DETHEOLOGIZING THE ΠΙΣΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ DEBATE: CAUTIONARY REMARKS FROM A LEXICAL SEMANTIC PERSPECTIVE

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1. Introduction

Remarking both on the prominence of the objective genitive in the NT and on the prejudice of English usage against it, James Hope Moulton issued this warning: “It is well to remember that in Greek [the] question is entirely one of exegesis, not of grammar.”¹ This turn-of-the-century reminder is timely for the present debate at century’s end over πίστης Χριστοῦ formulations in Paul (Gal. 2:16, 20; 3:22; Rom. 3:22, 26; Phil. 3:9), where the ‘subjective genitive’ reading no doubt continues to benefit from the oddness, from an English-language point of view, of an ‘objective’ sense to ‘faith of Christ’. I take the reminder to heart myself, as putting in question any attempt to rule on a properly exegetical decision from some ‘neutral’ standpoint above the fray. I presume nothing of the sort with my invocation of ‘lexical semantics’. What I offer (ultimately) comes under ‘exegesis’.

Perhaps the first observation to make on the πίστης Χριστοῦ debate from the perspective of lexical semantics is the almost complete lack of interest in the latter. To cite only the examples of the two recent book-length treatments, Richard Hays’s The Faith of Jesus Christ, by his own later admission, fails to treat of “the cultural/semantic background of Paul’s πίστης language,” and Ian Wallis’s The Faith of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Traditions, though it includes a survey of linguistic data, shows no interest in lexical semantics (making no use, for example, of such guidebooks as Silva or of the Louw-Nida lexicon [L-N]).² Now

it may be recalled that James Barr’s pioneering *The Semantics of Biblical Language* devoted a chapter to an earlier stage of this very debate (responding particularly to A.G. Hebert and T.F. Torrance, proponents of the subjective genitive reading).³ And it is not that Barr has been ignored; indeed, subsequent proponents of the subjective genitive seem obliged at least to mention Barr’s criticisms. But, somewhat paradoxically, it almost seems the response has been to steer clear of linguistic semantic argument. Hays remarks that Barr “attacked the linguistically naive assumptions” of Hebert and Torrance, who “argued their case badly and on illegitimate grounds,” but, says Hays, “it is significant that Barr’s criticisms, as he himself indicates, do not invalidate the theological position advanced by Torrance and Hebert; his critique merely undercuts the linguistic arguments employed.”⁴ Granted Barr largely opts out of the theological argument, but this still seems a rather optimistic take on his critique. He complains not only of linguistic ineptitude but also of the tendency to replace linguistic with theological argument—a challenge, I take it, to do a better linguistic job. Given that we are centrally concerned with the ‘meaning’ of key Pauline words and phrases, lexical semantics would seem to be one obvious source of methodological guidance in taking up that challenge.

Ideally, lexical semantics might offer a more or less stable and agreed set of terms and principles for the analysis of word-meaning, worked out in general application, and thus ‘neutral’, at least, to the specific interpretative issues arising over πίστις Χριστοῦ. In the absence of such methodological direction, argument over the meaning of πίστις in relation to πίστις Χριστοῦ formulations has been something of a lottery (a rigged one, at that): you draw up a short-list of possible meanings, and you take your pick. Rather than start from scratch or attempt to break new theoretical ground, I will for the most part simply assume the work of such guides as Silva and L-N.⁵ I would state my aim in

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⁴ Hays, *Faith*, 162, 186 n. 104; see also 190-91 nn. 133, 145.