

Acts 7:60 in the Navajo Bible

Copyright (c) 2008 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

Áko nitsizhdinígo'go yéego hadzoodzú'goájíní, Bóhólníhii, díí baahági ádashí'ínígíí doo bik'íjii' síní'áa da doo. Áádóó ákózhdíniidgo ájídín. (Acts 7:60)

Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60, NIV)¹

Introduction

Anyone with even a passing knowledge of Navajo will see immediately that different things are being said at the end of Acts 7:60 in Navajo and in English. The Navajo says *ájídín* "he is gone, i.e., deceased"; the English says "he fell asleep."

The context for this verse is that Stephen, a deacon in the early Christian church in Jerusalem, had been falsely accused of speaking against the temple and the law of Moses and was on trial for his life. At the end of his defense he spoke of Jesus so strongly that the whole council rushed at him, took him outside, and started throwing rocks in order to kill him. This was how the Jews executed people.² So in this verse Stephen is being injured by rocks and he dies as a result of his wounds.

Which Translation Is Right?

But the text doesn't say "he died of his wounds." Actually, it doesn't even say "he died," although we know he did die. But instead it says "he fell asleep." The Greek word is *ekoimēthē*. A literal translation of this Greek word into Navajo would be *ajiiithaazh*. It's hard to fall asleep sometimes in a warm bed with everything quiet and nothing to worry about. So how could Stephen fall asleep when he's surrounded by people shouting at him and throwing rocks? But that's what the Bible writer says, i.e., "He fell asleep."

Actually both translations are right. Stephen did die, so the Navajo is right in one way when it says *ájídín*, and the Greek does say "he fell asleep," so the English in another way the English is right. The question is not what happened. We all know what happened. The question is why anyone would say it this way.

To understand the Greek word, we have to go back further. The word *ekoimēthē* ("he fell sleep") is a Greek word that reflects a Hebrew thought. Secular Greeks didn't speak of death as a sleep, but all through the Old Testament we find this analogy being

¹ 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.

² There is a question why the Roman government would allow this form of execution. Some speculate that Judea might have been between governors at the time.

used. Let me give you some numbers. Some form of the word "sleep" (sometimes it is translated "rest") is used 219 times in the Bible. But "sleep" only means "sleep" in five out of every ten cases where it is used (115 examples = 52.5%). In two out of every ten cases (42 examples = 19.2%) this word refers to sexual relations, and in three out of every ten cases (62 examples = 28.3%) it refers to death.

What Does the Bible Say?

Bible writers in both the Old Testament and the New Testament compare death with sleep. This comparison is not something they explain. In their minds this is an idea that needs no explanation. It's something they take for granted. But what does all of this mean? Why do these writers say what they say?

Old Testament

When you're asleep you don't know what's going on around you. If you do know what's happening around you, you're not asleep yet. So comparing death with sleep is a way of saying that when people die they don't know anything. Solomon says, "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten" (Eccl 9:5). When he says they have "no further reward," that sounds like he is either discouraged about life or is not thinking of spiritual things the way other Bible writers do, but it's not just this one verse.

Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death[.] (Psalm 13:3)

You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning[.] (Psalm 90:5)

But while they are aroused, I will set out a feast for them and make them drunk, so that they shout with laughter-- then sleep forever and not awake," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 51:39)

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2)

There are lots of examples where the King James Version of the English Bible says this or that king "slept with his fathers." What this means is that he died, just like all of his ancestors. The New International Version says "rested with his fathers." Here is one example along with a New Testament verse that says the same thing:

Then David rested [Hebrew *wayyishkab*] with his fathers and was buried in the City of David. (1 Kings 2:10)

"For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. (Acts 13:36)

In other translations the word "rested" in 1 Kings 2:10 is translated "slept." It's the same word in the original as the one we've been talking about.

New Testament

Is this way of talking about death something we find mostly in the Old Testament, because people back then didn't know about Jesus yet? Do New Testament writers speak differently about what it means when a Christian dies? No, actually they don't. Writers in both the Old Testament and the New speak the same way about death. Throughout the Bible death is consistently compared with sleep. Jesus speaks this way in the gospels and so do Luke (in the book of Acts) and Paul (in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 Thessalonians).

Just because people go to sleep, that doesn't mean they never wake up. When the Bible speaks of people living forever in heaven with Christ, it's because Jesus personally comes and awakens those who have believed in Him. This happens in the resurrection at the last day (see John 6:39, 40, 44, 54). Here are some New Testament examples.

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up. . . . Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep." (John 11:11)

Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60)

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed [.] (1 Corinthians 15:51)

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 11:30)

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:6)

Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. (vs. 18)

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (vs. 20)

for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." (Ephesians 5:14)

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. (vs. 14)

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. (vs. 15)

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. (1 Thessalonians 5:10)

Conclusion

There's much more to discuss, but this paper is too long already. When a person dies, they go to sleep. That's how the Bible describes death. They do not go straight to heaven or to hell. Our departed loved ones are not in heaven now. They are resting peacefully in their graves waiting for Jesus to come. On the last day He will come with all the holy angels and wake them up. It is then that we will be together with Jesus in heaven, i.e., we will be there when He personally comes and takes us there. Not before. Our loved ones are not there already waiting for us.

It is important for any number of reasons to get this biblical teaching straight and understand it clearly. We can't go further here. Perhaps in future papers. The important thing at this point is that Christ tells the truth. More than this, He says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). If He says the dead are asleep and we say, but I would find it comforting to believe that they are not asleep – that they are in heaven with Jesus already – it might seem like this honors Him, but it doesn't. The only way to honor Christ is to tell the truth, just like He always did. And the truth is that our dead loved ones are asleep in their graves, waiting for Jesus to come.