

Romans 4:16 in the Navajo Bible

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Éí baa' Éíbraham bi'oodla' binahji' ba'áłchíní náás da'ahidoolchííígíí t'áá ałtso t'áádóo nídí Diyin God yee bá nihoní'áanii bíí' dadooleeł biniyé Diyin God bibee ajooba' yee bá nihoní'á. Jó, bee haz'áanii bik'eh ádajít'éhígíí doo éí t'éiyá da, nidi Éíbraham hwe'oodla' bik'ehgo joogáál yéęgi át'éegoo hwe'oodla' bik'ehgo dajíkáahii ałdó hwíí' dadooleeł. Háálá da'iiniidláanii t'áá áníłtso Éíbraham yéę nihizhé'é jíí. (Romans 4:16)¹

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. (Romans 4:16)²

Introduction

The syntax of this sentence is quite complex. When laying out the clauses side by side, there are some differences between the Navajo and the English, but there is no problem with this. It's just the way different languages work. Below I show how the clauses correspond to each other by numbering them.

Éí baa [4a] Éíbraham [2] bi'oodla' binahji' [4b] ba'áłchíní náás da'ahidool-chííígíí t'áá ałtso t'áádóo nídí [1] Diyin God yee bá nihoní'áanii bíí' dadooleeł biniyé [3] Diyin God bibee ajooba' yee bá nihoní'á. Jó, [5] bee haz'áanii bik'eh ádajít'éhígíí doo éí t'éiyá da, nidi [6] Éíbraham hwe'oodla' bik'ehgo joogáál yéęgi át'éegoo hwe'oodla' bik'ehgo dajíkáahii ałdó hwíí' dadooleeł. Háálá [7] da'iiniidláanii t'áá áníłtso Éíbraham yéę nihizhé'é jíí. (Romans 4:16)

Therefore, [1] the promise comes [2] by faith, so that it may be [3] by grace and may be guaranteed to [4] all Abraham's offspring- not only to [5] those who are of the law but also to [6] those who are of the faith of Abraham. [7] He is the father of us all. (Romans 4:16)

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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Textual Reflections

A free translation of the Navajo into English would read approximately as follows. Note that in this rendering the one who exercises faith is Abraham throughout, not his descendants.

Therefore, by [Abraham's] faith all his descendants without exception will inherit what God has promised. [This applies] not only to those who are according to the law but will also belong to those who walk according to the faith Abraham exercised. He is the Father of us all [who believe].

In the process of sorting out the syntax, the Navajo translators remove an ambiguity found in the English (and the Greek). NIV says, "the promise comes by faith," but the Navajo says the promise comes, "*Éíbraham bi'oodlq' binahji' . . .*," i.e., "by [Abraham's] faith." Is this merely an example of one language adapting to the needs of another in translation? Or does the wording reflect a theological agenda?

There is certainly no problem saying that Abraham believed God. Earlier in this same chapter Paul says, with emphasis, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3).³ And in the present verse he is called "the father of us all." (Sometimes we say he is the father of the faithful.) And the Navajo specifically states, *Háálá da'iiniidláanii t'áá ániiltso Éíbraham yéq nihizhé'é jíí* ("For Abraham is the father of us all [who believe]"). So Abraham exercised faith. Did his descendants?

If people in Old Testament times exercised faith, and people in New Testament times exercise faith, then what's the difference? Why do people talk about two dispensations if in both cases people exercise faith? It's a good question. Why do they do that? Isn't faith supposed to be one of the dividing lines between the Old and New Testaments? So what does the above textual question say about theological issues such as the viability of dispensationalism?

Theological Reflections

The promise is by faith. It passes to all of Abraham's descendants without exception. No controversy here, but there are some ironies. If Abraham's descendants do not believe, then how can the promise come to them by faith? Well, it would have to be by Abraham's faith. If all the faith comes from one individual, it's easy to see how this would be consistent with the promise passing to all his descendants without exception. Their faith or lack of it doesn't count. It is irrelevant. I have more than one problem with this model. Note, not with this verse, but with this model. My focus in the rest of the paper goes beyond the matter of how the word "Abraham" figures in the present verse. There is much more at issue than that.

³ Contrast Paul's point about Abraham with the point James draws from the same account (see James 2:21-23). Both men are quoting Genesis 15:6 ("Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness").

Preliminary examples

Jesus. In one passage, where Jesus is talking to a group of Jews, they remind Him that they are Abraham's descendants. In response He says,

I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. ³⁸ I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father." ³⁹ ¶ "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. ⁴⁰ As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. (John 8:37-40)

First Jesus says, "I know you are" Then He says, "If you were" The assumption in the first statement is that the Jews Jesus is talking to are "Abraham's descendants." The assumption in the second statement is that they are not "Abraham's children." So in this particular exchange being a descendant of Abraham is not the same as being a child of Abraham. What's the difference?

Jesus tells us what the difference is within the passage by saying, "If you were Abraham's children, . . . then you would do the things Abraham did. ⁴⁰ As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things" (vss. 39-40). Being a child of Abraham therefore means doing what Abraham did, and since what he did followed from what he believed it means having, not just Abraham's genes, but Abraham's faith.

Paul. At the end of Romans 2 Paul makes the same argument. Being "a Jew" is not simply a matter of being born to Jewish parents.

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (Romans 2:28-29)

For Paul being "a Jew" means having a living, spiritual relationship with God. This is what Jesus teaches in John 8 (above). Both Jesus and Paul are saying that those who respond to God in faith are spiritual Israel, whether they are physical Israel or not. "A man is *not* a Jew if he is only one outwardly, . . ." (vs. 28; emphasis added).

Other examples

There are many other examples that one could mention. I'm going to go through these at some length, not because of Romans 4:16 alone, but because I want the reader to understand my reasons for the positions taken here. It's an important point and it has implications that run through the length and breadth of Christian theology.

Hebrews 11. The faith chapter begins with the following summary statement: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for" (Hebrews 11:1-2). By saying, "the ancients," the author intends his statement to be understood generally. It is broadly applicable to a

large number of people – not everyone, but not just a few. He then offers about thirty specific examples to show us who these "ancients" were.

His first example includes the reader: "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (vs. 3). "We" does not refer to Old Testament people, but to later Christian readers.

The approach is chronological. He starts at creation and works his way forward. Next is Abel, a son of Adam. Then we have Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He mentions Sarah without specifically mentioning her faith, but does say, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (vs. 13).

Terms such as "the ancients," "we," and "all these people," are obviously intended to be inclusive. Another part of the discussion that speaks to inclusivity is the chronological approach, starting at creation, with each succeeding age represented by an example or two. The author appears to be saying that faith has been exercised by at least some in every age. He's not including every person, but he *is* including every age of history.

If all the ancients had exercised faith, there never would have been a flood (see Genesis 6-8). If none of the ancients had exercised faith, we would not be here to read about it. Noah believed God no less and in no different way that Abraham did at a later time. "By faith Noah . . . built an ark" (vs. 7). By hard work Noah built an ark. You could get heavy calluses with this kind of faith. Faith is not confined to intellectual assent (see James 2:19).

The author continues with Moses' parents, with Moses himself, and with all the people who passed through the Red Sea. "By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned" (vs. 29). At a later these same people did not exercise faith. The same author points this out in another chapter.

So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸ do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, ⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. (Hebrews 3:7-9)

He goes on to explain, "For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith" (Hebrews 4:2). This is why they died in the dessert and wandered for forty years. But what shall we say about the next generation that did go into Canaan? Those who entered did not wander forty years. They crossed Jordan, conquered the land, and lived there. That sounds like faith. So the people believed when they crossed the Red Sea, they disbelieved when they wandered forty years, and they believed again when they crossed the Jordan river.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days. (Hebrews 11:29-30)

Next is the prostitute Rahab, who helped the spies escape from Jericho and saved her own life and the lives of her family with her.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets,³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison.³⁷ They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.³⁹ ¶ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.⁴⁰ God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:32-40)

The one who "shut the mouths of lions" was Daniel (see Daniel 6:22). The ones who "quenched the fury of the flames" were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (see Daniel 3:24-27). Those who "escaped the edge of the sword" were all the Jews living in the time of Esther (see Esther 9:1). One person who was "sawed in two" was Isaiah. This is recorded, not in the book of Isaiah, but in an ancient document that is not part of the Bible, called The Martyrdom of Isaiah. Those who "wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" were probably the generation of Judas Maccabeus, only a century and a half before Christ. So this chapter covers quite a broad expanse of time, with examples of faith drawn from every age of history, starting from creation and extending to the time when the book of Hebrews was written down in the first century.

Ruth. We should include Ruth in our list. When her mother-in-law urged her to go back to her people and to her gods,

Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." (Ruth 1:16-17)

Ruth became the great grandmother of King David. Is her response not an example of faith, and an outstanding example?

Jehoshaphat. We must also include King Jehoshaphat, who sent his army into battle with men out in front of the soldiers, singing praises to God for the victory He was about to give them (see 2 Chronicles 22:21-23). If this isn't faith, what is faith? And there are many more examples than I have given here.⁴

⁴ Consider Mary and Joseph, who believed God before Jesus was born. Their faith is one reason why Jesus was born. We read about Noah, but all eight who went into the ark did so by faith. When the Israelites who were bitten by an infestation of snakes, Moses made a brass snake and

Discussion

There is a theology which says that faith is a New Testament innovation. True or false? Was Abraham the only one in the Old Testament who exercised faith? The examples I've given above argue that he wasn't. There were many who shared Abraham's faith, and many also who didn't. It's still the same today. Some have faith, others don't. Those who did looked forward to Christ in the same way that we look back to Christ. The cross is the pivot point of history. People before looked forward to it; people after look back to it. The cross is the center and focus of all right faith.

You might have noticed how active the faith of those listed in Hebrews 11 was. I mentioned Noah and his calluses. Many of the people in this chapter took some very bold steps to carry out God's will. Are these then examples of faith, or of works? They are examples of both. They are examples of faith expressing itself through love.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

The opposite of faith is not unbelief. The opposite of faith is fear, which causes us to hold back and refuse to follow our faith through to action. There is no conflict between faith and action. If there is, what does that say about Paul's faith? In one place he says,

So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. (Romans 15:19)

Do you know where Illyricum was? It was what we used to call Yugoslavia. Illyricum was the Roman word for the province that divided the Greek speaking eastern Mediterranean from the Latin speaking western Mediterranean. He goes on to add,

But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions [i.e., the eastern half of the Mediterranean basin], and since I have been longing for many years to see you, ²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. (Romans 15:23-24)

Paul had better hope that action does not interfere with faith, because he was more active in sharing Christ than any of the other apostles. In the book of Hebrews, which has much to say about faith, faith is not some form of intellectual assent. It is heart obedience, like Paul demonstrated, i.e., it is obedience that springs from a heart filled with love for God and for people like ourselves.

put it on a pole. He told the people if they would only look at it they would live, and this became a symbol of Christ on the cross (see John 3:14). Look and live. That's faith. We read about Sampson, but Sampson's parents also exercised faith. They wanted to know the name of the holy Being who told them they would have a son, so they could honor him when his prediction came true. Further examples could be multiplied. Simeon and Anna in the temple were looking for the consolation of Israel (see Luke 2:25-38). When it says that Anna "spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (vs. 38), they too had faith.

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. (Hebrews 8:10)

What this passage tells us is that God will put His law in our hearts. When He does, our faith will lead us to action and the result will be the building up of God's kingdom.

Conclusion

The contrast Paul has in mind in Romans 4:16 is not between obedience and disobedience (Jews obey, Christians disobey), but between Jew and Gentile. In this equation "those who are of the law" are Jews; "those who are of the faith of Abraham" are Christians. But if those who are of the law did not exercise faith, they would not have received the promise – just as those who died in the wilderness after wandering forty years did not receive the promise. God doesn't fulfill His promises to those who refuse to believe Him.

Paul refers to Christians as "those who are of the faith of Abraham" because they have the same faith as Abraham. He looked forward to Christ. As Jesus says, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). This is what it means to look forward to Christ by faith. We, on the other hand, look back to Christ. In doing this we show that we have the same faith as Abraham.

Is there a contrast between the two groups? Paul draws on this contrast in our passage, but not with the intent that one group is lost and the other saved. The Old Testament is not the record of all those who are lost (Noah? Ruth? Moses? David? Daniel?), while the New Testament is the record of all those who will be saved. That's not the contrast in this case. Instead Paul is saying that some who lived before will receive the promise, and that some who live after will receive the promise. Both alike receive the same promise through the same faith in the same promised Seed (see Galatians 3:16), i.e., Christ.

The terms "law" and "faith" could be used differently, and often are (see Galatians 3:10), but here they refer to two groups of Abraham's children – those who had faith before the cross⁵ and those who have faith afterward. Both alike receive the promise because both alike exercise the same faith that father Abraham had.

"So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:9).

⁵ These are not people who rely on the law for salvation. They are people who lived in an age of history prior to the gospel.