

HEBREWS 11:11

“BY FAITH SARAH RECEIVED ABILITY”

J. HAROLD GREENLEE

(Note: The works referred to by their author in this article and the English Bible translations mentioned are identified in the bibliography at the end of the article. References are to their discussion or translation of this verse unless otherwise noted.)

The purpose of this article is to show that the subject of Hebrews 11:11 is Sarah, not Abraham. I am confident, moreover, that the assumed need to make Abraham the subject is largely due to a misunderstanding of one phrase in this verse.

Someone reading the first part of Hebrews 11:11, Πίστει καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα...δύναμιν...ἔλαβεν for the first time—either in this shorter form or with the additions στεῖρα ‘barren’, ἡ στεῖρα ‘the barren one’, or στεῖρα οὖσα ‘being barren’ following ‘Sarah’—would surely have no reason to interpret it as anything other than “By faith Sarah herself also received ability....” The difficulty lies later in the verse.

We do, however, need to deal with these alternate readings, since they are significant. Indeed, GNT reads...Σάρρα στεῖρα...Sarah barren...’ although with a “C” decision, indicating that “the Committee had difficulty in deciding which variant to place in the text.”

As for internal evidence, it is an accepted principle that scribes were more likely to *add* a word or words intentionally, but to *omit* unintentionally. Metzger suggests that the majority of the GNT committee nevertheless considered ‘barren’ to be original but was omitted accidentally by similarity in appearance to the immediately preceding ‘Sarah’ written in uncial letters. However, these two words in uncial letters do not appear to be sufficiently similar to make such omission by homoioteleuton likely. I submit, rather, that it is far more likely that the original text read ‘Sarah’ alone, and that scribes not surprisingly made intentional additions in order to indicate

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Sarah's situation: 'Sarah barren', 'Sarah the barren one', and 'Sarah being barren'. Turning to external (manuscript) evidence, the textual apparatus of GNT and of Aland indicate, I am confident, that the support for 'Sarah' alone is as strong as, and probably stronger than, the support for the addition of 'barren', 'the barren one', and 'being barren' combined. In thus reading 'Sarah' alone I am in agreement with Alford, Bloomfield, Dods, Montefiore, Moffatt, Lünemann, Westcott, and the KJV, NAB, NASB, NJB, and REB. On the other hand, 'Sarah barren' or 'Sarah being barren' (it is not possible to determine with certainty which of these two readings some follow) is read by Miller, Bruce, Ellingworth-Nida, Lane, and the GNT, NIV, NRSV, TEV, TNT.

I am confident, then, that both internal and external evidence support the shorter reading. To anticipate a point to be discussed later, if the original text does not include *στεῖρα* in some form, the whole case for making this phrase a subordinate circumstantial or concessional phrase collapses, of course, and the verse can only be read, "By faith Sarah herself received ability...."

It is true that the subject of verses 8–10 and again in v. 12 is Abraham. How, then, is the change of the subject to Sarah in v. 11 justified? The words *καὶ αὐτὴ* 'herself also' are linguistically significant. They are doubtless emphatic, as Moll, Lünemann, and Ellingworth-Nida agree, both by their position and by the words themselves. According to Alford, these words indicate a transition to a new subject, with prominence. Moffatt thinks they refer to Sarah's physical condition. According to Bloomfield, Dods, Hewitt, Moll, Lünemann, Bruce, and Westcott they indicate a contrast with Sarah's former unbelief. Each of these interpretations has something to commend it. This is the only example of the persons of faith in this chapter who is introduced by such a phrase. If *καὶ* has the sense of 'also' (which I believe is preferable) it presents Sarah as a special instance in addition to Abraham, not merely one more in the list of heroes. If it means 'even' it may reinforce the emphatic sense of *αὐτὴ* 'herself.' In any case, *αὐτὴ* 'herself' may well imply a contrast with her initial unbelief and also refer to her physical condition.

At any rate, the phrase *καὶ αὐτὴ* 'herself also' is a linguistic device indicating that Sarah is not merely one more person in the list of heroes; she is presented in company with Abraham.

We now come to the crux of the problem, the phrase *εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος* "for laying down of seed." The problem lies in what I am confident is the erroneous and most unfortunate translation of this prepositional phrase as if it were an infinitive phrase, *δύναμιν καταβαλεῖν σπέρμα*, "ability to lay down seed." It is thus dealt with as an infinitive, clearly or apparently, by the Bauer and the Louw-Nida Greek lexicons, by Montefiore, Miller, Bruce, Ellingworth-Nida, Lane, and by the KJV, NAB, NASB, NIV, NJB, REB, TEV, TNT.

The problem is that translating this phrase as an infinitive implies that the subject of the infinitive is the same person as the subject of the clause; e.g., Jn. 4:43, *ἠθέλησεν ἐξελεῖν* "he (Jesus) wanted to go out," and Mark 1:24, *ἦλθες ἀπολέσαι ἡμᾶς* "have you come to destroy us?" The difficulty is that it is probably true that *καταβολὴ* refers to the father's function in conception, not the mother's (although Westcott, KJV, NAB, NASB, NJB, REB, and TNT take it to refer to Sarah's function). Bloomfield and Montefiore take it as a loose reference to the whole process of conception. Hughes, Hewitt, Lünemann (and a few oth-

ers referred to in various commentaries) interpret this phrase as referring to “the founding of a posterity.”

Dr. Eugene A. Nida, retired Translations Department Secretary of the American Bible Society, in a personal letter to me dated 4/15/94, makes a further interesting comment on the implications of the principal verb ἔλαβε '(she) received': "when you use the word λαμβάνω meaning 'to receive', this automatically functions as a false active, namely, a passive, so that if Sarah receives, then she, though the subject of the sentence, is also the one that experiences the receipt of the seed. She is therefore not the agent but the experiencer of the event." See the similar note in Louw-Nida 57.125.

In order to retain καταβολή as referring to the father's function but still hold to the translation of the phrase as an infinitive (requiring the subject to be the same as the preceding subject), several paths have been followed. One path is to regard the reference to Sarah as what Metzger calls "a Hebraic circumstantial clause." This is accepted by Hagner (as one possibility), Miller, Bruce, Lane, and by NIV, NRSV, and TEV. This alternative requires accepting the addition of στεῖρα 'barren', which, as we mentioned above, is inferior on both external and internal evidence and without which this meaning is impossible. Moreover, this interpretation makes the phrase a "nominative absolute," an irregular construction which has no parallel in the fine Greek style of this author and has few if any parallels in the entire New Testament. Blass-Debrunner-Funk's grammar seems to cite no similar New Testament instance. As Ellingworth comments, "Hebrews generally is one of the New Testament books least marked by direct Hebrew influence, and [moreover] the construction in question is not prominent in the LXX."

If the author had intended to introduce Sarah as a subordinate grammatical element he would surely have used the common genitive absolute construction, necessarily including 'barren' and almost certainly including as well the genitive of the poorly-supported (nominative) participle οὖσα 'being': *i.e.*, αὐτῆς Σάρρας (or the indeclinable form Σάρρα) στεῖρας οὖσης "Sarah herself being barren" (or possibly a clause of concession with εἰ καί and the indicative mood). Ellingworth indicates approval of this point of view ("Greenlee argues, correctly if perhaps too absolutely") as I stated it in a previous but less-developed article,¹ although he finally accepts another alternative (see the following paragraph) as preferable. David Alan Black observes, "Another phraseological feature of Hebrews is the frequent use of the genitive absolute," and he goes on to quote two rather complicated instances of this construction in Heb. 4:1 and 9:15.² In other words, the assumption of a nominative absolute construction here is nearly impossible for more than one reason.

Others accept the addition of στεῖρα 'barren' and resort to assuming (pointing to the common omission of the *iota*-subscript from uncial mss.) that the phrase concerning Sarah, instead of being nominative is the dative καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα (or the indeclinable Σάρρα) στεῖρα "together with Sarah barren herself also." This alternative (with or without στεῖρα 'barren') is followed by Ellingworth, Hagner (as one possibility), Morris, and Lenski. This involves assuming the dative case instead of the nominative with no support from any reported ms., as Montefiore notes, nor by any ancient writer including the Greek Fathers, as Hughes states. Moreover, the author could have prefixed the preposition σὺν 'together with' before καὶ to make this meaning clear even without the *iota*-subscript. Granted, the

author does not use this preposition elsewhere; but it was surely in his vocabulary. And if an early scribe had felt that the phrase should be taken as a dative case he could easily have inserted σύν.

Still others have even resorted to suggesting, with absolutely no manuscript support, that the reference to Sarah was not a part of the original text and was added by later scribes. Those cited (but without approval) as favoring this manner of disposing of the problem instead of solving it (!) include Windisch and Zuntz (mentioned by Ellingworth and Hughes), Field (by Ellingworth and Moffatt), and Loisy (by Ellingworth).

The four preceding paragraphs refer to attempts, which I believe are simply "counsels of desperation," to resolve the problem of this verse. Moreover, I am confident that they are not necessary. There is apparently virtually no indication that this phrase caused problems for early scribes or the ancient writers, although Ellingworth seems to indicate possible questions by Chrysostom and Galen. If the early scribes had felt a difficulty here, they could easily have changed καταβολήν to λήψις 'receiving' or a similar word.

The solution, I feel sure, is to be found in the proper translation of this troublesome prepositional phrase, εἰς καταβολήν σπέρματος, which is "for (the purpose of) deposition of seed." This translation leaves the subject of καταβολήν open, to be determined by the context and not limited to being the same as the subject of the verb ἔλαβεν 'received'. Consider, e.g., Matt. 3:11, in which John the Baptist states, ἐγὼ μὲν ὑμᾶς βαπτίζω· εἰς μετάνοιαν 'I baptize you...for repentance,' but it obviously was not John who was to repent. Καταβολήν, moreover, refers to the *fact* of 'deposition', not to the *process*. If, then, καταβολήν could refer to the wife's function, as some authorities mentioned above assume, then the phrase would naturally mean "for the deposition of seed (by Sarah)." If, on the other hand, καταβολήν refers to the husband's function, which is much more probable, then the phrase means "for the deposition of seed (in Sarah's body by Abraham)." The author did not need to name either Sarah or Abraham overtly, since it was clear who the participants were.

The above interpretation is followed by Alford, who indicates that the phrase implies giving to Sarah the power "to fructify seed deposited." He further states, "No Greek father, no ancient version, dreamt of any other meaning." Moffatt agrees, stating, "The general idea is plain...i.e. for Abraham the male to do the work of generation upon her." Dods implies agreement by pointing out that if the preposition εἰς is taken in the sense of "as regards' or 'in connection with' or 'with a view to,' the difficulty disappears" concerning the meaning of καταβολήν.

With this interpretation, it follows, of course, that the referent in the rest of the verse is Sarah; it is presumably she who is said to be παρά καιρὸν ἡλικίας "beyond the normal age" (although it could refer to both Sarah and Abraham) and it is she who πιστὸν ἠγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγελλόμενον "considered the one having promised to be faithful."

Perhaps a word should be said about the return to Abraham as subject in the following verse. As I said earlier, the καὶ αὐτὴ 'herself also' indicates that Sarah is mentioned not as another in the sequence of heroes of faith but is brought in as part of the discussion of Abraham, since of course she was a necessary participant in the event; so to continue in v. 12 with Abraham as subject is completely reasonable.

In summary, then, I maintain that both internal and external evidence support the shorter text, καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα ‘Sarah herself also’ (without στέρια ‘barren’), as the original. This makes it impossible to interpret the phrase as a concession. Even if στέρια ‘barren’ is accepted, the nominative case must be read, which clearly shows that the subject is Sarah. To assume the dative case or to assume that the reference to Sarah was not original, as we stated above, is totally without support.

In other words, the full verse is clear and unequivocal: “By faith Sarah herself also received ability for the deposition of seed [in her body by Abraham], even beyond (her/their) normal age, since she considered the one having promised to be faithful.”

NOTES

1. “Abraham’s Faith or Sarah’s—Heb. 11:11,” Notes on Translation 4,1 (Feb. 1990), pp. 37–41. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
2. In “Literary Artistry in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Filologia Neotestamentaria* VII, Mayo ‘94, p. 49.

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