Who is the example of faith
in Hebrews 11:11 – Abraham or Sarah?

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Bible translations quoted from:

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NLT: "The New Living Translation" Published by Tyndale Charitable Trust

ESV: "The ESV ® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version ®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved."

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About the Author

Dr Trevor R Allin graduated from the University of Leeds with a 1st Class Honours degree in Phonetics, French, Spanish and Philosophy and History of Religion. Following studies in linguistics, he undertook original research on a South American indigenous language, for which purpose he lived within the indigenous community and studied the language with native speakers over a period of more than a year. The University of St Andrews subsequently awarded him a Ph.D. for his thesis "A Grammar of Resígaro".

For many years he taught a range of languages up to "Advanced" level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state or state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including "A" Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of "Curso de Griego Bíblico: Los elementos del Griego del N.T."[1], the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff's "The Elements of New Testament Greek".[2] He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in various places in Spain on the important early Greek manuscript of the Bible, Codex Sinaiticus.

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[1] CLIE, 2019 See https://www.clie.es/curso-de-griego-biblico

[2] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

Hebrews 11:11: Who had faith, Abraham or Sarah?

According to some translations of the Bible, Hebrews 11:11 speaks of Abraham as having faith, while according to other translations, it is speaking of Sarah having faith. The NIV even changes from "Abraham" and "he" in its 1984 edition to "Sarah" and "she" in its 2011 edition. So which is right? To find the answer, we need to look at the Greek, by which we mean the Greek text itself, as even some interlinears get it wrong!

First, the words "he" and "she" are not in the Greek text, since in Greek (as in Spanish!) a subject pronoun is not required with a verb, so one or the other has been added by the translators as in English a finite verb must have a subject. The choice of pronoun is therefore dependent on whom the translators think that the verb refers to.

Secondly, the word "Abraham" does not appear in this verse. However, the verse divisions are not in the original text and Abraham is referred to unambiguously in the phrases that precede this verse and in the phrases that follow on from it – in our verses 8, 9, 10 and 12[3]. Thus we seem to have a "paragraph"[4] about Abraham's faith, with a reference in verse 11 to Sarah being unable to have a child.

After general references to the faith of various ancestors, the text returns (in our verse 17) to the faith of Abraham, then going on to the faith of his descendants over the next three generations.

The next "paragraph" (our verses 23-28) refers to the faith of Moses, and the rest of the chapter refers more briefly to the faith of numerous other people in the history of Israel. The chapter[5] thus gives major pre-eminence to two of the greatest characters in the history of Israel, Abraham and Moses.

The story in Genesis

If we return to the original account in Genesis, we find that Sarah is _not_ described as having faith. In fact, she _laughs_ at the idea that she might have a child:

> "The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. [2] He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. [3] He said, "My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. ⋯ [9] They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." [10] Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. [11] Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. [12] So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" [13] The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' [14] Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." [15] But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."" (Genesis 18:1-3, 9-15 NRSV)

All translations consulted agree that there is no ambiguity here: it is Sarah who by her laughter shows that she does not believe the promise that was made to Abraham by God.

The Greek translation of Genesis, the Septuagint, which was elsewhere in the letter repeatedly quoted from by the author of the letter to the Hebrews, is also clear that it is Sarah who demonstrated a lack of faith at this point.

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[3] Verse numbers are not in the original Greek text.

[4] Paragraphs are used in the Greek manuscripts, but less frequently than in English and paragraph breaks are not totally consistent in the formatting of different manuscripts, so we must not view paragraph breaks in English translations as significant evidence of section breaks in the original text.

[5] Chapter divisions are also not in the original Greek text.

To be fair to Sarah, we read that when, on a previous occasion, the Lord had first told Abraham that his wife Sarah would have a son (Genesis 17:15-16), Abraham reacted by laughing and saying _to himself_, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (Genesis 17:17, NIV) God responded by confirming that this would indeed happen (vv. 19, 21).

We also note that Abraham's faith is repeatedly emphasised from Genesis chapters 12 to 22. For instance, in Genesis 15:6 we read, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." (NIV) This verse is repeatedly quoted in the New Testament, in Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23, and it is alluded to in numerous other verses (for instance, in Romans 4:9, Romans 4:20-25, Galatians 3:7-14, Hebrews 11:8). In contrast, the New Testament nowhere refers to the faith of Sarah (apart from in Hebrews 11:11, if that is what this verse says).

Decisions by translators

So how is it that some translators of Hebrews 11:11 believe that this verse refers to Sarah having faith? Let us look at how various translations translate this verse.

	Who had faith?	
NIV 1984 By faith **Abraham**, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.	Abraham	✓
NIV 2011 And by faith even **Sarah**, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.	Sarah	✗
NRSV By faith **he** received power of procreation, even though he was too old — and Sarah herself was barren — because he considered him faithful who had promised.	Abraham	✓
THE MESSAGE By faith, barren **Sarah** was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said.	Sarah	✗
NLT It was by faith that even **Sarah** was able to have a child, though she was barren and was too old. She believed that God would keep his promise.	Sarah	✗
ESV By faith **Sarah** herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.	Sarah	✗
NA28/UBS5 Πίστει καὶ αὐτὴ Σάρρα στεῖρα δύναμιν **εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος** ἔλαβεν καὶ παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας, ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἡγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγειλάμενον.	Abraham	✓

Explanation

It is clear from the ticks and crosses that I have added in the final column that I conclude that some translations are right but that other translations are wrong. Let us look at my reasons.

1. The Greek phrase in Hebrews 11:11 does not mean "to conceive" (the female function) but "to impregnate" (the male function).

In fact, it literally means "to cast forth sperm" (a phrase that Bible translators understandably generally try to avoid using).

Here are dictionary definitions of the two key words:

I have underlined key phrases in these definitions, and have occasionally missed out of the reproduced definitions sections that are not relevant to this study, but that do not undermine the definitions that are quoted. In such cases, I have used ellipsis (…) to indicate this.

Word 1: καταβολὴν
Noun accusative feminine singular common from **καταβολή**

Friberg[6], *Analytical Greek Lexicon:*
[Fri] **καταβολή**, **ῆς**, **ἡ** (1) strictly *casting down*; hence *foundation, beginning* (MT 25.34); (2) as a technical term for putting seed into the ground, it is also used of the role of the male in impregnating the female; δύναμιν εἰς καταβολήν in HE 11.11 is best understood by the context and continuation of the subject to refer to the sexual function of the male in the sense *receive strength to become a father*; the phrase καὶ αὐτὴ Σάρρα στεῖρα (*Sarah herself also (was) barren*) is then taken as parenthetical

Liddell-Scott, *Greek Lexicon (Abridged):*
[LS] **καταβολή**
καταβολή, ἡ, (καταβάλλω) *a throwing* or *laying down,* N.T.

Word 2: σπέρματος
Noun genitive neuter singular common from **σπέρμα**

Friberg, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*:
[Fri] **σπέρμα**, **ατος**, **τό** seed; (1) literally; (a) of plants (MT 13.24); (b) of human or animal semen *sperm, seed*; by metonymy, as human descendants *offspring, posterity, children* (MK 12.19); …

Danker, *Greek NT Lexicon (DAN)*:
[DANK]   **σπέρμα**
σπέρμα,**ατος**,**τό** [σπείρω] – **1.** 'source of propagation', **seed** – a. of seed of plants **Mt 13:24, 27; Mk 4:31; 1 Cor 15:38; 2 Cor 9:10 v.l. – b.** of seed/semen of humans **Hb 11:18. – 2.** 'product of propagation' **– a.** of ancestral continuity or lineage **seed, posterity** Mt 22:24f; Mk 12:19-22; Lk 1:55; J 7:42; 8:33, 37; Ac 3:25; 13:23; Ro 1:3; 2 Cor 11:22; 2 Ti 2:8. …

Liddell-Scott, *Greek Lexicon (Abridged)*:
[LS] **σπέρμα**
σπέρμα, ατος, τό, (σπείρω) *that which is sown:* **I.** *the seed* of plants, Hes., Hdt., Att.:-also of animals, Pind., Eur. **2.** metaph. of *the germ, origin, element* of anything, …

2. "to conceive" is a different phrase. Herewith some Biblical examples, followed by the dictionary definitions.

Isaiah 7:14
Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin **will conceive** and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (NIV 2011)
διὰ τοῦτο δώσει κύριος αὐτὸς ὑμῖν σημεῖον ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος **ἐν γαστρὶ ἕξει** καὶ τέξεται υἱόν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Εμμανουηλ (LXX)

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[6] All Greek lexicon definitions are quoted from the electronic version in Bibleworks 10.

Matthew 1:18

before they came together, she was found **to be pregnant** through the Holy Spirit. (NIV 2011)

πρὶν ἢ συνελθεῖν αὐτοὺς εὑρέθη **ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα** ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου.

Dictionary definitions:

γαστρὶ noun dative feminine singular common from **γαστήρ**

Friberg, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*:

[Fri] **γαστήρ**, **τρός**, **ἡ** (1) as the inward parts of the body *belly, stomach*; … (2) of a woman *womb* (LU 1.31); idiomatically ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχειν literally *have in the womb,* i.e. *be pregnant* (MT 1.18)

Gingrich, *Greek NT Lexicon (GIN)*:

[GING] **γαστήρ**

γαστήρ, **τρός**, **ἡ** *belly*— … *womb* Lk 1:31. ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχειν *be pregnant* Mt 1:18, 23; …

Danker, *Greek NT Lexicon (DAN)*:

[DANK] **γαστήρ**

γαστήρ, **τρος**, **ἡ** [… the inner region of the body containing, among other parts, the stomach and the womb] – **1. belly,** …– **2. womb** Lk 1:31; ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχειν *be pregnant* **Mt 1:18; Mk 13:17; Lk 21:23; 1 Th 5:3; Rv 12:2.**

Liddell-Scott, *Greek Lexicon (Abridged)*:

[LS] **γαστήρ**

γαστήρ, **ἡ**: gen. έρος, sync. γαστρός: dat. pl. γαστράσι:-*the paunch, belly,* Lat. venter, Hom., etc.: hence, γ. ἀσπίδος *the hollow* of a shield, Tyrtae.:-often to express *greed* or *gluttony,* γαστέρες οἶον mere *bellies,* Hes.; γαστρὸς ἐγκρατής master of *his belly,* γαστρὸς ἥττων a slave to *it,* Xen. **2.** *the paunch stuffed with mince-meat, a black-pudding, sausage,* Od., Ar. **II.** *the womb,* Lat. uterus, γαστέρι φέρειν to be with child, Il.; so, ἐκ γαστρός from *the womb,* from infancy, Theogn.; ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχειν Hdt. (Deriv. uncertain.)

Understanding the Greek text of Hebrews 11:11

It is clear that there is a difference of opinion amongst the learned people who have translated this verse for different translations. In my opinion, this is the consequence of the lack of punctuation in the Greek text.

A literal, word-for-word, translation would read:

Πίστει καὶ αὐτὴ Σάρρα στεῖρα δύναμιν **εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος** ἔλαβεν
By faith even herself Sarah being barren power in order to cast forth sperm (he) received

καὶ παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας, ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἡγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγειλάμενον.
even beyond appropriate time time of life, since faithful (he) considered the one who had promised.

The word "he" is not in the Greek text. Nor is the word "she". This is because a subject pronoun is not required for a verb in Greek, so an appropriate pronoun must be added in English, with the correct one being determined by the context. However, the action described for which the power was received can only be the action of an adult male, so "she" is not an option. Also, the preceding and following verses are about Abraham, a strong indication that he is the one referred to.

A "wooden" translation, as close to the Greek as possible with only those changes of word order that are unavoidable to meet the requirements of English could be:

"By faith – even though Sarah herself was barren – he received power in order to cast forth sperm even beyond the appropriate time of life, since he considered the one who had promised to be faithful."

We note that that original promise "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7, NIV) had indeed been made to Abraham, not to Sarah, so the person referred to who "considered (God) faithful" to keep his promise must indeed have been Abraham, not Sarah. This has a fundamental implication for the previous phrase in the same verse (apart from the impossibility of Sarah having performed the function described).

We also note that the next verse continues the references to Abraham that had started before verse 11: "And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." (Hebrews 11:12 NIV British English)

So how do some translators get it wrong?

So how do some translators "get it wrong"? Sarah is named in the verse, as being barren, and the absence of subject pronouns for the verbs has led some translators to supply "she", assuming a reference to her. Having taken this decision, they have struggled to make sense of the phrase καταβολὴν σπέρματος (cast forth sperm) and have then decided that they had to put something indicating the female part of conception, therefore using phrases such as "enabled to bear children" (NIV 2011), "was able to become pregnant" (The Message) or "herself received power to conceive" (ESV), even though this is not justified by the Greek.

The Greek-English Interlinear New Testament[7]

For this new interlinear text based on the Nestle-Aland 28th edition of the Greek text, the English interlinear text is derived, largely via a software program, from the English Standard Version (ESV) text, and therefore generally follows the decisions of the ESV translators[8]. The addition of subject pronouns is explained in the Introduction on pp. xii and xiii:

> "Since Greek verbs do not inflect for gender, the gender of the pronominal subject is contextually determined: animate objects are masculine ("he"), feminine ("she") or common ("I," "we," "you," or "they"), while inanimate objects are neuter ("it") or common ("they")."

One of the verbs in Hebrews 11:11 is quoted there as an example.

This interlinear tries to keep close to the Greek in its glosses for this verse, but the use of a feminine pronoun results in a somewhat meaningless translation:

Πίστει καὶ αὐτὴ Σάρρα στεῖρα δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν
by faith also herself Sarah barren power for <u>sowing of seed</u> (she) received

καὶ παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας, ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἡγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγειλάμενον.
even beyond time of maturity since faithful (she) considered the one having promised.

However, even the ESV returns to the masculine for the next verse:

"Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." (Hebrews 11:12, ESV) The interlinear text follows this (correctly).

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[7] Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018

[8] See the Acknowledgments on page vii of this edition of the New Testament.

Other Academic support

Lest this be thought an oddity of interpretation by me, I would refer to the commentary on Hebrews by the learned and respected Greek scholar, F. F. Bruce[9], who translates this verse as follows:

"By faith – Sarah herself being barren – he received power to beget a child even after the natural season of life, because he reckoned the one who gave the promise to be trustworthy" (p. 289). Over three pages of text (pp. 294-296), Bruce explains the reasons why the reference must be to the faith of Abraham, not to faith of Sarah. A few brief quotations will make this clear:

> "Sarah … is not a good example of faith. According to Gen. 18:12 she laughed when she overheard the divine promise that she would give birth to a son, and the comment of God on her laughter (Gen. 18:13f) makes it plain that it was the laughter of incredulity." (p. 294)

> "The one firm argument against taking v. 11 as a statement of Sarah's faith lies in the fact that the phrase traditionally rendered "to conceive seed" just does not mean that; it refers to the father's part in the generative process, not the mother's. A literal translation would be "for the deposition of seed" …" (pp. 295-296).

Conclusion

All of the foregoing does remind us that we must not even blindly accept an interlinear translation; some knowledge of Greek, even if at a basic level, is helpful and can sometimes be necessary to resolve conflicts between different translators.

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[9] F F Bruce, "The Epistle to the Hebrews", Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990 Bruce is not the only academic who reaches the same conclusion.