

# πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

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The Faithful life of Jesus Christ and Covenant Fulfillment in the  
Judeo-Christian Narrative

By R. Scot Miller

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*Exuberant writing calls for exuberant exegesis:  
Not, of course, uncontrolled or fanciful exegesis,  
but an exegesis which pays attention to the proper controls,  
which are neither narrow lexicography nor philology,  
but under the wider rules of narrative discourse.<sup>1</sup>*

When congregants of many Protestant churches want to follow the reading of the biblical text for the morning's worship, some will do so with a well-worn copy of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. These Bibles have been sitting alongside believers in the pews of churches, often for half a century or more, and quite often, worshippers will perhaps bring their own more modern translations because they are more intelligible than the Old English of the Authorized Version. In a church that I attended in Ohio, West Elkton Friends Meeting, it is assured that the worship leader and pastor will read the morning's Scripture passage from a version such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). It simply reads better.

Of course, the differences between a translation from 1611 and a late twentieth-century translation are many, mostly due to the discovery of more reliable manuscripts, advanced linguistics studies, and evolving theological understandings of the meaning of the Greek text. Yet one barely noticeable difference between the KJV and the NRSV or New International Version (NIV), or most any other, is representative of an ongoing debate, where the effect of theology upon translation is not only important to developing an understanding of the Apostle Paul, but an the understanding of the entire biblical narrative. The difference can be found at various points in the Greek Testament, but this essay will focus upon the translation of Romans 3:22 and 26.

The debate centers around a specific Pauline phrase,  $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega\varsigma\ \acute{\iota}\eta\sigma\omega\upsilon\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omega\upsilon$  and how it was understood in the first century C.E. Just as importantly, the translation of the phrase by

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 2005), 46.

modern followers of Jesus has a bearing on how we might interpret the events of Jesus' life and resurrection, as well as how we live out our faith in those events. The NIV translates Romans 3:22 to read: "This righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe..." The NRSV renders the verse in English as "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe..." but adds a footnote to the phrase πίστewς Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ that suggests "through the faith of Jesus Christ" as an alternative reading. Yet in 1611 England, postdating the Lutheran Reformation but not indebted theologically to Luther's reading of the Pauline epistles, the phrase is translated as "even the righteousness of God, which is by the faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all who believe: for there is no difference."

Ah, but there is difference, and while it might not mean much at first glance for the worshipper at West Elkton Friends Meeting or any other congregation of the various Protestant denominations, the manner in which the phrase has been translated in the past centuries has had a great effect upon the application of Christian theological tenets to the world that the Church aims to serve. This project intends to look briefly at the grammatical issues raised by varying translations. More importantly, however, this project will look at length into the theological implications of rendering the phrase as "the faith of Jesus," as well as a reading of Paul that makes such an interpretation a more fluid integration of the life of Jesus into the ongoing and overarching narrative of YHWH, the Judean Messiah, and the Body of Christ.

## **Grammatical Considerations of πίστewς Ἰησοῦ**

In 1706, popular English Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote of Romans 3:22:

It is by the *faith of Jesus Christ*, that faith which hath Jesus Christ for its object, an *anointed Saviour*, so Jesus Christ signifies. Justifying faith respects Christ as a Saviour in

all his three anointed offices, as prophet, priest, and king - trusting in him, accepting of him, and adhering to him, in all these. It is by this that we become interested in that righteousness which God has ordained, and which Christ has brought in.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, it seems that even while Henry supposed the literal translation of the Greek was the correct one, his theology was such that Jesus was nevertheless the object of one's faith. I am not at this point debating the theological premise put forth by Henry and so many others. But Henry's translation does bear out the issue raised above in comparisons of the various translations. The most natural reading of the phrase "δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντες πιστεύοντες" appears to be "a righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ to all the ones believing."

At issue is whether πίστεως Ἰησοῦ should be translated in the subjective genitive (faith is the possession of Jesus the subject) or in the objective genitive (Jesus is the object of the verbal idea – faith – expressed by πίστεως ).<sup>3</sup> The literal translation would appear to render the English as "through faith of Jesus Christ." However, an interpreter could make the case that πίστεως Ἰησοῦ is intended to be heard or read in the objective genitive sense. The objective genitive interpretation of the author's intention is the foundation for the NRSV and others rendering Romans 3:22 "through faith in Jesus Christ." The NRSV translation bears out Matthew Henry's thinking above in twentieth century English.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; 1996), [CD-ROM Libronix Corporation] italics original.

<sup>3</sup> This sentence originally stated "the objective genitive (Jesus is the object of the faith of the possessor.) The correction was recommended by Dan Ulrich.

Yet modern commentators, possibly beginning with Johannes Haussleiter in 1891,<sup>4</sup> have insisted not only that the phrase be translated in the subjective genitive as found in the earlier KJV and *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, but that the phrase be *interpreted* as such. Haussleiter and many subsequent scholars have insisted that the Apostle Paul intended the Roman followers of Jesus to hear the phrase in a manner that God's righteousness was "attested to" (μαρτυρουμένῃ Rom 3:21) "through the faith of Jesus Christ." In other words, God was shown to be faithful to the divine covenant promises to Abraham (Rom. 4:13-17) through Jesus' own covenant faithfulness on behalf of Israel. "Paul understands the story of Israel," writes N.T. Wright, "to be reaching its climax with the coming and *achievement* of the Messiah."<sup>5</sup>

Returning to the grammatical debate, however, we find some scholars articulating the view that the subjective genitive translation is the most accurate. "The fundamental grammatical question is whether πίστις followed by a proper noun in the genitive case should be understood as faith in X or faith of X," writes Richard Hays.<sup>6</sup> Ian Wallis points out that instances of the Pauline use of πίστις followed by a genitive "favor, if not demand, a subjective interpretation."<sup>7</sup> A survey of Greek Testament texts produces 24 instances of faith followed by a genitive.<sup>8</sup> With Mark 11:22 providing an exception to the rule (πίστιν θεοῦ), and excluding the Pauline passages in dispute (Romans and Galatians), each Greek Testament instance of an objective

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Haussleiter, "Der Glaube Jesu Christi und der christliche Glaube," NKZ 2 (1891), cited in Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1 – 4:11*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; 2002), 142.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, 44 italics added.

<sup>6</sup> Hays, 148.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Wallis, *The Faith of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1995), 69.

<sup>8</sup> A personal count finds such instances at Mk. 11:22; Acts 3:16; 20:21; 24:24; 26:18; Rom. 3:3,22,25,26; 4:12,16; Gal. 2:16 (two instances plus an instance of καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν ἐπιστεύσαμεν); 3:22,26; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 2:17; 3:9; Col. 1:4; 2:5; James 1:3; 1 Tim 2:5; 2 Tim. 3:15.

genitive involving πίστις (or “faith in X”) contains the prepositions ἐν or εἰς.<sup>9</sup> In the undisputed Paulines, the Apostle uses the preposition ἐν in Romans 3:25, Galatians 2:16 (in one of two instances of πίστις) and Galatians 3:26. All other occurrences of πίστις are subject to the disputes of the present project.

“Apart from Paul,” writes Wallis, “there are no unambiguous cases in the New Testament where πίστις followed by Christ or God in the genitive case must be interpreted objectively.”<sup>10</sup> George Howard surveyed the Septuagint in 1979 for instances of similar grammatical construction which included the noun πίστις and found similar results.

It was inappropriate to the Hellenistic Jewish mentality to express the object of faith by means of the objective genitive. Though a textbook case can be made for it, in actual practice it does not appear. Characteristically the writers use the preposition when they wish to express the object.<sup>11</sup>

First Samuel 21:3 (LXX) has an instance of the phrase not found in modern English translations. Here, πίστις is coupled with the genitive θεοῦ. The NRSV reads “I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place.” The Septuagint additionally reads ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τῷ λεγομένῳ θεοῦ πίστις Θελλάι Αλεμωνι, or “in the place called the faithfulness of God, Phellani Alemoni.” First Maccabees 14:35 reads καὶ εἶδεν ὁ λαὸς πίστιν τοῦ Σιμωνος καὶ τὴν δοξάν, or “and the people saw the faithfulness of Simon and

<sup>9</sup> One example is found in Colossians 1:4: “τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ” literally “the faith of you in Christ Jesus.”

<sup>10</sup> Wallis, 71.

<sup>11</sup> George Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatia. A Study in Early Christian Theology*, SNTSMS 35 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), cited in Hays, 149.

the glory...” There is also a text that supports the subjective genitive reading in Fourth Maccabees 15:24.

Yet such evidence is not deemed suitable - seemingly not sophisticated enough - to convince other scholars of what they propose is obvious. Roy Harrisville writes “there is ample evidence to conclude that the objective genitive rendering [of πίστις] was by no means unusual or abnormal Greek. Πίστις Χριστοῦ as ‘faith in Christ’ is good, if not excellent Greek.” Harrisville cites examples of classical Greek authors such as Aeschines (330 BCE), and Euripedies, whose work *Medea* includes two incidents of the objective genitive occurrence. Harrisville also cites the work of Plato, Lysias, Thucydides and others.<sup>12</sup>

James Dunn has written substantially in support of the objective genitive translation, and his point of view appears in Hays’s oft-cited work *The Faith of Jesus Christ* through the inclusion of an appendix. He responds to Wallis’s claim that no unambiguous cases of πίστις occur objectively interpreted by countering with the aforementioned Markan passage (11:22) and provides Acts 3:16 and 2 Thessalonians 2:13 as examples.<sup>13</sup> Hays refers to these instances as rarities.<sup>14</sup> Concerning the lack of definite articles in Pauline usage of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ, Dunn responds that this fact “can be adequately explained by the fact that Χριστος, by this stage... regularly functioned as a proper name.”

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<sup>12</sup> Roy A. Harrisville, “Before ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ: The Objective Genitive as Good Greek,” *Novum testamentum* 48.04 2006; 358-356 [journal online] retrieved at <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/psjow?cookie=3484087&pid> on 11/8/2007.

<sup>13</sup> James D.G. Dunn, “Once again: ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ,” Appendix 1 in Hays, 249.

<sup>14</sup> Hays, 149 n. 113.

Much more of Dunn's argument, however, focuses on interpretive matters as opposed to translation issues. As such, an immediate response to Dunn's definite article explanation is available that offers a segue into more interpretive, or theological, reflections. States Wright, "If you read *Christos*...as merely a proper name, or simply as a divine title, it won't make nearly as much sense as if you read it as 'Messiah'."<sup>15</sup> As early as 1908, scholars on the subject were warning that "it is well to remember that in Greek [the] question is entirely one of exegesis, not grammar."<sup>16</sup> A.T. Robertson wrote in 1914 that the Apostle Paul "transcends all rules about subjective and objective."<sup>17</sup>

Arland Hultgren's 1980 article presents a challenge to the subjective genitive claim. He states that the case for the subjective genitive is "presented not so much on the basis of syntax (except to note that it is a possibility from the standpoint of syntax), but from exegetical and theological insights."<sup>18</sup> He proposes a number of arguments from syntax that support the objective reading. First, he states that on the basis of Pauline texts, "one can expect that Paul would have supplied the article (so ἡ πίστις τοῦ Χριστοῦ) if he intended to speak of the (subjective) faithfulness of Christ, but that is precisely what he does not do."<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, in the absence of the preposition, it could be argued that "within Paul's own writings...such constructions – having Christ or God as the object of a preposition do not exist." Finally, Hultgren concludes that on the basis of syntax alone, "apart from theological

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<sup>15</sup> Wright, 42.

<sup>16</sup> This quote from J.H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek I. Prolegema*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 72 has been cited by two contemporary authors who happen to be opponents of the subjective genitive reading, R. Barry Matlock, "Demythologizing the ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ Debate: Cautionary remarks from a lexical semantic perspective," *Novum testamentum* XLII 2000; 1; Arland J. Hultgren, "The ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ Formulation in Paul," *Novum testamentum* XXII 1980, retrieved at <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/psjow?cookie=3484107&pid> on 11/8/2007.

<sup>17</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek Testament in Light of Historical Research*, (New York: Hodder and Stoughton; 1914), 499; cited in Hultgren, 249.

<sup>18</sup> Hultgren, 252.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

considerations – the interpretation of the πίστις Χριστοῦ formulation along the lines of the subjective genitive is excluded.”

Luke Timothy Johnson countered Hultgren’s work in 1982. Johnson asserts that “simply on exegetical grounds, a subjective reading of *pistis Christou (Iesou)* is not only sometimes possible, but at times necessary.” Johnson uses literary criticism of Romans to support his claim, and also regards aspects of Pauline theology as necessitating a subjective reading. He notes that for Paul, the phrase πίστις Χριστοῦ is confessional in meaning. “The confessional aspect of *pistis* specifies the shape of the *Christian* response to God.” Furthermore, Johnson regards Paul as being passionate in believing that “it is not ‘faith in Christ’ which gives Paul life; it is ‘Christ living in me.’ (Rom. 2:20a) The ‘faith’ here, one begins to think, may belong to ‘the one who loved me and gave himself up for me.’”<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, even Dunn agrees that the more simple subjective genitive rendering is of interest – “there is of course, something seductively attractive about taking the phrase in its most literal English translation – the faith of Christ.” Dunn says more about the issue:

I should make it clear that the *theology* of the subjective genitive reading is powerful, important, and attractive...Moreover, as a theological motif, it seems to me wholly compatible with Paul’s theology; that is, not a component of Paul’s theology but consistent with other emphasis...none of this, however, is to the particular point in dispute. That focus is on the meaning Paul intended...for audiences for hear.<sup>21</sup>

Such theology is apparent in Wright’s translation of Romans 3:22, the centerpiece of the wider context of 3:21-31 which I will study. Wright translates: “through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who believe” and suggests that “from God’s faithfulness to human faithfulness, when God’s action in fulfillment of covenant is unveiled, it is because God is faithful to what has been promised; when it is received, it is received by that human faith that

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<sup>20</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, “Romans 3:21-26 and the Faith of Jesus,” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 44, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Dunn, 269; italics original.

answers to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, that human faith that is also faithfulness to the call of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

Since Luther’s reading of Paul, the tendency of scholarship through the centuries has been to highlight an objective reading of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. Douglass Harink sums up the Lutheran perspective as such:

Generations of readers of Paul since the time of Luther have understood that one must “have faith in” Jesus Christ in order to be “saved.” Indeed, it is not enough to give “mental assent” to God’s work in Jesus. God’s work of justification is completed in the individual only through his or her *whole-hearted trust* in Jesus Christ and his atoning sacrifice for sin on the cross and not in any effort, work, or merit of one’s own. That is the meaning of being saved by faith, not works.<sup>23</sup>

Harink notices, however, that Paul never places any emphasis on his own faith in Jesus. He does not do so after his conversion experience, or even “at points where it might be advantageous to do so.”<sup>24</sup> What the pre-conversion Paul was lacking in his life was not faith in YHWH, or even in Jesus. Paul’s faith is not the question. What had been lacking in Paul’s pre-conversion life was the “knowledge... not that he must have faith other than works, but that Jesus is indeed the messianic agent of the God of Israel... In whom ‘the righteousness that comes from God’ is disclosed.”<sup>25</sup>

Πίστις Χριστοῦ is thus Paul’s shorthand phrase that enables him to place Jesus the Messiah into the ongoing narrative of YHWH and the divine plan for Israel and the rest of creation.<sup>26</sup> God’s plan for Israel has come to fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah, as the faith of Jesus

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<sup>22</sup> N.T. Wright, “Romans,” *New Interpreters Bible (NIB)* vol. X, edited by Leander Keck et al., (Nashville: Abingdon; 2002), 470.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press; 2003), 26.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Wright, 46-47.

has brought covenant promises to realization and Judean and Gentile alike were now able to enjoy the inheritance promised to Abraham.

Key to this understanding of Paul is the understanding of what the messianic hopes of Israel were, and how Paul discusses messianic fulfillment in the context of the epistle to the Roman followers of Jesus. However, I will discuss three important themes of the Romans letter, and how they contrast what Hays prefers to describe as *anthropological* and *christological* readings of the πίστεως Ἰησοῦ phrase, as opposed to the objective and subjective readings.<sup>27</sup>

These are the themes of δικαιοσύνη and its cognates, or, as translated into English, righteousness and justification, and ἀπολυτρώσεως – redemption.

## **The Not So “New Perspective on Paul”**

It would be impossible to catalogue the religious thinking that claims the German Reformation as a catalyst for its theology. No fruit borne of Luther’s theology might be so widely harvested (though perhaps bitter tasting) as the “doctrine of justification by faith.” Ernst Käsemann cited “justification by faith” as the “canon within the canon” of Protestant *Sola Scriptura* theology.<sup>28</sup> From this reading of Romans has developed over the centuries a caricature of ancient Yahwist faith in contrast to Luther’s “justification by grace through faith” theology where no believer could ever “work” his or her way into a heavenly post-mortem existence, but

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<sup>27</sup> Richard B. Hays, “Πίστις and Pauline Christology: What is at Stake?” in *Pauline Theology* vol. 4, *Pressing On*, ed. by Elizabeth Johnson and David M. Hay, (Atlanta: Scholars Press: 1997), 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck; 1970), 405; cited in James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; 1998), 336.

only by assenting to having a “faith in Jesus Christ” (though there is no need to exhibit such faith).

According to mainline Protestant theologians, this meant that Judaism was viewed as the “antithesis of Christianity. Judaism was a legalistic religion in which God was remote and inaccessible.”<sup>29</sup> For so many Protestants, this seemed to suggest that ancient Yahwists spent centuries trying to “work” their way into a state of salvation. Wrote Samuel Sandmel: “it can be set down as something destined to endure eternally that the Christian commentators will disparage Judaism and its supposed legalism.”<sup>30</sup> E.P. Sanders, and later theologians like Dunn, Wright, and scores of others, have redefined Pauline theology in terms that identify YHWH’s grace as a constant centerpiece of Yahwist belief.

Torah obedience, or “works of the law” (ἔργων νόμου) was not a means by which ancient Yahwists labored their way into God’s good grace. The refusal to eat a goat boiled in its mother’s milk (Deut. 14:21) did not allow one to accumulate bonus points toward salvation. Torah obedience was the means by which human beings properly responded to the reality of God’s covenant grace. Sanders’ position is a clear statement of revised thinking on the issue. “*Obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but does not earn God’s grace as such. It simply keeps an individual in the group which is the recipient of God’s grace.*”<sup>31</sup>

Thus when Paul leads the Roman listener into our pericope by stating that “by works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight,” Paul is making a statement about who will be “in the group” and how they will maintain that status. Again, a key term in our understanding is

δικαιοσύνη. English uses both “justify” and “righteousness” to translate the Greek. Dunn

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<sup>29</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; 1977), 35.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties*, (1969); cited in Sanders, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Sanders, 420, italics original.

writes that this can be somewhat confusing. “More to the theological point,” he writes, “‘righteousness’ is a good example of a term whose meaning is more determined by its Hebrew background.” Contemporary English has viewed δικαιοσύνη in the sense of a Hellenistic moral imperative that must be introduced when an individual or institution has been dishonored. “In contrast,” writes Dunn, “in Hebrew thought ‘righteousness’ is a more relational concept – ‘righteousness’ as the meeting of obligation laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he or she is a part.”<sup>32</sup> An example of such thinking is evident in 1 Samuel 24:17. Saul has been unfaithful to his covenant obligations as the ruler of Israel by failing in his royal duties. David has been deemed “more righteous” because “I will not stretch out my hand against YHWH’s anointed.” (24:10)

In relating to readers what God has done through Jesus Christ, Paul puts the Jesus event into the wider context of the ongoing story of YHWH and Israel. Romans 3:21- 22a reads: “But now apart from the law a righteousness of God has been manifested, being attested to by the law and prophets, a righteousness of God through [the] faith of Jesus Christ.” Paul has identified the righteousness of God as faithfulness to covenant obligations (*cf.* also 3:29-30) that were part and parcel of the promises made to Abraham and Sarah.<sup>33</sup> As Dunn states: “It should be...evident [that] God’s righteousness was simply part of the fulfillment of his covenant obligation as Israel’s God in delivering, saving, and vindicating Israel, *despite Israel’s own failure*.”<sup>34</sup>

“The covenant people had become part of the problem, not the agents of the solution,” states Wright. “This creates a crisis for God...how is God to be both faithful to the covenant and just in his dealings with the whole creation?”<sup>35</sup> As I will suggest later, the covenant between

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<sup>32</sup> Dunn, *Theology*, 340.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 342. *Cf.* Rom. 4 *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*. Wright shares this point in other literature, e.g. in “Romans.”

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *Paul*, 29.

YHWH and Abraham/Israel was indeed a two-party contract. God was faithful, but Israel had not lived up to its obligation of being a light unto the Gentiles and the living expression of YHWH's will for humanity. Because of Israel's unrighteousness (Rom. 2:17-29; 3:22b) God was prompted to set things right, to fulfill both ends of the covenant. "Paul could take it for granted that 'the righteousness of God' would be understood as God's action on behalf of human beings."<sup>36</sup>

Following this thinking makes the translation of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ more intelligible if translated as "the faith of Jesus Christ," for it is in the faithful life of Jesus of Nazareth that Israel's covenant obligations have been fulfilled. "Though it would not be strictly accurate," says Wright, "it would not be a very great hyperbole to say that, for Paul, 'the righteousness of God' was one of the titles of Jesus the Messiah himself...God's plan of salvation has always required a faithful Israelite to fulfill it. Now, at last, God had provided one."<sup>37</sup> Through the "faith of Jesus Christ" - a faith that ultimately led to execution on a Roman cross - God has been shown to be righteous and faithful to the covenant, and, through that same faith, covenant obligations have been fulfilled on behalf of Israel and the purpose of God's elect has been fulfilled. Paul sees this event happening in the crucifixion, a sacrifice through which the blood of Jesus demonstrated covenant faithfulness (Rom. 3:25).

Perhaps now the question remains: Why all of the references to "works of the law" in relation to justification? Remember, Torah is not a vehicle for salvation, but a response to the reality of salvation and an identity marker for the elect who will experience such a liberation from the powers and principalities of the world. One does well to reflect upon the idea of redemption that Paul presents in 3:24. Redemption has been widely considered as a metaphor for

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<sup>36</sup> Dunn, *Theology*, 344.

<sup>37</sup> N.T. Wright, "Romans," 470.

slave market transaction (and it is). But such liberation from the state of slavery has overtones in the narrative of Israel that would be hard to overstate. Paul and his Roman listeners would immediately identify such slave-market language with the Exodus narrative, the Passover event, and the whole of Israel's existence as a people set apart for God's purposes.

The Exodus marks the liberation of a people chosen to live out the covenant between YHWH and Abraham. When the Law of Moses is given at Mt. Sinai, it provides an identity marker for the descendants of Abraham. By the time of Paul, Torah, Sabbath keeping, and circumcision were notable identity markers of the covenant people. As stated above, they were the identifying marks of "the in-group." Yet the promises to Abraham and Sarah were such that every nation was to be identified as the scions of the promise (Rom. 4 *passim*). If such an event had taken place through the faith of Jesus (3:27-30) a new identity marker was necessary, as now there was no distinction between Jew and Greek. *Works of the law no longer identified who was in the group, but instead a community's exhibiting of faith such as that known in Jesus did.* God will be "just of the justifier of the one of the faith of Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

## **Justification and Hebrew Narrative**

Rudolf Bultmann, suggests Hays, is the primary spokesperson against applying a narrative hermeneutic to Pauline thinking. Hays also suggests that it is Bultmann who was "once dominant" in Greek Testament studies and that "his *Theology of the New Testament* was a benchmark against which any new hermeneutic proposal ha[s] to be measured."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, XXV.

Bultmann identifies Jesus' *death* as *the* emphatic salvific event. "The salvation wrought by Christ's sacrifice is generally termed 'forgiveness of sin'."<sup>39</sup> Sacrificial death is also the redemptive act in Bultmann's theology. However, there is also his insistence that the obedience and faithfulness of Jesus Christ is *not* salvific, but that "it must be admitted that the 'obedience' and 'love' of the pre-existent Son are not visible data and cannot be directly aimed at the man who is challenged to believe."<sup>40</sup> Bultmann seems to believe that the life of Christ (or, indeed, Christ's own faith) is of little consequence,

For in the proclamation Christ is not the same way present as a great historical person is present in his work and its historical after-effects. For what is involved here is not an influence that takes place in the history of the human mind; what does take place is that a historical person is raised to the rank of the eschatological event. The word which makes this proclamation is itself part of this event, and this word, in contrast to all other historical tradition, accosts the hearer as a challenge. If he heeds this challenge....(It adjudicates) to him death and thereby life, then he believes in the risen Christ.<sup>41</sup>

As such, Bultmann can claim that "*the salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding, and promising word of preaching.*" He writes that the salvation event "does not become part of the fact of the past, but constantly takes place anew in the present. It is present not in the after-effect of a significant fact of world-history...[and] does not get absorbed into the evolution of the human mind."<sup>42</sup>

With such statements, says Hays, Bultmann "transvalues all Paul's 'mythological' language into anthropological affirmations."<sup>43</sup> According to Bultmann, to emphasize the salvation event as a historical occurrence, observable at a specific point along the ongoing

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<sup>39</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* vol. 2, trans. Kendrick Grobel, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; 1954), 157.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, vol. 1, 304.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 302, italics original.

<sup>43</sup> Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, 49. Paul's mythological language should be understood in any reference to such stories as the covenant with Abraham, and, of course, the resurrection.

narrative of YHWH and Israel (which Bultmann would classify as ahistorical) would be to “objectify” the event through the attempt to insist upon historicity.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, to “demythologize” Paul’s claims about Jesus, and extract them from the context of the narrative of a Creator God who has made promises, chosen and liberated a people, and who was (and is) known to act within the supposed confines of history, makes the claims of salvation through any aspect of the story of Jesus unintelligible. The story of Jesus can only be understood within the realm of human history, a history which Paul knew to be authored by a God who had made covenant with the forbearers of Israel to accomplish certain things on their behalf. “Paul’s letters may then be understood as growing organically out of the process of narration,” writes Hays. Paul’s use of *πίστις*, *δικαιοσύνη*, and *ἀπολυτρόσεως* in the passage which provides for the scope of this project represents the use of a symbolic language, well known to his Roman listeners, which “calls for interpretation” by the churches.<sup>45</sup>

Paul Ricoeur suggests when new events take place within the structure of an ongoing narrative (perhaps worldview fits better), “it calls for a new speech-act which would paraphrase the first [story].”<sup>46</sup> States Hays, “a Pauline letter could be understood as a ‘new speech-act’ that attempts to rearticulate in discursive language the configurational dimensions of the gospel story.”<sup>47</sup>

I must explain what narrative structure has to do with my suggested interpretation of *πίστεως Ἰησοῦ* in the subjective, or “christological” sense. For centuries, Protestants have been participating mostly, it seems, within the perceived reality of Martin Luther which suggests that individuals are “saved” by having faith in specific theological propositions made with regard

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 (1975) 195; cited in Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 25.

to Jesus Christ. If as Bultmann suggests, the life, death, and resurrection is simply an event that has no historical meaning, but is given meaning through the preaching of certain proposals rising from the myth of the pre-existing Son, then it makes sense that an individual would need to intellectually assent to certain proclamations concerning the myth to experience the fruits of the cross as a “recognizable...salvation event.”<sup>48</sup> If the proclamation is salvific, then faith in the proclamation is necessary. This is not, however, how the Apostle Paul is hoping that the followers of Jesus in Rome would understand his letter. I propose a different reading of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ as representative of Paul’s understanding of how YHWH has fulfilled covenant promises through the faithful obedience of the person of Jesus the Messiah, whose faithful *life* fully recognizes the covenant obligations of Israel, and is, thus, a specific (and no less) *historic* salvific event. I now turn to the narrative of Genesis 15 to provide the context for a narrative understanding of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ and a fresh reading of Romans 3:21-30 that deemphasizes the “Lutheran” reading and the Bultmannian demythologizing project..

Paul, and all of Israel, understood that covenant faithfulness and righteousness were the obligation of Israel if they were to fulfill their role as a light unto the nations. YHWH promised Abraham and Sarah that all the families of the earth would be blessed through their descendants (Gen. 12:4). But Israel had a very difficult time remaining faithful to the Creator God. This was foreshadowed in the covenant scene of Genesis 15. In the Genesis 15 narrative, Abraham is portrayed as being fully aware that he and his descendants could hardly be expected to be wholly faithful to YHWH’s expectations. When YHWH invites Abraham to participate in a covenant ritual, Abraham is overcome by “terror and great darkness” (15:12) and does not participate in the ritual. Instead, the author of the Genesis story suggests that YHWH made the covenant with

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<sup>48</sup> Bultmann, vol. 1, 302, 303.

Abraham, by taking responsibility for *both* covenant parties. While Abraham is not able to walk between the carcasses, YHWH, as doubly represented in the “smoking oven and flaming torch,” passes between these pieces. (15:17) In essence, God foresees covenant unfaithfulness in the future of Israel, and promises to uphold covenant responsibility in Israel’s stead. Thus, there would be a need for a faithful Judean, the chosen representative of YHWH who would accomplish such faithfulness. This belief gives rise to the messianic hopes of first-century Yahwists.

First-century Judeans could never forget the promises of land and descendants to Abraham that Israel viewed as its collective inheritance. Nor could the ever-present memory of the Exodus event be minimized, which acted as the paradigm for Yahwist hopes of restoration and national glory. It was the relationship to Abraham, the land of Palestine, the blessing of Torah that provided Israel with its covenant identity in the first century CE. They believed that YHWH was a faithful God, and that this God was working in history to set the world right and vindicate all of the suffering that the chosen elect had been burdened with. All of these beliefs were reinforced by, more than anything, the stories that had been told through the generations and centuries. Jews were participants in an epic saga authored by YHWH, and they were anxiously awaiting the next chapter.

First-century Judaism is an excellent example of a culture which quite obviously thrived on stories, which we may divide into two categories: the basic story, told in the Bible. Of creation and election, of exodus and monarchy, of exile and return; and smaller unit stories, either dealing with a small part of the larger story, or running parallel to it.<sup>49</sup>

The Yahwists of Palestine knew they were in the midst of this story, and were waiting for the conclusion. From such a narrative, there develops a coinciding narrative of hope. It is a hope that appears in various Hebrew writings, and it is this hope that inspired so many Yahwists to revolt

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<sup>49</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 215.

against the Roman imperial forces through the first and second centuries. The hope for the “Anointed One” (Χριστός) who would carry out YHWH’s will, meet the covenant obligations of deliverance, and lead Israel toward the restoration the House of David, the Promised Land, perfect obedience to Torah, and a unified people of God who would rule over the Gentiles. This hope was for the fulfillment of the covenant between YHWH and Israel – a hope for a Messiah.

The story of Jesus – and Paul’s claims about Jesus as Χριστός – is the story of this messianic hope being fulfilled. As stated, a faithful Judean was needed for covenant fulfillment – and it is only through the faith *of* Jesus that this can happen, through a *life* of obedience, even if it requires, as Paul notes in Romans 3:25, his death. It makes little sense to suggest that by the modern human’s assent to believe *in* Jesus that any criteria for an individual’s salvation has been met. Israel has always had faith in God. Paul is saying that YHWH’s promise of redemption for creation through the promises made to Abraham and Israel have begun to bear fruit in the person of Jesus.

By my reading of πίστewς Ἰησου, and according to the covenant narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is not an atoning *death* that satisfies the covenant obligations of Israel, or brings salvation to all the nations. It is righteousness and faithfulness, as demanded of Israel and the monarchs throughout the Scriptures, that justifies Israel in the sight of YHWH and enables Israel to satisfy YHWH’s intentions for the Chosen People. That being, to bring salvation to a world that has not yet known the God of Abraham and Sarah. This is the messianic purpose and intention of Jesus.

Jesus was not the messiah that Israel expected. He fully believed, however, that he represented the critical point in history in which the future of Israel hung in the balance. Israel,

especially its religious and political authorities, had betrayed YHWH's intentions to facilitate a just society that prioritized caring for the poor, the widow, the marginalized. Jesus believed that Israel's valuing of inheritance over the reflecting of God's will had mired the nation in a state of idolatry. He believed that Israel's esteem for its origin in the child borne of Abraham and Sarah had muddied the waters of YHWH's original intention for election; that being the creation of a nation through which the whole world would be adopted into the line of the covenant family.

It is most important, however, to remember that Jesus was acting as a faithful Galilean Yahwist who believed firmly in the ongoing narrative of a deity who was working toward the redemption of the whole world through God's chosen people. Jesus' ministry and faithfulness is intended, especially by Jesus, as a messianic action that claims the Day of YHWH has come, and that covenants are fulfilled through his actions. The Davidic line is restored, and salvation has come to those who follow his royal example. It is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ through which YHWH acts in history to liberate creation from its bondage to domination and violence. Through the faithful life of Jesus, the world is brought into right relationship with God.

None of this was obvious to even the most hopeful of first-century Yahwists. Jesus of Nazareth did, after all, get himself executed for all of his trouble. Like a common insurrectionist, like so many before and after him, Jesus faced off against the power structures of the world and lost. It must have appeared to many that he lost resoundingly. His followers, scattered and fearful, seemed to forget the promises made by Jesus that he would return. As everyone in the world of the First Century was fully aware, death was the end. Death was the trump card that Rome and Jerusalem held over every challenger to their authority. Death reaffirmed the power of Caesar.

A few days after his death, however, a new story was circulating around Jerusalem. The disciples of Jesus were making the claim that they had made contact with a Jesus who was very much alive. He had been dead – they all knew – but now the story was going around that Jesus had been resurrected. If this was true, then the empire and the aristocracy had not won. The Nazarene who preached peace had been vindicated by YHWH, his life an example of covenant faithfulness that brought about God’s acting in history to verify every claim that the Messiah Jesus made. The kingdom of God was inaugurated, not only by the life of Jesus, but by the hope and promise of resurrection that facilitated the belief of disciples that the covenant faithful would be vindicated for *their own* suffering and obedience as well. Jesus exemplified covenant relationship, expressed through the ancient and ongoing narrative of Abraham and Sarah, the Exodus, and divine command for justice, and through David, and the people of God.

Hereafter, a significant “new speech-act” by Paul in the context of the Hebrew narrative would be necessary to explain how YHWH was continuing to work in creation. This interpretive speech-act is evident in those Pauline statements in Romans that declare that the “righteousness of God” which the law and prophets had all pointed toward, “has been manifested...through the faith of Jesus Christ,” and now “all,” both Judean and Gentile, are “justified,” or made righteous themselves “in the present time” through Jesus’ own faithfulness as the Messiah.

As such the Judean followers of Jesus the Messiah were expected to welcome many new adherents into the ongoing epic of Israel, and together they were called upon by Paul to live out an apocalyptic existence that insisted that YHWH would act again soon, and that Jesus would return to guide his followers. While that return is yet to happen, the followers of Jesus in Rome and elsewhere worked to create a community that was dedicated to living the same obedient life that was exemplified in the “faith of Jesus.” Communities that found their lives profoundly

intertwined with the ancient story of a God of liberation and justice, love and resurrection; communities that insist that YHWH is not the God of the dead, but of the living, as exhibited by their own faithfulness: A faithfulness toward ancient covenant which reflects YHWH's desire for humanity, which is revealed in the faith of Jesus Christ.

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