BEFORE ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ: 
THE OBJECTIVE GENITIVE AS GOOD GREEK

by

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In recent years a debate has ensued concerning the meaning of πιστίς Χριστοῦ and similar phrases in St. Paul’s letters. (See Gal 2:16, 20; 3:22; Rom 3:22, 26; Phil 3:9.) One of the points in contention is that the subjective genitive reading is more natural than the objective rendering and thus constitutes better Greek.1 However, if one dares to look at the evidence in the pre-Christian Greek authors themselves, one will find ample evidence that πιστίς plus the objective genitive is quite normal and indeed constitutes good Greek.2

Using only the Perseus 2.0 database of ancient Greek authors3 I searched for all forms of the noun πιστίς and the verbal form, πιστεύω (all tenses and moods), plus the genitive (apart from prepositional phrases) in those Greek authors who wrote in the first century BC or earlier. For the most part when an ancient Greek author wishes to indicate faith or reliance in someone or something, the dative is used of the object. However, by using even the limited database within Perseus 2.0 I have managed to uncover a healthy list of examples in which the objective genitive is used both with the nominal and verbal forms of πιστίς.

It must be pointed out that there are certainly many more examples of the objective genitive in ancient Greek sources. This study has

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2 Matlock has already identified a number of instances of the objective genitive with πιστίς in Plutarch’s *Lives*. Matlock, p. 304.

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only dealt with one word in such a construction to ascertain if it is good Greek. It is. This is significant because it means that native Greek speakers would have been conditioned to hear and read the objective genitive with πίστις and would not have considered such constructions odd. To be sure, the subjective genitive was also uncovered. But such discovery only serves to emphasize the need to allow context to determine the reading of a phrase. The following evidence was uncovered from a variety of authors.

**Aeschines.** In 330 BC a friend of Demosthenes by the name of Ctesiphon suggested he receive a crown in honor of his service to Athens. Aeschines opposed the move in his speech, *Against Ctesiphon.* In section 208 we find him saying “... ὅταν δ’ ἔπισκοπος ἄν εἰς τὴν τῶν ὀρκων πίστιν καταφυγάνη...” Here Aeschines is trying to discredit Demosthenes before the Athenians saying that the perjurer Demosthenes counts upon the Athenians’ reliance upon sworn oaths. In this instance πίστις may be translated as confidence or reliance and its use in an objective genitival construction is unmistakable.

**Euripides.** In his famous *Medea* there occur two instances of πίστις with the objective genitive. One is in a lament by the Chorus: “... θεῶν δ’ οὐκέτι πίστις ἄραρεν...” (*Medea* 413). One may translate this phrase, “... their faith in the gods has no longer held.” The other instance is in a statement by Medea to Jason that faith or trust in Jason’s oaths has gone away (“οἵρκων δὲ φρονόθη πίστις...”) (*Medea* 492). Again, the objective genitive reading is plain.

**Herodotus.** This author provides one example of the subjective rendering of πίστις with the genitive: “σέβομαι δὲ Ἀράβων πίστις ἀνθρώπων ὦμοι τοσὶ μάλιστα...” (*Histories* 3.8.1) Here the translation would be “Arabs honor the oaths of men second to none.” The subjective rendering seems clear in this context.

**Demosthenes.** The orator supplies us with six examples of an objective genitive with the noun πίστις or its verbal form. In his speech *On the Crown* (18.215) he recalls that the Thebans relied upon the decency of the Athenians when the Thebans allowed them into their city during the campaign against Philip of Macedon (“... ἵν’ ὑμῖν πολίσσατες συμφροσύνης πίστιν περὶ υἱῶν ἔχοντες ἔδειξαν.”). In *Against Leptines* (20.17) he employs the phrase “ὁ τοῖν τὴν πίστιν ἀφαίρων τῶν δωρεᾶς νόμος...”, which may be translated “The law, therefore, that removes faith in rewards...” The last example of the nominal form of πίστις with the objective genitive is found in *Against Timotheus* (49.43): “... κακώ τούτων πίστιν ἡθέλησα ἐπιθεῖναι...” This phrase