

1 Timothy 1:17 in the Navajo Bible

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Doo nihonít'i'góó hoogáa'ii biyi' Aláahgo Naat'áanii, doo daatsaahii, doo yit'íinii, t'áá bí t'éi Diyin God [hóyáanii], hool'áágóó ahóyéel'áágóó ı̄ nilı̄ı̄ doo, ında baa ha'niih doo! T'áá ákót'ée doo. (1 Timothy 1:17) ¹

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17) ²

Introduction

The English of this verse, at least in NIV, says all the right things. All the right parts and pieces are there. And yet the wording doesn't necessarily sparkle. But the Navajo does. This is one of a growing list of what I would call beautiful passages in the 2000 Navajo *Diyin God Bizaad*.

English

One reason why I like and use the New International Version (NIV) is it's nice styling. I like the fonts they use. Everything NIV touches is nicely done. It's not a perfect translation, as many will hasten to point out, but it's a pretty good combination of Evangelical scholarship and attention to the details that make such scholarship come to life on a spiritual and esthetic level. The problem in 1 Timothy 1:17 – well, I shouldn't say "problem." There is no problem for NIV in 1 Timothy 1:17, but neither does the verse stand out.

Other English version also do a good, workmanlike translation of the verse. And they also take the matter as far as English wording is likely to take it. Here are a few examples.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17, CSB)

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17, ESV)

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. Other English translations mentioned in this paper are CSB = *Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003); ESV = *English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2007); NAB = *New American Bible* (Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1970); NKJV = *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), NRSV = *New Revised Standard Version* (National Council of Churches, 1989).

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To the king of ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17, NAB)

Now to the eternal king, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17, NET)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17, NKJV)

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17, NRSV)

Some of the differences here are "King eternal" (CSB, NIV, NKJV) v. "eternal king" (NET) v. "King of (the) ages" (ESV, NRSV) (or "king of ages" [NAB]). "King of (the) ages" is more literally accurate, but here we're talking about literary style. To my ear, "King eternal" sounds about as good as any of the alternatives, and that's the rendering we started with.

The difference between "God who alone is wise" (NKJV) and "the only God" (everyone else) is a textual rather than stylistic difference. The word "wise" does not occur in certain older manuscripts, but NKJV includes it. If anything, I think the extra words make the verse sound better, which is not often the case for NKJV. NKJV does not often improve stylistically on anything you might find in NIV. Here one might say that it does. There are many English translations of the New Testament, but perhaps this sample will prove to be representative.

Navajo

I now list the four available Navajo New Testaments (1956, 1975, 1985, 2000). The first two (1956, 1975) were only New Testaments, the last two (1985, 2000) entire Bibles. But in regard to 1 Timothy 1:17, all four translations go over the same ground.

Doo nihońt'i'góó hoogáańii biyi' Aláahgo Naat'áanii, doo daatsaahii, doo yit'íinii, t'áá bí t'éi Diyin God nilíinii, hool'áágóó ahoól'áágóó ń nilíi doo, ńnda baa ha'niih doo. T'áá ákót'ée doo. (1 Timothy 1:17, 1956)

Doo nihońt'i'góó hoogáańii biyi' Aláahgo Naat'áanii, doo daatsaahii, doo yit'íinii, t'áá bí t'éi Diyin God [hóyáanii], hool'áágóó ahóyéel'áágóó ń nilíi doo, ńnda baa ha'niih doo! T'áá ákót'ée doo. (1 Timothy 1:17, 1975)

Doo nihońt'i'góó hoogáańii biyi' Aláahgo Naat'áanii, doo daatsaahii, doo yit'íinii, t'áá bí t'éi Diyin God [hóyáanii], hool'áágóó ahóyéel'áágóó ń nilíi doo, ńnda baa ha'niih doo! T'áá ákót'ée doo. (1 Timothy 1:17, 1985)

Doo nihońt'i'góó hoogáańii biyi' Aláahgo Naat'áanii, doo daatsaahii, doo yit'íinii, t'áá bí t'éi Diyin God [hóyáanii], hool'áágóó ahóyéel'áágóó ń nilíi doo, ńnda baa ha'niih doo! T'áá ákót'ée doo. (1 Timothy 1:17, 2000)

The 1975 and 1985 translations are identical in 1 Timothy 1:17, and 2000 is nearly so. There is a subtle difference between 1975 and 1985 on the one hand and 2000 on the other, i.e., it is subtle when we confine ourselves to this one verse. Over many verses it becomes noticeable and a little annoying. What I'm referring to is a sweeping change of spelling conventions whereby syllabic */n/* with high (*ń*) or low tone (*n*), is virtually removed from the text in 2000. In 2000 there are no examples whatever of word-initial syllabic */n/* and the number of word-medial syllabic */n/*'s is greatly reduced. I don't understand the reason for this, but that's how they do it.³

The differences between 1956 and the others are more substantial. The reading of the Greek text that Faye Edgerton and Faith Hill accept in 1956 ("only God") has been changed in all three subsequent printings to "only wise God" (cf. NKJV above), but the word is placed in square brackets. This printing convention, by contrast with the one mentioned above, is a hands down winner. People familiar with KJV won't think that words are being taken away from their Bible, and yet those same readers will be able to see that the word "wise" is not equally well represented in all ancient manuscripts. At the same time the wording becomes much more graceful in 1975. Saying *t'áá bí t'éí Diyin God nilíinii, hool'áágóó ahool'áágóó it nilíí doo* is not nearly so appealing – again, to my ear – as *t'áá bí t'éí Diyin God [hóyáanii], hool'áágóó ahóyéel'áágóó it nilíí doo* (1975, 1985, 2000).

There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the sequence *nilíinii . . . it nilíí doo* (1956) as opposed to *[hóyáanii] . . . it nilíí doo* (1975, 1985, 2000). The second reason has to do with the word sequence *hool'áágóó ahool'áágóó* (1956), which changes in later printings to *hool'áágóó ahóyéel'áágóó* (1975, 1985, 2000). Putting the two changes together, from 1975 onward the verse just sounds better. I'm not saying that including *[hóyáanii]* in the text is more accurate than leaving it out. We're not dealing with that set of issues here. Actually, the reverse is probably true. It would be more accurate textually to leave the word out. But what we're talking about here is the way the verse sounds.

Conclusion

The 2000 Navajo Bible (along with the 1975 New Testament, and the 1985 Bible) makes 1 Timothy 1:17 sound better than it did in 1956 and, to my view, they made the verse sound better than it does in the available English translations. It is not merely translated competently from a scholarly point of view, but it just has a nice ring when you read it.

³ One reason why this change might not be an improvement is that it creates a systematic difference between the Navajo Bible and the standard dictionaries of Young and Morgan.