

# THE MEASURE OF STEWARDSHIP

## ΠΙΣΤΙΣ IN ROMANS 12:3

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### Summary

*A tiny handful of studies have recognised that πίστις in Romans 12:3 could be rendered as something like ‘stewardship’, ‘trusteeship’, etc. This article argues that this option deserves to be more widely visited. The explanatory power of this rendering is far greater than that of other options, and the strength of its philological backing (which includes entries from Josephus) has not yet been fully appreciated. One reason this rendering has not received the hearing it deserves is that earlier studies have failed to understand how it fits with the use of πίστις in 12:6.*

### 1. Introduction

If there has been a lasting lesson from the debate over the use of πίστις in Paul, it might simply be that the semantic range of the Greek term is broader than our English renderings have recognised. Those who have considered the lexical data at close range can testify that the debate over πίστις still has not tapped the riches of this term. While ‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness’ represent the two main branches of development of meanings for πίστις, our simply toggling between those two renderings does not recognise the full range of meaning in Greek literature. As this article attempts to show, it also does not do justice to the range of meaning of πίστις in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the meaning argued here, David M. Hay argues that, for Paul, the term sometimes means an ‘assurance’ or ‘pledge’ (*Pistis* as “Ground for Faith” in Hellenized Judaism and Paul’, *JBL* 108 (1989): 461-76). Dennis R. Lindsay details Philo’s use of the term with that meaning (*Josephus and Faith: Πίστις and Πιστεύειν as Faith Terminology in the Writings of Flavius Josephus and in the New Testament* (AGAJU 19; Leiden: Brill, 1993): 56-57).

Paul uses πίστις in Romans 12:3 to refer to something that God *measures out*: ‘For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of oneself more highly than one ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith (μέτρον πίστεως) which God has assigned to each’. Whether God measures out πίστις to every person or just to every believer is not immediately clear, although the context of gifts and their placement within the church suggests the latter.

It should perhaps be mentioned that the traditional rendering (‘measure of *faith*’) brings us face to face with a divisive theological conceit—that God has dealt each believer the amount of faith that he or she has. With Augustine (and again with his Reformation-era admirers) this conceit widened into the notion that any innate power of believing counted as a *work* (!), so that the exclusiveness of God’s effecting our salvation takes in both the objective and subjective aspects of the idea of saving faith.<sup>2</sup> In more modern times, misreadings of texts like Romans 12:3 and Ephesians 2:8 have lent support to this widened category of works. My interests in this article lie in a commonly misread phrase rather than in dogmatic matters, and my objection to the deterministic-theological reading of Romans 12:3 rests in more than just a lack of exegetical support for the idea of a faith-dealing God.<sup>3</sup> Those are the stakes, and to some degree they might also represent exegetical considerations.

## 2. The ‘Measure of Πίστις’

John Ziesler’s rundown of the chief competitors for the meaning of ‘measure of πίστις’ in Romans 12:3 is convenient for our purposes. He

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<sup>2</sup> The Reformation moorings of the contributors to Kittel’s *Wörterbuch* are no more apparent than in their treatment of πίστις as a gift from God. Hermann Hanse’s paragraph (‘λαγχάνω’, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976): 4.1-2, esp. 2) on why ‘it must be constantly borne in mind’ that ‘faith is the work, not of man, but of God or Christ’ (an idea he concedes is ‘not stated with equal clarity in all parts of the NT’) is representative. Rudolf Bultmann correctly notes that Paul ‘never describes faith as inspired’ (‘πιστεύω κτλ.’, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6.197-228, esp. 219-20), but he proceeds to smuggle that view into Paul anyway.

<sup>3</sup> Rightly divided, Eph. 2:8 does not support the idea that faith is a gift from God, as what is being described there as ‘the gift of God’ is not *faith* but rather *being saved*. That is not to deny the idea that God develops faith through circumstances, etc.

first notes that the term ‘recurs in slightly different form in v. 6’ (where it is τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως), and then lists four possible meanings of the term: (1) the ‘measure of faith’ refers to ‘the fruits of faith’ (like ‘charismatic powers’), in which case Paul is advising his readers not to exaggerate their gifts; (2) it could refer to ‘the capacity for faith, of which some have more than others’; (3) ‘faith’ refers to ‘the Christian faith’, so that Paul is invoking the so-called ‘rule of faith’; or (4) ‘faith’ refers to ‘the human response to Christ’, in which case Paul’s reasoning is ‘All are recipients, so none has any room for conceit’.<sup>4</sup> In Ziesler’s estimation, ‘[n]one of these interpretations leaps to the eye as obvious’, but he thinks that the last one in his list (a view he found in Cranfield’s commentary) ‘raises the fewest problems’.<sup>5</sup> My own view is that none of these views is without problems. And I certainly cannot see how view (4) gets us anywhere, as the syntax of Romans 12:3 seems to suggest that the expression μέτρον πίστεως (whatever it means) represents something that differs from one believer to another. As Günther Bornkamm noted, one effect of the verse is to show that faith is quantified: ‘each man [has] a different “measure” of it’<sup>6</sup>—although, as I will argue below, the difference Paul hints at may be more in kind than in degree. It is also difficult to see how view (4) could simultaneously govern the (almost certainly) synonymous expression in verse 6.

The broadening of scholars’ habitual choices when encountering πίστις in Paul’s letters is certainly a welcome development, but Romans 12:3 may represent an instance where those choices have still not broadened enough. We have seen that translating πίστις as ‘faith’ in Romans 12:3 does not render a very clear meaning for the passage as a whole. If anything, the usual alternative (‘faithfulness’) might be a

<sup>4</sup> John Ziesler, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM, 1989): 295-96. See Kuo-Wei Peng, *Hate the Evil, Hold Fast to the Good: Structuring Romans 12.1-15.1* (LNTS, 300; London: T & T Clark, 2006): 212-14.

<sup>5</sup> See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975–79): 2.615. Krister Stendahl notes that Cranfield’s ‘faith seems to be at stake on this subject, It is almost the only emotional passage in his two volumes’ (*Final Account: Paul’s Letter to the Romans* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995]: 48).

<sup>6</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 146. J. Paul Sampley refers to ‘[t]he notion of faith as variable in strength’ (*Walking between the Times: Paul’s Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991): 47).

step in the wrong direction.<sup>7</sup> But if we move beyond the choices of ‘faith’ or ‘faithfulness’ (that is, beyond the essential choices offered in New Testament lexicons like Bauer’s or Thayer’s), and consider other meanings that appear to extend from these two primary meanings, we find a suitable meaning in two places within the entry for πίστις in the Liddell-Scott-Jones *Greek-English Lexicon* (p. 1408). That πίστις = ‘position of trust or trusteeship’ is implied in a passage from Plutarch (*LSJ* definition I.3.b), while ‘That which is entrusted, a trust’ is derived from half a dozen sources (*LSJ* definition III). I cite one of those sources here as an illustration: ‘... Seleucus ... had entrusted him [Hermeias] with the government’ (αὐτῷ τὴν πίστιν ἐγχειρίσαντος, Polybius, *Hist.* 5:41:2, trans. W. R. Paton (LCL 3:101)).

The evidence collected in Liddell-Scott-Jones can be expanded in directions more telling of the world of the New Testament. Josephus’ use of πίστις in this way is particularly noteworthy. In his book-length study of πίστις in Josephus, Dennis R. Lindsay gives ‘that which is entrusted’ as one among several meanings obtaining in Josephus. Lindsay counts this use of the term three times within the 200 instances in which this word is found:

In *Ant.* 2, 57 πίστις is the ‘charge’ or ‘stewardship’ which Joseph exercised over the estate of Potiphar. The assassins of Ishbosheth in *Ant.* 7, 47 considered that they would receive in return for this act some gift from David: either a military command or some other trust (= ‘office’). In *Ant.* 12, 47 πίστις refers to a position of trust in the royal court of Ptolemy.<sup>8</sup>

Three instances out of 200 hardly counts at all when it comes to determining the *normal* meaning of πίστις, but our task here is to rediscover an element in the term’s semantic range that NT scholarship has neglected.<sup>9</sup> I am not trying to determine what the dominant meaning of the term is in Paul’s corpus, but simply to determine whether a side meaning best explains the way he uses the term in a pair

<sup>7</sup> S. K. Stowers attempts to apply the ‘faithfulness’ meaning to Rom. 12:3, but I cannot make sense of his exegesis: ‘Paul understands Christ’s faithfulness as his adaptability to the needs of Jews and gentiles and makes it a principle of community for gentiles (12:3; 15:1-9)’ (*A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, & Gentiles* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994]: 40). I cannot see how Rom. 12:3 can be read that way.

<sup>8</sup> Lindsay, *Josephus and Faith*: 82.

<sup>9</sup> In speaking of a ‘normal’ meaning, it should be mentioned that Paul perhaps deliberately uses πίστις with a variety of meanings (e.g. in Gal. 3). See Hay, ‘*Pistis* as “Ground for Faith” in Hellenized Judaism and Paul’: 474-75.

of related verses in Romans. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this marginal meaning comes more to the fore when Josephus uses the associated verb: ‘Although in Josephus the substantive πίστις very seldom relates the idea of “that which is entrusted”, ... the verb πιστεύειν commonly expresses the meaning: to entrust.’<sup>10</sup>

I am aware of only three scholars from the past century who have entertained this range of meaning for πίστις.<sup>11</sup> Alexander Pallis is perhaps the most interesting, not least for the depth of his knowledge of Greek. He writes, in connection with Romans 12:3,

πίστεως. *Of trust.* This passive signification of πίστις is very rare, but Liddell and Scott register a few examples. Every office in the Church is thus viewed as a trust from God, and the officers are exhorted in their aspirations to be content with the faithful management of their respective trusts. Cf. 1 Pet. 4.10 ἕκαστος καθὼς ἔλαβεν, εἰς ἑαυτοῦς διακονοῦντες ὡς οἰκονόμοι ποικίλης χάριτος θεοῦ.<sup>12</sup>

This is a very good beginning, but for some strange reason, Pallis forgets all about this ‘rare’ meaning of πίστις when he comes to 12:6. That forgetfulness, along with his mistaken understanding of προφητεῖαν as ‘preaching’ (!),<sup>13</sup> forces him to emend the text at that point. Noting that he ‘cannot see how there can be more or less belief so that accordingly there might be more or less of the gift of preaching’, he suggested reading ἐνπνεύσεως in place of τῆς πίστεως.<sup>14</sup>

Pallis’s understanding of πίστις in 12:3 has had very few backers, but it was entertained by Matthew Black, who produces the same passage from Polybius that I quote above. Unfortunately, Black tried to

<sup>10</sup> Lindsay, *Josephus and Faith*: 82-83. Lindsay lists the following as being entrusted through the formula πιστεύειν τινί τι: ‘positions of power, government, administration, jurisdiction over a geographical region, treasures and strong cities, the protection of something, (the administration of) a war, the siege of a city or even an assassination attempt’ (Lindsay, *Josephus and Faith*: 119). Lindsay also suggests translating ὁ πιστευθείς in *Ant.* 4.287 as ‘depository’, and πεπιστευμένα in *Ant.* 17.158 as ‘the things which have been entrusted, the charges, the stewardships’ (Lindsay, *Josephus and Faith*: 120).

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, Peng could be a fourth (*Hate the Evil, Hold Fast to the Good*: 213), since he cites Thompson’s agreement with this rendering, but his reference is rather fleeting.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Pallis, *To the Romans: A Commentary* (Liverpool: Liverpool Booksellers, 1920): 134.

<sup>13</sup> Pallis defines προφητεῖαν as ‘the faculty of instructing by an address when the faithful met for prayers’! (*To the Romans*: 135).

<sup>14</sup> Pallis, *To the Romans*: 136.

improve upon Pallis's proposed meaning by moving from 'that which has been entrusted to us' to 'our responsibility'. Black found this gambit too costly in terms of the difficulties it causes for 12:6, but unfortunately he does not try reading that verse with the simple meaning of 'stewardship/trusteeship'.<sup>15</sup> In turn, Michael Thompson, who knows both Pallis's and Black's commentaries, seems to recognise the potential of the trusteehip rendering more fully than Pallis or Black: 'πίστις refers by metonymy to that which is entrusted to each person, that is, one's χάρισμα(τα)'.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Thompson understands Romans 12:3 to be saying '[E]ach should measure himself according to his own faithfulness in fulfilling his God-given role by using his χάρισμα as it is intended (12:6-8)'.<sup>17</sup> Both Pallis and Black fail to grasp how well the 'stewardship/trusteeship' meaning fits, because both mishandle that meaning in its application to verse 6. Thompson appears to steer clear of these errors, although his saying that 'πίστις refers by metonymy' could give the wrong impression (although he did not mean it that way) that the 'trusteeship/stewardship' rendering is not philologically established. The fact of the matter is that it is much better established than Pallis, Black, or Thompson tells us.

It only remains, I believe, to show that the idea of *stewardship* or *trusteeship* fits better than the traditional rendering in Romans 12:3. While translators have consistently rendered πίστις in this verse as 'faith', a clear and straightforward sense of God's entrusting someone with a ministry appears when we render the term as 'stewardship': 'I bid every one among you ... to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of stewardship which God has assigned one'. This rendering fits very well, of course, with the succeeding verses, which refer to a variety of callings: 'prophecy ... service ... teaching ... exhortation ... contribut[ing] ... giv[ing] aid ... do[ing] acts of mercy'.<sup>18</sup> Rather than encouraging a rather strange view of God as outfitting this one or that one with the requisite 'measure of *faith*' for carrying out a given ministry, Romans 12:3 refers simply to God's

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Black, *Romans* (2nd edn; NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989): 169.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1-15.13* (JSNTSup 59; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991): 88.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*: 87. On the relationship between χάρις and apostleship in Paul, see Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (WUNT 4; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1981): 288-96.

<sup>18</sup> On the callings listed in vv. 6-8, see A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991): 79-81.

entrusting this one or that one with a well-defined ministry. While this understanding of πίστις is probably restricted to just two verses in the Pauline corpus (Rom. 12:3, 6), it is worth noting that the equivalent sense can be found in Paul's use of the verb πιστεύειν in Romans 3:2 ('... the Jews are entrusted [ἐπιστεύθησαν] with the oracles of God'). A closer parallel to the sense of πίστις argued here is found in Titus 1:3, where 'Paul' refers to 'the preaching with which I have been entrusted (ἐπιστεύθην) by command of God our Savior'.

To be told 'not to think of oneself more highly than one ought to think' makes good sense in the light of this revisionist rendering, as it refers to the limits of the different stewardships that God has assigned to members of the Body of Christ. It is not a matter of gauging one's raw supply of faith. This understanding also brings the discussion in Romans 12 into closer parallel with the discussion in 1 Corinthians 12. In Romans, Paul brings definitional focus to the callings, while, in 1 Corinthians, he calls the believer to be content with his/her assigned function within the body.

The proper understanding of τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως in Romans 12:6, then, probably has to do with God assigning a different prophetic ministry to one prophet from what God assigns to another prophet.<sup>19</sup> God does not just call the prophet to prophesy in a general sense. Rather, the call of the prophet is in a sense *territorial*: God calls the prophet to prophesy with determinate messages and in determinate venues. Thus fidelity to the office of prophet involves prophesying in line with one's (prophetic) stewardship.

### 3. A Parallel Expression in Ephesians 4:7

The interpretation of Romans 12:3 that I have set out in this article is supported by the reference to 'the measure of Christ's gift' (τὸ μέτρον τῆς δωρεᾶς τοῦ Χριστοῦ) in Ephesians 4:7. The thought and expression are clearly parallel. In Romans a *stewardship* is 'measured out', while in Ephesians 'Christ's gift' (*viz.* the Spirit)<sup>20</sup> is 'measured

<sup>19</sup> Contra Gerhard Kittel, who thinks that prophecy's unique connection with the term ἀναλογία is due to 'an inherent temptation to exercise [prophecy] without πίστις' ('ἀναλογία', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: 1.347-48).

<sup>20</sup> On the connection between Eph. 4:7-11 and the sending of the Spirit, see W. Hall Harris III, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7-11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), and the works cited there. On 'gift' = the Spirit (in both the New

out', but in both passages that which is 'measured out' is revealed to be the multiplicity of offices or tasks (Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11). 'Measure' in Ephesians 4:7 represents the distributive aspect of Christ's gift, poured out at Pentecost. When Bultmann writes that 'πίστις is not a gift of the Spirit',<sup>21</sup> his claim holds true only with respect to the main definitions of πίστις. It does not hold for how Paul uses the word in Romans 12:3.

#### 4. Conclusion

While the battle has waged over whether Paul's use of πίστις Χριστοῦ is an objective or subjective genitive, hardly anyone seems to have noticed that broadening our choices for the meaning of πίστις can resolve an old problem connected with Romans 12:3. Although standard NT lexicons do not list 'trusteeship' or 'stewardship' as a meaning for πίστις, that meaning appears in a number of Greek writers, including Plutarch, Polybius, and Josephus. The rendering 'stewardship' fits especially well in Romans 12:3, where it allows 'the measure of πίστις' to be understood as God's entrusting of a calling or task (as listed in vv. 6-8). It is hardly insignificant that the expression and the idea behind it are impressively paralleled in 'the measure of Christ's gift' in Ephesians 4:7, which happens to be another reference to ministerial callings.<sup>22</sup>

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Testament and in patristic thought), see Yves M. J. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury, 1983): 3.144-47. Few commentators on the Ephesians passage notice a connection with the thought of Rom. 12:3, 6, but see Petr Pokorný, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Epheser* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1992): 168-72.

<sup>21</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'πιστεύω κτλ.': 219. J. H. Yoder interprets Paul's language of 'the grace that had been meted out' in terms of 'a specific working of God the Spirit, present in, with, and under a particular pattern of social process, profoundly different both from contemporarily available social models and from most of what later Christian history has done with the notions of "charisma" and "ministry"' (*The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994]: 363). Unfortunately for Yoder, there is no evidence within the text for such an understanding of the language of grace generally or of charisms specifically, nor can this evidence be found elsewhere within the New Testament. It is transparently a product of Yoder's programmatic needs.

<sup>22</sup> While this article was in press, I discovered A. Vanhoye, 'The Problematic Reception of πίστις in Romans 12.3, 6' in *What Is It that the Scripture Says? Essays in Biblical Interpretation, Translation and Reception in Honour of Henry Wansbrough OSB*, ed. P. McCosker (LNTS 316; London: T & T Clark, 2006): 102-10, which makes the same case as the present article (and makes it very well). Also, I would like to thank Dr Michael Bird and Mr Ken Olson for their assistance.