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A Note on the Philological Aspect of Paul's Theory of Faith*

The gates of exegesis never close. Scholars have been labouring to discover the logic and consistency of Paul's letters. Dr. Francis Watson argued recently that: "This combination of historical and sociological perspectives seems to offer a more appropriate approach to the interpretation of Paul's view of Judaism than the exclusively theological models so often propounded."¹ Through his analysis and approach, Watson not only succeeds in revealing the *Sitz im Leben* of Paul's letters, but also in resolving difficult problems of interpretation that the theological approach could not clarify. According to Watson, the letters reflect Paul's efforts to free gentile converts to Christianity from the yoke of observing the *Torah's* precepts, and to persuade the Jewish Christians to join the gentiles in a common form of worship, thereby abandoning the non-Christian Jewish way of life, and so forming a separate sect, rather than remaining as a reform-movement within the Jewish community. Paul reached the conclusion that this was necessary after his preaching among the Jews failed (Watson 28ff.).

Separation of the church from the synagogue was a logical development of the gentile mission and of its success (Watson 36). In order to realize this sectarian policy, Paul had used denunciation, antithesis, and reinterpretation. This sociological model is to be found in Galatians, Philippians, and Romans, as well as in Qumran and the gospel of John (Watson 40ff.). Watson attacks the exegesis that began with Luther and the Reformation, and that has been continued and upheld by modern Protestant theologians, who have misinterpreted Paul's faith = works antithesis, and invested him with the doctrine of 'grace alone', *inter alia* (Watson 1ff.; 80; 112; 120; 148; 158–59; 178–80).

* This is part of a paper delivered at the July 1988 conference of the Historical Society of Israel on the concept of Election in Israel and the nations. It is also part of a monograph on *The 'Chosen People' Conflict of Jews and Christians*, now in preparation for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

¹ Paul, *Judaism and the Gentiles – A Sociological Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, 48.

May I express my thanks to Dr. Francis Watson, who read the manuscript and gave me the benefit of his remarks. Errors that remain are, of course, mine.

While agreeing on the whole with Watson on the social function of the letters, I would like to add a few words concerning the relationship between conditions in the Jerusalem church and Paul's position and actions. At an early stage, a decision fraught with consequences was reached: in imitation of the Essenes, and perhaps under their influence, it was established that members of the Jerusalem community should sell their property and deliver the money to a common fund, which would serve to maintain the congregation.² This decision left the church with no economic base, and its dependence on the charity of other Christian churches gave Paul a powerful position, for his excellence in preaching was matched by his organizational talents and ability to mobilize contributions for the impoverished church in Jerusalem.

After his conversion, Paul was called to Jerusalem, where his preaching and debates provoked the anger of Jews from the Diaspora (Acts 9:1ff.). This was probably seen as an obstacle to missionary work among the Jews, for "upon discovering this, the brethren brought him down to Caesarea and sent him forth to Tarsus" (Acts 9:30). It seems that Paul was 'unemployed' for many years in Tarsus (Gal 2:1), and was restored to activity only through the personal initiative of Barnabas. This must have been a traumatic experience for Paul, who would do everything possible to prevent the repetition of such a disgraceful dismissal. He must have realized very soon that the consolidation of his position in the leadership of the community depended on his ability to establish many gentile churches. To facilitate this, the requirements of the *Torah* must be waived.³ The Palestinian apostles and the

² Acts 2:44ff.; 4:34ff. In contrast to the Essenes, who continued to work their common property and to produce crops and profits from it, the members of the Christian community turned their fields into money and used up the capital accumulated thereby.

³ I refer to the ritual laws. Paul objected specifically to circumcision (Gal 2:3ff.; 5:2ff.; 6:15; I Cor 7:19; Rom 2:25–29; 4:9–12; Phil 3:2), to the food laws (Gal 2:11ff.; Rom 14–15; I Cor 8–10), and to the observance of certain holy days (Gal 4:10; Rom 14:5f.; Col 2:16f.). Recently, Th. R. Schreiner (*The Abolition and Fulfillment of the Law in Paul*, JSNT 35 [1989], 47–74), reconsidered the question of Paul's attitude towards the *Torah*, presenting new arguments for making a distinction between moral and ritual commandments. The latter had been abrogated, he says, because they depended on the Mosaic covenant, which was temporary and which separated Jews from gentiles, whereas the former were still valid, being connected to the covenant with Abraham (see especially pp. 50–51; 55–56; 59; and 65–66). These conclusions do not affect my argument as presented here.

Jewish Christians in general opposed this. Paul tried to secure Jerusalem's recognition of the legitimacy of his gentile congregations through the collection of money for its poor,⁴ as well as by his arguments and proofs derived from scriptural exegesis.

Paul came across the term 'faith' in two verses. In one, it is said that Abraham "believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen15:6); the other reads: "And (the) righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab 2:4; Paul omitted 'his'). He then tried to create a contrast between faith and the commandments of the *Torah* by a twisted interpretation of other verses (Deut 27:26; 21:23; Lev18:5).⁵ Watson (64) rightly comments on this alleged contrast:

"There is no theoretical reason why the practice of the Jewish law and confession of Jesus as the Messiah should be incompatible, as Jewish Christians demonstrated.⁶ The antithesis between faith and works does not express a general theoretical opposition between two incompatible views of the divine-human relationship. It merely expresses Paul's conviction that the church should be separate from the Jewish community. In itself, the antithesis does not provide a reason for this separation; it simply asserts the necessity for such a separation."

I would like to examine the question of whether – philologically – this antithesis is at all possible.

Like Paul, the *Midrash* (Midrash Rabba [= MR] Ex 23:5) combines the verse from Genesis with the verse from Habakkuk:

"Another interpretation: 'You shall look from the top of Amana' (Song of Songs 4:8) – Israel shall sing a song in the future to come, for it is said: 'Sing unto the Lord a new song; For He has done marvellous things' (Psalms 98:1). And by what merit shall the Israelites sing a song? By the merit of Abraham, who believed in the Holy One Blessed-Be-He, as it is said: 'And he (Abraham) believed in God' (Gen 15:6). This is the faith through which the Israelites inherit, and Scripture says of it: 'And the righteous shall live by his

⁴ See: Watson, *op. cit.*, 174–76.

⁵ See: Gal 3:5–14; Rom 1:16–17; 4:2–15; cf. 2:9–14, 25–29; 7:7–13.

⁶ In note 73 *ad locum* (on p. 197), Watson adds: "Nor is there any incompatibility between faith and the law in non Christian Judaism." Watson quotes here from II Bar 54:5 and 59:2, and IV Ez 13:23. He then adds: "1QpHab 8.1f applies Hab. 2:4 (one of Paul's main proof-texts for righteousness by faith apart from the law, Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11) to 'all those who observe the law' and who have 'faith in the teacher of righteousness.'"

faith' (Hab 2:4). This is what is meant by 'You shall look from the top of Amana' (Song of Songs 4:8).⁷

Further on in MR Exodus, the verse from Genesis is correctly explicated: "R. Shimeon bar Abba said: 'Because of the belief (*amana*) that Abraham believed to the Holy One Blessed-Be-He, as it is said: "And he believed in God," through this the Israelites were granted the privilege of singing a song at the sea, for it is said: "then sang Moses" (Ex15:1), by which it is meant: "You shall sing from the top of faith."' And, indeed, this is the plain meaning of the verse in Genesis (15:6). Abraham put his trust in God's promise that the Land of Israel would be given to his descendants despite the fact that he was already an old man and had no children. In fact, even Paul himself understood it in this way, for he says further on (Rom 4:19–22):

"[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead, being about a hundred years old, neither the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not doubt God's promise because of disbelief [or distrust; = *apistia*], but strengthened in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully assured that what he had promised he was also able to do. That is why it was 'reckoned to him as righteousness.'"

To sum up: "And he believed in God" does not mean faith in the theological sense, that is, belief in the existence of God or in the religious principles which teach about him, but it means that Abraham trusted in God's promise, relied on it.⁸ It is worth noting that the theological meaning of this verb and noun does not exist at all in the Hebrew Bible, and that, even in Classical and Hellenistic Greek, the verb, *pisteuein* (to believe, to have faith), and the

⁷ This *midrash* requires some explanation for the English reader. The anonymous homilist plays with the root *aman*, which means to believe, have faith. The verb appears in Gen 15:6, and the noun, *emuna*, which means faith, belief, appears in Hab 2:4. The homilist took the name of the mountain *Amana* in the Song of Songs (4:8) as if it were a noun derived from *aman*, and combined it with the verses in Gen and in Hab. Then he took the first word of the verse in the Song of Songs, "You shall look" (= *tashuri* as if it were written *tashiri*, "You shall sing," and combined it with the verse in Psalms 98:1 in which Israel is told to sing (*shiru*) a new song unto the Lord (*shir* is both a verb and a noun). In this way, the homilist found in this verse of the Song of Songs a kind of parallel with and corroboration of the verses in Gen and Hab. After these two linguistic twists, the homilist read this message into the verse of the Song of Songs: "You shall sing from [i.e., on account of] the top of faith," that is, the faith manifested by Abraham enabled the Israelites to sing at their redemption.

⁸ Cf. Watson 78: "'Faith alone' brings salvation only in the sense that for Paul its meaning includes not just 'belief' or 'trust' in the narrow sense, but the acceptance of a new way of life, with all the beliefs, ethical norms and social reorientation which this entails."

noun, *pistis* (faith), have the same meaning as the Hebrew terms: to trust in, confide in, rely on (a person or thing). It is only in ecclesiastical literature from Paul on that the identification of faith – *pistis* with the sum total of all that one believes in, with a system of religious dogmas, a creed, is developed.⁹ We should then understand the words “And he believed in God” as “he trusted God, relied on God,” just as in Ex14:31: “And they [i.e., the Israelites] believed in the Lord, and in His servant Moses,” which clearly means that Israel trusted God and Moses.

The verse in Hab 2:4 too does not offer support for Paul. The verse consists of an antithesis between a wicked man whose “soul is *‘ooplā* [translated as ‘lifted up,’ ‘puffed up’], is not upright, in him,” and a righteous man who lives by his faith (*emuna*). Now the word *‘ooplā* is a *hapax legomenon* in

⁹ See: G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, 1087. And cf. on this issue G.G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings*, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970 (1930), 201ff., and Appendix A (= pp. 377–79; written by H. Loe-we); and see the concise survey of J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, London 1896, 154–64.

In their meticulous survey of the sources (*Faith* [Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. x; London, 1961]), R. Bultman and A. Weiser support my suggestion concerning Paul's understanding of the term, faith. They note that our Hebrew verb “is rendered in the LXX almost without exception by πιστεύειν and in fact corresponds to the Greek πιστεύειν in so far as, like the latter, it means *to trust* (in persons. . .), *to put trust in* (words. . .)” (43; Bultmann's italics). So also “In the rabbinic literature. . . Hand in hand with obedience we find trust” (47). Then, “Faith in divine providence is a specifically Hellenistic phrase used for such trust in God” (48). And as for Philo: “When speaking of trust in God's help and of his promises Philo echoes the words of Judaism as a whole”, and although he has “understood man's relation to God in terms of the Greek and Platonic tradition. Yet at the same time he holds fast to the meaning of *trust* as the basic significance of πίστις” (52–53; Bultmann's italics).

In contrast to all this, “in Paul πίστις has only rarely the immediate meaning of trust (cf. 64) since it is in the first place ὁμολογία and ὑπακοή” (88; cf. 87–88). Finally, “Paul can use πίστις in the sense of a standard or a principle, . . . as when he contrasts νόμος and πίστις as being the two paths to salvation (Rom iii. 31; iv. 14) and speaks of the ‘coming’ of πίστις as of an independent entity (Gal iii. 23, 25). consequently he can form the combination νόμος πίστεως (Rom iii. 27). Πίστις is also understood as a principle in Rom iv. 16, Gal iii. 12, 1 Cor, xiii. 13. Therefore Paul can already use πίστις quite simply in the sense of ‘Christianity’, which again can mean being a Christian (i.e. Christian behaviour) or the Christian message, teaching, principles” (79; cf. 91–94). Compare H. Kleinknecht and W. Gutbrod, *Law* (Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. xi; London 1962): “In Rom. iii 27 νόμος πίστεως is contrasted with νόμος ἔργων. Thus νόμος has here the wider meaning of a divine ordinance which describes faith, not works, as the right behaviour of men; . . . Just as νόμος ἔργων can be understood as the law which results in works, so can νόμος πίστεως as God's ordinance demanding faith” (105).

the Hebrew Bible, and the commentators had difficulty in explaining it.¹⁰ In the light of the contrast between the two parts of the verse, and in the light of its construction, it is reasonable to assume that the words “is not upright” = *lo yashra* were interpolated in the text in order to explicate the word ‘*oopla*’ by a very early editor.¹¹ According to Solomon Mandelkern’s *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae* (Tel Aviv 1962), and according to Eliezer ben Iehuda’s *Thesaurus Totius Hebraeae*, the noun ‘*emeth*’ is nothing but a contraction of ‘*ameneth*’ from the root ‘*aman*’. This expository conclusion was drawn earlier by the ancient translator of the so-called *Targum Yonathan*, who translated: “But the righteous shall live by their truth”. Faith (*emuna*) is thus identical in one of its meanings with truth (*emeth*), with honesty, integrity, uprightness.¹² Philologically, then, both verses on which Paul relies cannot support the meaning with which he proposes to endow the term, faith (*emuna*), so that he may set it up as a counter-balance to the *Torah*. If this be so, then the chronological argument – that Abraham was justified by faith *before* he was circumcised and that the precept of circumcision ordained in the *Torah* is therefore of no importance – fails of itself.

Paul’s claim that the *Torah* and its precepts were now obsolete, and that they had been replaced by a new *Torah* based on the belief in Jesus (Gal 5:1; 6: 13–14; 3:2–6, 10–14, 23–25; II Cor 3: 6, 11; Rom 3:21–22, 27–28; 6:14; 7:6;

¹⁰ Rashi (and others) derive ‘*oopla*’ from audaciousness and fierceness, as in “but they presumed to go up [or, rose up; = *vayaapilu*] to the top of the mountain” (Num 14:44), or from haughtiness, as in “the mount [*ophel*] and the tower” (Is 32:14). *Targum Yonathan* renders the sentence in this way: “for the wicked say that all these do not exist, but the righteous shall live by their truth”; see below.

Prof. B. Uffenheimer’s recent “Habakkuk Challenges Heaven,” in: *Studies in the Bible...*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987, (Hebrew) deals with our verse. He suggests that the verb ‘*oopla*’ means ‘crookedness and distortion,’ while *emuna* means ‘trust and firmness.’ He argues that, in the first part of the verse, God reproaches the prophet for his complaint, and that, in the second part, God asserts that the righteous will live if he will only be firm and strong and will wait with trust and patience for the coming day. However, Uffenheimer does not explain the repetition in ‘*oopla lo-yashra*’, nor the opposing parallelism of “but the righteous will live by his *emuna*.” (See below).

¹¹ Traces of such editing are to be found in Ps 103:20 and Gen 37:25–28, for example.

¹² It is worth noting that the Septuagint generally understood and translated the word *emuna* (faith) by *emeth* (truth, *alêtheia*); their next most frequent translation of *emuna* was *pistis*, trust.

10:4–9)¹³ was echoed in a Talmudic source of the first century C.E. The motif that the *Torah* of Christianity replaced the *Torah* of Moses is put in the mouth of ‘a *philosophos*’, whom Rashi rightly calls a ‘heretic’ (*min*). The context lends support to the supposition that he was a Christian of pagan origin. Here is the story (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath 116a–b, according to the version in *Dikdukei Sofrim*):

“Imma Shalom, the wife of R. Eliezer, was the sister of Rabban Gamaliel. There was in his neighbourhood a philosopher who advertised [himself] as unbribable. They [Rabban Gamaliel and his sister] wished to make a laughingstock of him. She brought in a golden lamp and they went to him. She said to him: ‘I want you to divide the property of my father’s house for me.’ He said to them: ‘Divide!’ He [Rabban Gamaliel] said to him: ‘It is written us that where there is a son, a daughter shall not inherit.’ He said to him: ‘*From the day that you went into exile from your country, the Torah of Moses was taken away and the Gospel [= ‘Avon Gelion = Evangelion; literally, it means: ‘The sheet of sin’] was given, and in it is written: a son and a daughter shall inherit together.*’ Next day, he [Rabban Gamaliel] came back and brought him a Libyan donkey. He said to them: ‘I went to the end of the Gospel and it was written there: “I did not come to subtract from the *Torah* of Moses, but I came to add to it”,¹⁴ and there is written: “where there is a son, a daughter shall not inherit.”’ She said to him: ‘Let your light shine like a lamp!’ Rabban Gamaliel said to her: ‘The donkey came and knocked the lamp over.’”

In a late Jewish source, the establishment of a sectarian antinomistic policy is explicitly ascribed to Paul and John. In “An Addition to the Legend (*Aggada*) of Shimeon Cepha, Version C,”¹⁵ we read this: “And R. Shimeon Cepha went with the Christians and acted to them as though he were very attached to their faith...and he admonished them about the *new Torah* and the *new worship* which Yohanan [= John] and Abba Saul [= Paul] gave them, *and warned them to stay away from the congregation of Israel, and that they should not enter synagogues and houses*

¹³ Schreiner (above, n. 3, 51–52) thinks it “unlikely that Paul saw the sayings and example of Jesus as a new law, the *Torah* of Christ.” He argues that Paul rarely quotes the words of Jesus, while he quotes abundantly from the Old Testament. This is true, but what “constituted the new *Torah* which replaced the old *Torah*” was faith, with the amplified meaning that Paul strove to give it. See Schreiner’s assertion on p. 50: “We were guarded under the law until faith came (... [Gal.] v. 23). The faith (τὴν πίστιν) Paul has in view must be specific faith in Jesus as Messiah.” And see above, n. 9.

¹⁴ Compare Mat 5:17.

¹⁵ In *Bet ha-Midrash*, ed. A. Jellinek, Jerusalem ²1938, part VI, 156.

of study, and that they should not prevent Israel from their worship, because by this they would bring them down to the grave, since the *Torah* of Moses is loathsome in the eyes of Jesus [= *Yeshu*, written as an abbreviation of the phrase meaning: 'may his name and memory be wiped out']...”

Finally, I would like to present to the English reader an unusual, even fantastic, theory about Paul, proposed by an Israeli writer. In the *Sefer Hamaasiyoth* (= The Book of Tales) published by M. Gaster, and in the *Midrash Ha-gadol*, there appears a tale about a pagan priest in Damascus named Abba Gulish, who converted to Judaism and caused “thousands and tens of thousands of the nations [to be] converted.” On the basis of this tradition compared with the traditions about Paul in the New Testament, Micha Yoseph ben Gurion¹⁶ develops his theory, according to which Paul is Abba Gulish and, therefore, in contrast to the explanation adopted above, Paul did not turn his back on the Jews because he failed with them but, rather, because as a former pagan, he found it natural to approach the pagans; since he knew them, it was possible for him to influence them and attract them to his new faith (see his pp. 11 ff.; 42 ff.; 103 ff.; 126 ff.). The author's sharply worded conclusion (128) challenges the usual view: “Hence, Christianity did not reach the gentiles through Jewish Christianity. It is more reasonable that Christianity, which was gentile from the beginning, succeeded in gaining adherents among the Jews, too. The common opinion notes, of course, an opposite process: Jewish Christianity existed first and afterwards a gentile Christianity was added to it; there was a contest between the two and, at the end, gentile Christianity won.” *Non videtur*.

David Rokéah, Jerusalem

¹⁶ *Studies in the Origins of Christianity, from the Literary Remains of Micha Yoseph ben Gurion: Saul and Paul*, ed. Immanuel ben Gurion 1971 (Hebrew).