's Day" and "Day of the Lord" refer to widely different things and, in the original languages, are completely different in form as well. No confusion there. In Old Testament Hebrew "Day of the Lord" is *yôm-YHWH*. There is nothing comparable to "Lord's Day" in the Old Testament. In New Testament Greek "Day of the Lord" is *hēmera kuriou* (also in the Old Testament) and "Lord's Day" is *kuriakē*. Again, there's no basis for confusing the two.

In English there are two ways to express the genitive, e.g., "the house of my friend" and "my friend's house." The one might sound more formal than the other, but the meaning is substantially the same even though the words are arranged differently. By convention we have become used to thinking of the end of all things as the "Day of the Lord," and – in the popular view – we associate "Lord's Day" with Sunday. Actually, though, these associations are completely arbitrary in English and could just as easily have been reversed. The English language could have developed in such a way that "Lord's Day" meant the end of all things and "Day of the Lord" meant Sunday – again, in the popular view.

Without this history of commonly agreed usage to guide our use of words, there would be no more difference between "Day of the Lord" and "Lord's Day" than there is between say, "the wedding of my daughter" and "my daughter's wedding." The difference in meaning that we associate with these terms is not built into the words themselves. This problem is especially acute in Navajo. In that language there were no long years of commonly accepted usage associated with "Day of the Lord" or "Lord's Day." The culture did not use either term.

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.

In table 1 (below) I show some Old Testament examples of Hebrew *yôm* YHWH ("Day of the Lord") and its Navajo equivalent in a number of passages. The last column is a gloss that gives the sense of the Navajo.

Table 1
Old Testament Examples of "Day of the Lord"

| Reference | Hebrew | Navajo | English Gloss |
|------------|---|--|---|
| Isa 13:6 | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii anídóot'íił baa hoolzhíish | The time has come for the Lord to judge |
| Isa 13:9 | yôm-YHWH | Bóhólníihii atí'él'íigo anídóot'íił beidoołkááł | The time will come for the Lord to judge by punishing |
| Ezek 13:5 | b ^e yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii beiníłkáądi | On the day of the Lord |
| Ezek 30:3 | l ^e yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii bá ashja'iilaaígíí koshídéé' hadziih | What the Lord has prepared for them is near |
| Joel 1:15 | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii nídoodaálj'i beiníłká | The time has come for the Lord to return |
| Joel 2:1 | yôm-YHWH | Bóhólníihii nídoodaálígíí baa hodoolzhish | The time will come for the Lord to return |
| Joel 2:11 | yôm-YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkáłígíí ayóó át'éego ádooníł ında t'óó hóyé'ígi áhodooníł | The coming day of the Lord will be great and terrible |
| Joel 2:31 | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii t'ah doo beiyíłkaahgóó áhodooníł | This will happen before the day of the Lord |
| Joel 3:14 | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii bijí | The day of the Lord |
| Amos 5:18a | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkááł | The day of the Lord will come |
| Amos 5:18b | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkááł | The day of the Lord will come |
| Amos 5:20 | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkááłdi | When the day of the Lord comes |
| Obad 1:15 | yôm-YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkáłígíí | The day of the Lord (still future) |
| Zeph 1:7 | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkááł | |
| Zeph 1:14a | yôm-YHWH, | Bóhólníihii beidoołkáłígíí | The day of the Lord (still future) |
| Zeph 1:14b | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkáłígíí | The day of the Lord (still future) |
| Zech 14:1 | yôm bā ³ l ^e YHWH | Bóhólníihii beidoołkááł | The day of the Lord will come |
| Mal 4:5 | yôm YHWH | Bóhólníihii beiníłkáądi | When the day of the Lord comes |

New Testament "Day of the Lord"

In table 2 (below) we continue with New Testament examples of Greek *hēmera kuriou* ("Day of the Lord"), again showing the equivalent Navajo phrases and an English gloss of the Navajo.

Table 2
New Testament Examples of "Day of the Lord"

| Reference | Greek | Navajo | English Gloss |
|-------------|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Acts 2:20 | <i>hēmeran kuriou</i> | Bóhólníihii nídoodááł t'ah doo beiyíłkaahgóó áhodooníł ³ | Before the day of the Lord's return |
| 1 Cor 5:5 | <i>tē hēmera tou kuriou</i> | Bóhólníihii Jesus beiníłkáądi | On the day of the Lord Jesus (second coming) |
| 2 Cor 1:14 | <i>tē hēmera tou kuriou</i> | Bóhólníihii Jesus beiníłkáądi | On the day of the Lord Jesus (second coming) |
| 1 Thess 5:2 | <i>hēmera kuriou</i> | Bóhólníihii beidoołkááł | Day of the Lord (future) |
| 2 Thess 2:2 | <i>hē hēmera tou kuriou</i> | Bóhólníihii beidoołkáátígíí | The day of the Lord (future) |
| 2 Pet 3:10 | <i>hēmera kuriou</i> | Bóhólníihii nádáhígíí beidoołkááł | Day of the Lord's return (still future) |

New Testament "Lord's Day"

The New Testament term for "Lord's Day" is entirely unique in the original. The word for "Lord" in Greek is *kurios*,⁴ while the word for "Lord's Day" is *kuriakē*. A more literal gloss would be simply "Lord's" (feminine possessive). The word "day" is not present, but by convention when people see *kuriakē* they translate "Lord's Day." It is only when the term is translated that the potential for confusion arises. In Greek there is only a minimal linguistic connection between "Day of the Lord" (*hēmera kuriou*) and "Lord's Day" (*kuriakē*). There is a shared element, but no one would ever confuse the two terms.

In 1956 the Navajo term for "Lord's Day" was *Bóhólníihii bijí* ("Lord's day") – in context *Bóhólníihii bijí góne'* ("on the Lord's day"). In 1975 the translator's revised this to *Bóhólníihii biháá'áyíłh jí* ("Lord's rest day") – in context *Bóhólníihii biháá'áyíłh jí góne'* ("on the Lord's rest day"). This is what it was also in 1985 when the first entire Navajo Bible came out. There were no changes in 1985. In 2000 the vowel of the word "day" was lengthened from *jí* to *jíí*, in view of its occurrence before *góne'* ("inside"). Thus, *Bóhólníihii biháá'áyíłh jíí góne'* (2000) as opposed to earlier *Bóhólníihii biháá'áyíłh jí góne'* (1975, 1985).⁵

³ See Joel 2:31.

⁴ The same word describes human lords as well. In this case we wouldn't use a capital letter for the English gloss.

⁵ The word *góne'* ("inside") normally causes a preceding stressed vowel in an open syllable to lengthen, so in 1956, 1975, and 1985 the fact that *jí* remains short before *góne'* is what requires explanation, not that in 2000 it is written long (*jíí góne'*). The pattern followed in 2000 is the expected norm.

Now look back at table 1 and notice Joel 3:14. The Navajo term for "Day of the Lord" in that verse is *Bóhólníihii bijí*. It is a literal, straightforward rendering of Hebrew *yôm YHWH*. The meaning is clear; the translation is accurate. And so? Well, these are identically the same words that were used to translate "Lord's Day" in the 1956 Navajo New Testament. So we have *Bóhólníihii bijí* ("Day of the Lord," Joel 3:14) and *Bóhólníihii bijí* ("Lord's Day," Revelation 1:10 [1956]). The same confusion that would be possible in English is a reality in Navajo, at least when comparing this one Old Testament passage with this one version of Revelation 1:10. It's easy to see why the translators in later versions would want to try to clarify the meaning by adding a word.

The word they add is *háá'áyííh* ("rest"). Thus, John was not in the spirit on the "Day of the Lord" (the end of all things) – what he wrote about still future in his day – but on the "Lord's Day." You know, the Lord's *rest* day (Sunday). Another way to emphasize this is by saying the *Lord's rest* day (Sunday), i.e., not just anybody's rest day (Saturday). And so there's this extra word in the Navajo text of Revelation 1:10.

New Testament "Sabbath"

With this much as background, it so happens that the Navajo term for "Sabbath" in the New Testament is *háá'áyííh jí* ("rest day"). By adding the word *háá'áyííh* ("rest") to *Bóhólníihii bijí* ("Lord's day"), as the 1956 Navajo New Testament has it, the 1975 revisers create a remarkably close parallel with Mark 2:28. Thus, *Bóhólníihii biháá'áyííh jíí góne'* ("on the Lord's day"). In Mark 2:28 Jesus asserts that He is Lord (*Bóhólníihii*) of the Sabbath (*háá'áyííh jí*). The similarity between John's being in the Spirit on the "Lord's rest day" (Revelation 1:10) and Jesus' being "Lord" of the Sabbath ("rest day") in Mark 2:28 is striking. Clearly in Mark 2:28 the Sabbath is the day of which Jesus is Lord. And just as clearly Jesus is the one who is Lord of the "rest day" mentioned in the Navajo of Revelation 1:10. Thus, in the New Testament – though not in later tradition – the Sabbath is the Lord's day and the Lord that it pertains to is the Lord Jesus. People who keep another day in order to honor Jesus should consider these facts carefully.

Discussion

The point I'm drawing from Mark 2:28 is found in other passages as well. In Matthew 12:8 Jesus says, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath," and in Luke 6:5 again He says, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." One will argue that this is merely a synoptic parallel. I counter that not everything from parallel passages in the synoptic gospels gets repeated in all three of them. Jesus' lordship over the Sabbath is a point that all three gospel writers wished to emphasize.

With the passage of time people have come to see this three-fold parallel in a different light. I say "different" because, with 2000 years of history and tradition behind us, the way we interpret Christ's intent has changed. What Jesus was saying is that the Sabbath is a day that He claims as His own. What we see in His words now is the idea that He has so much authority and so much lordship that He can set the Sabbath aside. Claiming is not the same as disclaiming. Jesus was not setting the Sabbath aside.

Let me emphasize this last point by asking how Christ's words would have been heard in a day and time before the church reacted against the Sabbath and did indeed set it aside. Since we have done this for so long we read our own attitudes back into Christ's words 2000 years ago, but this is backwards. How would one become Lord of the Sabbath, which refers back to the seventh day of creation week? Let me ask the question a different way. How could Jesus be Lord of the seventh day of creation week without first being Lord of days one through six? And could He do this unless He were the One doing the creating?

Here is the place to mention such passages as John 1:3 ("Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made") and Hebrews 1:2 ("but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe [*tous aiōnous*]"). In Mark 2:28 Jesus was not expressing disdain for the Sabbath; He was claiming to be one with the great God of creation. Does this put things in a different light? What should our attitude toward the Sabbath be if in fact it is Jesus' special day and one which reminds us every week that He is the One through whom God made all things?

Conclusion

This is not just a game of words. The "Lord's Day" is truly the seventh day and not the first. This is not so because in their 2000 revision the Navajo translators decided to add a word to the text for clarification. It is true because Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God. The day we so lightly reject is the day which, more than any other, tells us who Jesus is.

It is time to correct such misunderstandings. The Sabbath does not deflect our faith away from Jesus to a system of works-based salvation. I always marvel that people say such things. The word "Sabbath" means to "cease," to "stop," to "rest." How is resting the same as working? Reflect on this irony the next time you're doing something in the heat of the day, sweating hard, wanting to stop and get a drink of water.

The Sabbath is my special time with Jesus and it can be your special time with Jesus too. Spending the whole day with Him is not the same as ignoring what He was done for me. In fact resting in what Jesus has done for me is a pretty good summing up of what faith is all about. How much does your trip to the grocery store on Saturday morning draw you to Jesus? How much would fellowship with other Sabbath keepers, in worship and praise, draw you to Jesus? If we can't spend a day with Jesus now, how will we ever be able to enjoy spending forever with Him when He comes?

John was in the spirit on the seven-day Sabbath, the day we call Saturday. If we keep the day the same way he kept it we also will be in the spirit then – not in the sense of writing books of Scripture, but in the sense of having a spiritual relationship with Jesus and drawing closer to Him.