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Heliso, Desta

Pistis and the Righteous One: A Study of Romans 1:17 against the Background of Scripture and Second Temple Jewish Literature

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In this revised dissertation, Desta Heliso offers the results of his doctoral thesis, written at the London School of Theology and directed by Max Turner. Heliso seeks to remedy the “interpretive shortcomings” (245) of the christological reading of Rom 1:17 and the citation of Hab 2:4 found therein. The majority view understands the citation as a reference to the justified believer (“anthropological” view), whereas newer attempts offer a messianic reading with reference to Christ (see Hanson, Hays, Campbell, Wallis). The “central question of this study” is: “can the Christological reading of Rom 1:17 be shown to be sufficiently strong so as to threaten the viability of the widely accepted anthropological reading of the passage?” (35, also 39). Heliso answers this question affirmatively and finds his own contribution in the study of Rom 1:17 “in light of Jewish literature” (3).

After the “Analyses of Existing Interpretations” (ch. 1, 3–39), Heliso discusses the translations and interpretations of Hab 2:4 in the LXX, 1QpHab, the Nahal Hever text (8HevXIIgr), and Heb 10:37–38 (ch. 2, 40–71). The results are mixed, with Heb 10:37–38 reading a messianic meaning into the quotation and 1QpHab and the Nahal Hever text a “generic” one.

In chapter 3 (72–121), Heliso seeks to argue (1) that *δύναμις θεοῦ* in Rom 1:16 is not the predicate of τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (the gospel is the power) but the subject of the second part of 1:16 (the power is the content of the gospel) (75–77); (2) that *δύναμις θεοῦ* in Rom 1:16 is a “linguistic image for Christ” (see Rom 1:4 [*ἐν δυνάμει* describes “Son of God,” not the verb “was declared”] and 1 Cor 1:24; 81–83); (3) that, *pace* Watson, the revelation of God’s “righteousness” in Rom 1:17a is not a status given to the believer but, as parallels to Pss 98:2; 143:1, 11 (used in Rom 3:21–22), and 1 En. 71:14 indicate, stands for “God’s eschatological saving power” in general (116) and, in this context, for “God’s coming in Christ” in particular (104); and (4) that *ἐν αὐτῷ* in Rom 1:17a is not an adverb of ἀποκαλύπτεται (“righteousness of God is revealed in it [the gospel]) but an adjective of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (“righteousness of God in it [the gospel] is revealed”) (78–79). The major syntactical result of these exegetical decisions is that 1:16b–17 is not perceived as an explanation of “the gospel” in 1:16a. Instead, “1:16b, 1:17a and 1:18a can be taken as independently forming three exegetically interrelated reasons probably intended to justify and affirm Paul’s claim that he is not ashamed of the gospel” (120; also 75). Theologically, this reading shifts the focus from the oral proclamation of the gospel as God’s power and the believer as the one to whom righteousness is being revealed (anthropological reading) to a more theocentric and christological reading.

Chapter 4 begins with a study of the messianic use of “the righteous one” in the New Testament, 1 En. 38–53, Wis 4:10–16, Isa 53:11; 11:1–5, and Pss Sol. 17 before analyzing the Habakkuk citation of Rom 1:17b. While admitting that “commentators of Romans are unanimous” in understanding “the righteous” in 1:17b as a reference to the believer, Heliso finds that a reference of this phrase to Christ “can be supported” (146), especially with reference to the parallel in Rom 5:19 (147–54).

However, the “final decision” of a generic or specific meaning of “the righteous one” in Rom 1:17 is delegated to the “exegetical reading of *ἐκ πίστεως* in relation to the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* construction in Galatians and Romans” (164), discussed in chapter 5. After rejecting the meaning of *ἐκ πίστεως* as God’s covenant faithfulness (see Dunn; 171–76), Heliso moves to the heart of his argument. One of the keys to Heliso’s proposal is, based on a comparison of Gal 3:11 with 3:22 and Rom 1:17 with 3:22, 26, to take “*ἐκ πίστεως* probably [as] an abbreviated form of *ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ [Χριστοῦ]*” (178, 190), which (1) brings “Jesus Christ” into the text of Rom 1:16–17, although he is not mentioned explicitly and (2) redirects the debate over an anthropological or christological reading of Rom 1:17 to the larger discussion about the meaning of *πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* in Paul’s thought. That debate is engaged in the extensive exegesis of Gal 2:16 (207–23) in which Heliso, siding with the New Perspective, first rejects *pace* Westerholm and Silva the traditional understanding of “works of the law” as a form of salvation by human action and, second, defines *πίστις Χριστοῦ* as “Christ’s Faithfulness-to-Death” (216–23). Key to

this definition is, first, Heliso's separation of the verbal expression "believing in Christ" from "faith of Christ" in the same verse because "Paul often uses πίστις as 'faithfulness' (e.g., Rom 1:5, 8, 12; 16:26; 2 Cor 5:7; 1 Thess 1:3, 8; 3:2, 6; 5:8) and the use in Gal 2:16 could well be the same" (220). Second, πίστις as a reference to Christ's death is suggested by the reference to Jesus' "obedience" (implied is obedience to death on the cross) in Rom 5:19, which connects with "faith" via the exegetical "obedience of faith" in Rom 1:5 and 16:26 (225–26). Furthermore, it is "unlikely" that πίστις refers to any human action in Rom 3:24 (227). Romans 4 is also used in support of a christological reading of Rom 1:16–17, where, against "the majority of Pauline scholars" (232), Heliso argues that Abraham's faith serves as an example of Christ's faithfulness, not of Christians' faith (231–39). At the end of all this labor, the "Summary and Final Conclusions" (243–54) about this study of Rom 1:17 arrives at a rather meager result (254):

our exegeses of the passage and internal and external evidence cumulatively showed that the passage could also be understood to be concerned with introducing and providing a framework for the idea of *God's act of salvation through Christ's faithfulness-to-death* (πίστις Χριστοῦ), the knowledge of which triggers the human act of faith-response.... Admittedly, pre-Pauline and Pauline evidence in favour of reading ὁ δίκαιος in the Habakkuk citation as Christ seems to be insufficient and the christological meaning of ἐκ πίστεως is heavily dependent on the disputed subjective genitive interpretation of πίστις Χριστοῦ. However, that this reading is internally coherent and has some degree of argumentative cogency cannot be denied.

Heliso offers a creative attempt to apply the insights of two newer paradigms in Pauline scholarship (the New Perspective; the "faith of Christ" debate) to a key text of Romans and of Pauline soteriology. Yet my overall impression is that Heliso finds what he is searching for and repeatedly replaces relevant information of the immediate context with selective data from the remote context. Three examples may suffice.

(1) Based on mere syntactical possibilities, Heliso reads ἐρχόμενος ἤξει in LXX Hab 2:3 messianically (following Manson), although he admits that it leads to logical (48) and theological (65) improbabilities if not impossibilities, for how can the Messiah, according to Hab 2:4, "draw back" so that God says, "my soul has no pleasure in him"? A similar objection can be raised against Heliso's christological reading of the citation in Heb 10:37–38 (61–68). The inversion of Hab 2:4a and 4b does not only create a parallel between ὁ ἐρχόμενος and ὁ δὲ δίκαιός but, as he states himself, makes the latter also the subject of ὑποστειλῆται (65) with the same theological difficulties as seen above. Furthermore, the anthropological reading of 10:37–38 is strengthened by the nonmessianic use of δίκαιος in Heb 11:4 and 12:23 as well as the "application" of Heb

10:38/Hab 2:4 (ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται) to Noah in Heb 11:7 (τῆς κατὰ πίστιν δικαιοσύνης ἐγένετο κληρονόμος) and other people of faith in 11:33 (διὰ πίστεως ... εἰργάσαντο δικαιοσύνην).

(2) Since the “immediate context” offers “no obvious indication in Rom 1:16–18 of Christ and his eschatological life” (150), Heliso thinks that tracking a messianic use of ὁ δίκαιός in selected Second Temple Jewish texts and in 5:19 helps to explain the phrase in 1:17 (an example of referential fallacy). Yet in a letter where the meaning of terms such as “law,” “righteousness of God,” “Jew,” “Israel,” and so forth shift sometimes from one verse to another, it is exegetically precarious to make “connections between his [Paul’s] scattered ideas” based on mere lexical similarity. In other words, if a lexical option is not supported by the immediate context, it should not be considered. It strikes me as improper selectivity in this regard to delegate the anthropological use of the arthrous ὁ δίκαιος in general and its occurrences in 1 Pet 4:18; 2 Pet 2:8; Rev 22:11 to a mere footnote (163 n. 151) and to exclude them from the discussion and (therefore) from the index at the end of the book. Heliso’s modest conclusion of chapter 4 is more hermeneutically sound (163–64) than his elaborate previous attempt to connect scattered Jewish texts and Rom 5:19 with 1:17 might suggest.

(3) I see no reason why, on the other hand, the noun “faith” in Rom 1:17 (ἐκ πίστεως) and Gal 2:16a (ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ) should be separated from the *verbal* expression of human “believing” in Rom 1:16 (παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι) and Gal 2:16b (ἐπιστεύσαμεν) when the latter constitutes the clearest possible immediate interpretive context—unless such exegesis conflicts with certain theological desires.

Proponents of a christological reading refer to the danger of the “meritorious understanding of faith” (so Wallis 25; also Hays and Campbell 22, 24, 233), and it seems to me that Heliso’s argument against the traditional anthropological reading of Rom 1:16–17 is driven by the same concern (see 244–45). Yet it is doubtful in my eyes that interpretive revisions of a prepositional phrase (ἐκ πίστεως) and a genitival expression (πίστις Χριστοῦ) are enough to cope with thorny issues in Paul’s letters such as the judgment of believers (e.g., Rom 14:10–12; 2 Cor 5:10; Gal 6:7–8; see the recent review of fourteen ways suggested by scholars of how to relate justification to judgment in Pauline thought by Dane Ortlund, “Justified by Faith, Judged according to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox,” *JETS* 52 [2009]: 323–39).

The year 2007 has seen another two monographs by the same publisher in the same series about the same question regarding the understanding of the πίστος Χριστοῦ expression: Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith in Romans 4: Paul’s Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6* (WUNT 2/224; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); and

Karl Friedrich Ulrichs, *Christusglaube: Studien zum Syntagma πίστις Χριστοῦ und zum paulinischen Verständnis von Glaube und Rechtfertigung* (WUNT 2/227; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007; see the review in *RBL* 06/2008). Both studies come to different conclusions than Heliso, and rightly so in my eyes.