

Rev 6:9-11 in the Navajo Bible

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Bee ída'diiljeehí naaltsoos bee bidáda'deeshjée'ii ashdla' góne'ígíí ąą yidinízóqzgo, bikáá' náá'iinihi biyaagi Diyin God bizaad yaa dahalne'go áádóó t'áá éí yee ádaa ch'ídahwiist'áago biniinaa nidabi'diztseedii bii' naazíinii yiiltsá. ¹⁰ Áko éí chánahgo hadadeeshghaazhgo ádaaní, Ni t'éí Bóhólníihii nílíinii, diyin índa t'áá aaníí nílíinii, kodóó hahgoshá' nahasdzáán bikáa'gi kээdahat'íinii nihidił biniinaa baa nídíít'íłł áádóó nihá k'ээdidíłł? ¹¹ Nít'ée' éí t'ááłá'í nítínigo éé' ligaii bitaa daastsoozgo ábi'doo'niid, T'ah átsé háádaat'yíłh, bił nidaał'a'ii índa nihik'isóó t'áá nihí nidanihi'diztseedígi át'éego nidabidi'dootsiłígíí altso nidaaztseedgo índa. (Revelation 6:11)¹

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait [*anapausontai*] a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed. (Revelation 6:11)²

Introduction

In Revelation 6:9 the souls of the martyrs (those put to death for their faith) cry out for justice from under the altar and God tells them to, well, that's the question. What does He tell them to do? The Navajo word *háádaat'yíłh* means "rest." But does He tell them to "rest" (Navajo, ESV, NRSV), or to "wait" (NIV)? And is there a difference?

Background

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews says, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Hebrews 12:4). That statement was written before A.D. 70. Thirty years later, however, when the book of Revelation was written, there had been a number of Christian martyrs. One of them was the apostle Paul. Are these the ones John sees under the altar? Yes, these, and others. Many others.

In the following centuries there would be countless martyrs, and not just under Nero or one of the other Roman emperors. The number of Christians who died for their faith was not complete when the Roman empire gradually gave way to the separate countries that make up Europe today. Even after the Roman empire was gone thousands of people were systematically

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.

turned over to the secular authorities for execution because of their faith in and witness to the truth of the gospel. Their deaths were ordered, not by people who knew nothing of Christ, but by the religious authorities of their day.³ Jesus told us beforehand that this would be the case.

They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. (John 16:2)

Think, for example, of Stephen the first Christian martyr, who died in A.D. 34. He was rejected by the Jews, put out of their assembly, and stoned to death. Those who did this thought that by killing him they were offering a service to God. Others were rejected later by Romans. Did the secular Roman authorities feel they were offering a service to the God of Jews and Christians when they persecuted people as they did? Probably not. So did Christ's statement stop being true when Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and the Jewish people had lost the ability to put people to death for their beliefs, as in the case of Stephen? Not at all. The statement continues to be true and in fact applies with special force at a later time, i.e., during the middle ages.

By far the majority of Christian martyrs have been put to death, not by Romans, but by fellow Christians. If it seems indelicate to refer to the historical facts of what happened, could we not say that the events themselves were indelicate? We need to study and learn what happened in the past so we won't repeat it in the future. Anyway, the people who died witnessing to their faith in Christ and His truth during the earliest Christian centuries, and during the middle ages, are all represented as being underneath an altar. What the text says is clear. The question is whether we must interpret the words literally in order to learn from them.

Text of the Passage

What do the words say?

The Navajo term which corresponds to NIV's English word "wait" is *háádaatyííh* (lit. "rest"). This is a translation of the Greek verb *anapauomai* (not *anapauō*, which has a slightly different meaning).⁴ A related Greek noun Greek is *anapausis* "rest." Together these three words, in their various forms, occur some thirteen times in the New Testament. (The exact form in Revelation 6:11 is *anapausontai*, lit. "they will rest"). In nine cases the English Standard Version (ESV), New International Version (NIV), and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) – taking these as a representative sample – all translate using a form of the English word "rest."⁵ Three times they all agree in not using a form of the English word "rest." See tables 1 and 2 (below).

³ Foxe's Book of Martyrs (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxes_book_of_martyrs) documents especially the persecutions that took place in England during and after the reign of Mary Queen of Scots. Some of what happened then might have had a political edge to it, but Inquisitions and Crusades (not only against Muslims in the east [Palestine], or pagans in the North [Pomerania, Finland], but against Christians in the South [southern France, northern Italy]). So it is not that Foxe says too much, but that he says too little.

⁴ Greek *anapauō* means "give rest" (see Matt 11:28), while *anapauomai* means "achieve rest, be refreshed by resting" (see Mark 6:31).

⁵ There is nothing uniquely special about these three versions. They are well done and widely used. I could have chosen three others – or six others. I merely use them as means of facilitating discussion.

Table 1
ESV, NIV, NRSV Use English "Rest"

Ref	Anapauō	Anapauomai	Anapausis
Matt 11:28	"rest" (ESV, NIV, NRSV)		
Matt 11:29			"rest" (ESV, NIV, NRSV)
Matt 12:43			"rest" (ESV, NIV), "resting place" (NRSV)
Matt 26:45		"rest" (ESV, NRSV), "resting" (NIV)	
Mark 6:31		"rest" (ESV, NIV, NRSV)	
Mark 14:41		"rest" (ESV, NRSV), "resting" (NIV)	
Luke 11:24			"rest" (ESV, NIV), "resting" (NRSV)
1 Pet 4:14		"rests" (ESV, NIV), "resting" (NRSV)	
Rev 14:11			"rest" (ESV, NIV, NRSV)

Table 2
ESV, NIV, NRSV Do Not Use English "Rest"

Ref	Anapauō	Anapauomai	Anapausis
Luke 12:19	"relax" (ESV, NRSV), "Take life easy" (NIV)		
Phlm 1:20	"Refresh/refresh" (ESV, NIV, NRSV)		
Rev 4:8			"cease" (ESV), "stop" (NIV), "ceasing" (NIV)

There is one further example (Rev 6:11) and here the three translations disagree among themselves. ESV and NRSV say "rest" while NIV says "wait." Both are legitimate renderings of the original text, but is one better than the other in the present context?

What does the passage mean?

The words can't be literal. If we think Revelation 6:9-11 is giving us a literal description, then we should understand what we mean when we say this. Consider the white robe that each soul is given. How many robes are there? Well, how many martyrs are there? We have said it is a large number. No one can know for sure how large until we get to heaven and ask God who knows exactly, but it could be many hundreds of thousands.

If there were hundreds of thousands of martyrs, it follows that there are hundreds of thousands of robes, so let's think about this. How much space would it take to store just 100 robes, all neatly folded ready for storage? Now multiply that times 10. And now multiply *that* times 100. Now we have 100,000 (a 1 with five zeros). That's quite a bit of space. And remember we said there are probably not one, but many, hundreds of thousands. I don't think it would be possible to understand the words literally. But let us say for argument that it would be.

We would not want the words to be literal. Heaven is supposed to be a happy place. If you knew that, after dying a martyr's death, you would spend your first several centuries in heaven confined to the area underneath an altar along with 100,000 other martyrs, that would not be a happy picture of heaven.

During the second world war many Jews were put in cattle cars – so tightly that they couldn't sit down – and were kept there for days as the trains took them to labor camps. Clearly this experience was not happy, and here we're only talking about a few scores of people in each car and keeping there for only a few days. In Revelation 6:9, on the other hand, we're talking about many hundreds of thousands of people and centuries of time.

This has got to be a figure of speech. If the description John gives us is literal, the text offers a pretty bleak picture of what heaven is like. Quite apart from whether it would be possible to interpret the words of this passage literally, I don't think we would want to do so.

Discussion

When the text speaks of souls under the altar, this reminds me of the story of the rich man and Lazarus. In that story good people go at death, not to "heaven," but to "Abraham's bosom" (see Luke 16:19-31). I believe this a figurative illustration. I say this because a literal reading of the story of the rich man and Lazarus would require us to believe that heaven is close enough to hell – horizontally – that people can talk back and forth between them. They are separated by "a great chasm" (Luke 16:26). Think of the Grand Canyon for example. Can people on opposite sides of the Grand Canyon talk to each other? This is not literal language. It is valuable and true, but not literal. Instead we are dealing with figures of speech that Jesus used to make a point. So we must learn to make certain distinctions.

In the present case, what is the purpose for saying that the souls of the martyrs are under the altar? This is a word picture which shows that these people have made the ultimate sacrifice for Christ and that He is reserving a special reward for them. It also makes clear that they have not received it yet.

What Does "Rest" Mean?

If we translate Greek *anapauomai* as "wait," following NIV, this leaves open the question of what those in white robes do while they wait. Are they to work during this time? No, their work is over; all their life choices have been made. So what are they doing? They're resting. This is one reason why "rest" is a better translation of *anapauomai* in the present context than "wait." The word "wait" has to do only with the passage of time. It does not tell us what happens during the time that passes. But what happens is an important part of the message in this text.

The contrast is between life (working) and death (not working), which in turn is similar to the contrast between day (working) and night (not working). What do people do during the day? They work. And at night? They sleep. There is a natural connection between rest and sleep. When we rest at night, we are sleeping. That is the imagery we find here. The martyr's work is over. Their struggles are at an end. They are not just passing time; they are at rest (*anapouomai*).

Euphemisms

A "euphemism" is a nice way of saying something. Thus, in Genesis 4:1 KJV says, "And Adam knew [*yāda*] Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD." The word "knew" is a euphemism. It doesn't mean that he got acquainted with Eve; it means he lay with her sexually, making her pregnant. And that's how NIV puts it. "Adam lay with [*yāda*] his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain."

Another biblical euphemism involves saying "rest" or "sleep" to represent death. Such usage is widespread in both Old and New Testaments. The words can take different forms, such as: "asleep," "rest," "rest with," "rested," "rested with," "sleep," "sleep with," "sleeper," "sleeping," "sleeping with," "sleepless," "sleeps," "sleeps with," "sleepy," "slept," "slept with." One could get the same results by doing the search with original language words (Hebrew, Greek), but here I use English because it will be more accessible to the reader. Consider the percentages in fig. 1.

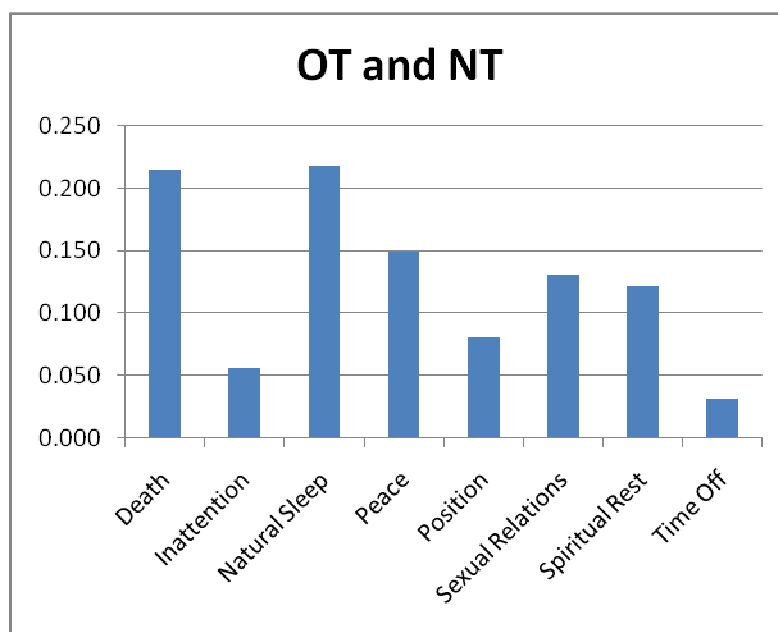


Fig. 1. Chart showing the various meanings of the Hebrew words

Notice that the words in the above list mean "death" just about as often as they mean "natural sleep." The actual numbers are 21.4 percent as opposed to 21.7 percent. That's about 1 in 5. From there we go to such additional meanings as:

Peace

But now the LORD my God has given me **rest** [Hebrew *hēnîḥ*, Navajo *háá'áyííh*] on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster (1 Kgs 5:4)

Sexual Relations

Then Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have **slept with** [Hebrew *šākab*, Navajo *yit neezhtéezhgo*] your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." (Gen 26:10)

Spiritual Rest	He said to them, "This is what the LORD commanded: "Tomorrow is to be a day of rest [Hebrew <i>šabbatôn</i> , Navajo <i>dílzin</i>], a holy Sabbath to the LORD." (Exod 16:23a)
Position	[A]nd on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest [Hebrew <i>wattánaḥ</i> , Navajo <i>dah náz'éeł</i>] on the mountains of Ararat. (Gen 8:4)
Inattention	This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper [Greek <i>ho katheudōn</i> , Navajo <i>Athoshí</i>], rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." (Eph 5:14)
Time Off	So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested [Hebrew <i>wannēšēb</i> , Navajo <i>táá' danihiiská</i>] three days. (Ezra 8:32)

It should be clear that a variety of meanings for "rest" and "sleep" are represented in the data. But my point is that one of the most frequent of these has to do with death. If you come across one of the expressions from fig. 1 anywhere in the Bible – Old or New Testament – there's about a 1 in 5 chance that the word is a euphemism referring to death.

Death as rest or sleep

In Navajo culture words associated with death are not used widely or publicly. Once I was scheduled to read a paper at a conference in Shiprock, on the reservation, and wanted to introduce my talk with an introductory paragraph in Navajo. I went over the paragraph with a friend who knows the language well and he suggested not starting out with, *Yá'át'ééh kwá'ásiní* ("Hello friends"), because once a student of his had said it might have some association with the dead. It doesn't, but on my friend's advice, I used a different greeting. Actually *kwá'ásiní* is a perfectly good and useful word. Frank Harvey has a chapter on it in his excellent book, *Saad T'áá Aanii Wójíhígíí*⁶ and once a number of years ago, when the tribal chairman was visiting Lake Valley chapter house and I went to hear him and he used *kwá'ásiní* in his greeting to the people, just as I had planned to do at Shiprock. There is nothing whatever wrong with the word. Once the suggestion had been made, however, my friend felt that it would be better to say something else.

The Bible does not reflect such attitudes. In the Bible death – for a person who knows and loves God – is completely inconsequential. It's like resting or sleeping. Below let me illustrate this point with examples from both testaments. We begin with the book of 1 Kings. The expression in question is "X rested with his fathers" (= "X died and was buried, just as his fathers had been"). There are no fewer than 36 examples of this expression in the Old Testament,⁷ but here for your interest are some of the earliest ones.

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

⁶ *Tsé Nitsaa Deez'áhi*, 1974.

⁷ See 1 Kgs 2:10; 11:21, 43; 14:20, 31; 15:8, 24; 16:6, 28; 22:40, 50; 2 Kgs 8:24; 10:35; 13:9, 13; 14:16, 22, 29; 15:7, 22, 38; 16:20; 20:21; 21:18; 24:6; 2 Chr 9:31; 12:16; 14:1; 16:13; 21:1; 26:2, 23; 27:9; 28:27; 32:33; 33:20.

While he was in Egypt, Hadad heard that David **rested with** his fathers and that Joab the commander of the army was also dead. Then Hadad said to Pharaoh, "Let me go, that I may return to my own country." (1 Kings 11:21)

Then he [Solomon] **rested with** his fathers and was buried in the city of David his father. And Rehoboam his son succeeded him as king. (1 Kings 11:43)

He [Rehoboam] reigned for twenty-two years and then **rested with** his fathers. And Nadab his son succeeded him as king. (1 Kings 14:20)

And Abijah **rested with** his fathers and was buried in the City of David. And Asa his son succeeded him as king. (1 Kings 15:8)

Then Asa **rested with** his fathers and was buried with them in the city of his father David. And Jehoshaphat his son succeeded him as king. (1 Kings 15:24)

The examples I've given so far all deal with Hebrew kings and they all come from the Old Testament. Does this concept of death change when Jesus comes? Does the New Testament teach that death is comparable to rest or sleep, or does it teach something else? Nothing changes. In the New Testament we find many similar expressions, and especially in the writings of Paul. Here are some examples of what Paul says on the topic.

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. (1 Corinthians 15:18)

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have **fallen asleep**. (1 Corinthians 15:20)

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

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. (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

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**. (1 Thessalonians 4:15)

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

Why does the Bible speak like this about death? Why does it compare death with "rest" or "sleep"? For at least two reasons. First, because when you go to sleep at night, it's not long until you wake up again. When a baby goes to sleep, that's not the end. Just the opposite. It's a guarantee that the baby will be healthy and live a long life. That's one reason. And second, because in sleep you have no knowledge of what's happening around you. If you go to sleep in class, you won't know what the teacher said. If you go to sleep while driving, you won't have any awareness of where the road is or where the car is going. Let me illustrate.

. . . the U.S. National Commission on Sleep Disorders commissioned a study to determine the direct cost of accidents which result from sleep debt (Leger, 1997). The results were staggering. In the test year (1988) in the United States, the cost of motor vehicle accidents caused by sleepy drivers was \$37.9 billion. Sleep debt related accidents in the public transportation accidents cost \$720 million dollars. Work-related accidents caused by sleepiness added up to \$13.4 billion. Falls and other accidents in public places that are directly due to sleepiness came to \$1.3 billion. Finally, accidents around the home due to sleep debt resulted in a cost of \$2.7 billion. The grand total came to over 56 billion dollars.⁸

Numbers like these support the idea that when people sleep they are unconscious of things around them. This is not a private interpretation. Death is like that. Saying so is not a private interpretation either. When people die they don't know what's happening around them – until Jesus returns to waken them (see Daniel 12:1-3).

An earlier question

In the present context let's return to an earlier question. When John speaks of souls under the altar (Revelation 6:9) – all of them under one altar – is he speaking literally? No. His language is not literal. Those killed for their faith in earlier ages are not under an altar, they are not crying out audibly, they are not in heaven, and they do not know what's happening on earth. But God knows what's happening, and the fact that these people died for their faith bothers Him. It bothers Him a lot. The fact that they died as they did cries out to Him for justice. But a few other things must happen before the time comes to judge those who killed them. The writer is making a point. He is using words figuratively.

Discussion

People who die do not become disembodied spirits – not those who become martyrs and not the rest of us. Instead they become dust. At least the Bible says they do.

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:19)

⁸ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/inabis98/occupational/coren0164/two.html>.

The body returns to dust. The breath of life, on the other hand, returns to God who gave it (see Ecclesiastes 12:6-7). When Jesus comes again He raises the dead, i.e., He brings the dust back together and restores the life principle which had made us living beings.

When God does this, He's not populating the world with ghosts. He's populating the world with living people, who are just as much alive as you or me. He is God, not of the dead, but of the living (see Matt 22:32). Resurrected people are not dead any more. That's the whole point about resurrection. Resurrected people are alive. So there's nothing in this teaching to fear. When Christ comes and raises people to life again, they (and we) will have bodies that are just as real as the glorified body He Himself has now. Resurrection has to do with changing death into life. When this change occurs, things are not the same as they were before. When any change occurs, things are not the same as before. But when this particular change occurs, there is only life. We might be afraid of death, but after the resurrection that's gone and there should be nothing more for those who love Jesus to fear.

The popular viewpoint removes the contrast between life and death and, in doing this it is misleading. Let the dead be dead and the living be alive. Let them be what they are. The dead do not go on living somewhere else as disembodied ghosts. Dead people are not shadows that simultaneously go to heaven and remain here to haunt us. They cease to be. They return to dust. It is only when Christ comes again that they live again. While they are dead, they are really dead, and when Christ raises them again, they are really alive. Nothing could be more different than death and life. Until the dead who die in the Lord are raised again they know nothing and have no existence of any kind – in heaven or on earth.

Conclusion

So is there a difference between "wait" (NIV) and "rest" (Navajo, ESV, NRSV) in Revelation 6:11? Does it matter? If it does, which translation makes more sense in the context of the passage we're discussing?

There is a subtle difference and it does matter, but only when we think about the passage carefully. I think it makes more sense here to say "rest," as ESV and NRSV have it. This is also the position taken by the Navajo translators. If asked, they might disagree with me on how the Old and New Testaments view the matter of death, but they do agree that "rest" (*háádaat'yííh*) is a better way to represent the meaning of the Greek word *anapauomai* than NIV's suggested alternative.