

Hebrews 11:1 in the Navajo Bible

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

Ha'át'íida t'áádóo nídí hodooleełgo bíká hoł chohoo'íigo baa nitsídzíkeesii éi hwe'oodla' wolyé, éi doo daat'íinii t'áa aaní dahólóqo bééhózinígo íí'í. (Hebrews 10:30)¹

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (Hebrews 10:30)²

Introduction

It's possible to get different shades of meaning from the present verse. NIV suggests that faith is "being sure" and "[being] certain." This is good in that it makes our faith an active thing. Other translations convey a similar thought.

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. (NLT)³

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (NRSV)⁴

For this verse I especially like KJV: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." This sounds a lot like what the other translations were saying. Is there a difference and, if so, on which side does the Navajo translation come down?

What Does the Passage Mean?

There is a difference. The Greek says *hupostasis* on the one hand, and *elegchos* on the other. We haven't discussed what these words mean yet, but they are nouns. "Being sure" and "[being] certain" (NIV) are verbal constructions.

Verbs

If we talk about "being sure" (NIV), or even about having "confidence" (NLT) or "assurance" (NRSV), where do these things reside? They reside within us. Being sure is something that takes place in our minds, and that also is where confidence and assurance

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 *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, second edition. Copyright © 2004 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.

⁴ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*. Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

reside. What about "substance" (or reality), "evidence" (or proof)? Where does the substance or evidence for our faith reside? Is that in our minds as well? If so, something's missing.

Nouns

Where the substance of our faith is depends on which period of time we have in mind. At one time the substance of our faith was in His mother's womb. Later He was in the Jordan river being baptized by John the Baptist. When His ministry was coming to an end the substance – the flesh and blood humanity – of our faith was nailed to a Roman cross. Christ in His person is the tangible reality of our faith. Remember that "tangible" means something you can touch.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. (1 John 1:1)

Then there's the word "evidence", or proof. The evidence that I will live forever is that Christ lives forever. On the cross Jesus was taking my place, because I was the one who deserved to be there dying for my own sins. But He did in my place. And He did this in order to give me (and you) all the good things that were rightfully His. This is an exchange. The nature of this exchange is something our faith must grasp. Doing so is a fundamental part of being a Christian.

Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. "With His stripes we are healed."⁵

Pursuing this same thought further, the reason why I know I will one day reign over some part of God's universe is that Christ now reigns over all of it. As Paul says,

Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; ¹³ if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. (2 Tim 2:11-13)

The fact that Christ exists and that He sits at the right hand of the Father is the evidence – the proof, or tangible evidence – of everything I hope for but do not yet see. This is completely outside of and apart from myself. There is a big difference between this and being sure of something in my mind. I can be sure of things in my mind that don't begin to be true. People do this sort of thing all the time. But the existence of Christ is independent of anything in my mind. I do not wish Him into existence. He is, and faith helps me grasp this fact. Thus, the reality of my faith resides, not in me, but outside myself – in Christ.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 1898 edition (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), p. 25.

How Does the Navajo Translation Say These Things?

The 2000 *Diyin God Bizaad* comes a long way toward the type of thought I'm trying to convey here. A rough English equivalent would be, "Faith means resolutely hoping for what will happen; it makes known things which can't be seen." Although the translators use verbs instead of nouns at crucial points to convey these thoughts, I like the way they use the expressions *hodooleetgo* ("things that will be") and *bééhózinígo íít'í* ("it makes known").

I like *hodooleetgo* because what we resolutely hope for and think about are things that are going to happen. It's not that we hope they will happen, or think they will happen. These things are going to be – and we think about them with resolute hope. If *t'áádóo nídí* is added to convey the idea that our act of hoping is resolute, that takes us back toward NIV and other translations similar to it. If, on the other hand, the intent is that the events we hope for will take place, surely and without fail, then that's closer to what I'm trying to say here. The issue is whether the words *t'áádóo nídí* pertain to hoping (something that happens in our minds) or to happening (something outside ourselves).

In regard to the expression *bééhózinígo íít'í* ("it makes known"), things we don't yet see are made known to us by faith. Their existence does not derive from the way we think about them. When I speak in this way, I'm thinking of the promise that Jesus will come again and that before He does that He will care for our needs. Things like that. I'm not suggesting that God will do each and every thing we pray for. We can hope He won't, because we sometimes ask for things that would harm us. God is too loving and wise to respond to our prayers in this way. Our faith must be in Him and not in what we think He will do.

Conclusion

What I like about the Navajo translation of Hebrews 11:1 is that it's consistent with the idea that our faith rests in something outside ourselves. It's not just that, if we really hope something is true, then for us it can be true and we can think about it that way. If this is our concept of faith, then our faith is an illusion. There is no – how can I say this? – there is no substance to it.

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

The "substance" of our faith is Christ's human flesh and blood. Similarly, the "evidence" for our faith is the historical fact that Jesus' body was born at a specific time and place, nailed to a cross, and raised again the third day. Demons believe these things too, but it won't do them any good, because they – unlike us – do not cling to the Christ who did these things as their Master, Lord, and Savior. But I do.

With these facts as background, I think the Navajo translation did a good job with the present verse. They have accurately conveyed the author's essential idea.