Hab 2:4, PISTIS in the LXX and faith in Romans

(Iver Larsen, revised October 2026)

It is often a challenge to translate verses in the OT that are quoted in the NT. Quite often the words may be used in a somewhat different sense and context than the original.

One example is Hab 2:4 which is quoted in Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11 and Heb 10:37-38. The quote in Hebrews is longer and is from the LXX, which is quite different from the Hebrew text we have. This means that the translation of the quote in the NT looks different from the translation of the original passage in Hebrew. Such differences need to be maintained and can be explained in a footnote. They are common in Hebrews which follows the LXX, apparently without reference to the Hebrew text.

The problem with Rom 1:17 and Gal 3:11 is not so big, but we still have the different senses of the Greek word PISTIS. In Hab 2:4 it refers primarily to "faithfulness" but when Paul quotes it he is thinking more of "faith". That is not a problem in Greek since PISTIS can mean both, but it is a problem in many other languages. My preference is to use faithfulness in Hab and faith in Romans and Galatians, but a footnote is helpful in any case. There is a close affinity between having faith in God and being faithful to him, since in both the OT and the NT, having faith means entering into a covenant where faithfulness is of the essence. A person who lacks faithfulness to God has broken the covenant and thereby also lost his faith in God.

It is helpful in this connection to study the use of Greek PISTIS in the LXX.

PISTIS as a noun is not particularly common in the LXX. It occurs 32 times in the books of Genesis to Malachi, but two of these are curious attempts to translate names, and 2 are in passages with no equivalent in the Hebrew text, so let me confine myself to 28 occurrences. The word is used to translate two related Hebrew words emun(a) and emet.

The Hebrew words are centred around the concept of steadfastness, dependability and reliability. Once it describes a spring or river that dries up and therefore does not have stability and is not reliable. But it is a simile, so it still refers to a people who are not faithful or dependable/trustworthy.

4 times PISTIS is used to translate emet, but that is not the normal Greek rendering of this Hebrew word that basically means truth. This is found in Prov 3:3, 14:22, Jer 39(32):41 and Jer 40(33):6. But being truthful and trustworthy are closely related. While KJV translates with ”truth” in Prov 3:3, RSV chose ”faithfulness” (maybe influenced by the LXX). The same in Prov 14:22. In Jer 39(32):41 God will do something ”in truth”. KJV and NIV translate by “assuredly.” The Hebrew ”amen” is from the same basic root. In Jer 40(33):6, KJV translates with truth, but NIV with security as it is parallel to peace/well-being. I agree that ”truth” is not the best translation in this context. Nor is PISTIS.

A few times PISTIS is used where emuna refers to a position that people are given and entrusted with. It is expected that they will be faithful in their duties and trustworthy. (1 Ch 9:22,26,31; 2 Ch 31:18). NIV says ”positions of trust”.

In the rest of the occurrences it refers to the concept of being faithful. In almost all cases it refers to people being faithful, but there are two instances where it refers to God. These are Psa 32(3):4 and Hos 2:22(20). The English versions of Psa 33:4 vary: truth, faithfulness, trustworthy, dependable and fair(?). In Hos 2:20 most English versions talk about faithfulness, but GW says: I will be true to you.

In the Greek Apocrypha PISTIS is fairly common (27 times) and appears to refer consistently to faithful people (I didn’t check all of them).

So, although the word may refer to God, it normally refers to people being true, faithful, dependable, reliable, trustworthy.

Hab 2:4 is interesting, partly because it is being quoted 3 times in the NT. It is a promise from God about the coming deliverance (from exile). Verse 4 appears to depict the proud and haughty

Babylonian king or anyone with a similar attitude. I think the NLT captures the meaning well: ”Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God.” The LXX is quite different. Maybe they had a different text: ”If he draws back, my soul is not pleased with him, but the righteous shall live based on my faithfulness.”

When Hab 2:3-4 is quoted in Hebrews 10:37-38 it becomes: ”He who is coming will come and he will not delay. My righteous one shall live by faith(fulness), and if he draws back, my soul is not pleased with him.” Here the context is about persevering through persecution, and that requires both faith and faithfulness. The author draws out his conclusion in v. 39, but the PISTIS word can still cover both faith and faithfulness as the text refers to not drawing back but continuing in faith and obedience to the end.

Paul quotes Hab 2:4 in Rom 1:17 and Gal 3:11, but either he translates from the Hebrew text rather than quoting the LXX or he removes the pronoun "my" from the LXX: ”The righteous (person) shall live based on (his) faith.” Paul does not include ”his” from the Hebrew text, probably because he is focusing on the concept of faith in general, not that of a particular person. He has already introduced the phrase EK PISTEWS – based on faith - which is a key phrase in Romans and Galatians. In both cases the context talks about justification based on faith versus based on law observance.

Whereas PISTIS in the LXX regularly and commonly talks about the faithfulness of people in doing right, that is not the normal usage of the same word in the NT. In Matt 23:23, Gal 5:22 and Rev 13:10 the intended meaning is probably faithfulness, but it is hard to exclude the concept of faith. A steadfast faith implies faithfulness. Rom 3:3 is the only place in the NT where PISTIS clearly describes God, and therefore it has to be understood as faithfulness. Here there is a contrast between lack of faith(fulness) among those Jews who did not believe in Jesus and God’s unwavering faithfulness. In all other cases in the NT (about 240) the context indicates that the word refers to people having faith in God or Jesus.

Now, Douglas A. Campbell (2007, Duke University) discusses Hab 2:4 and Rom 1:17 in his SBL paper: **The Faithfulness of Jesus Christ in Romans and Galatians.** He says on page 3:
”it is difficult to avoid the suggestion that Paul has quoted Habakkuk 2:4—
his first explicitly cited text in Romans—to resume, define, and affirm
his use of its central phrase in the same sentence’s preceding clause.”

I find it difficult to accept such a suggestion. The central phrase is indeed EK PISTEWS – based on faith. Did Paul quote Scripture to define what he says or means? Did he need Scripture to affirm his statements? Did he quote Scripture from a modern view of exegetical accuracy? I think not. He is not resuming anything, he is supporting what he wants to say. As other sages of his time, he would quote associatively. He wants to persuade the Jews that justification is based on faith, and see, it even says in the Scriptures that a righteous person bases his life on faith. That is what makes him faithful and trustworthy. In the original context, it refers to faithful obedience to God’s laws and commandments. Such a person is righteous, and he shall live in the sense that God will protect him in trouble and give him a good life on earth, including eternal life in the age to come. Paul is not concerned about the context in Habakkuk, but he uses the phrase EK PISTEWS (based on faith) to persuade the Jews that to be righteous in the eyes of God, you need to have faith. And more than that. Faith rather than law observance is the basis (and means) for being considered "righteous". It is not unlike many preachers who take a verse out of context to make a point. An exegete is not allowed to do that, but a preacher is - as long as what he says is otherwise correct.

On page 19-20, Campbell says: “We should note first that a christological orientation supplies a perfectly acceptable reading of Romans 1:17: “The DIKAIOSUNH QEOU is being revealed through it [the gospel] by means of fidelity and for fidelity, as it is written, ‘The righteous one, by means of fidelity, will live.’” The righteous one spoken of here is plainly Christ, and this prophetic

text, read in this fashion, suggests that by means of his faithfulness to the point of death he will live in the sense of being vindicated and resurrected…There seem to be no immediate problems with this reading."

I can see lots of serious problems which makes this reading quite unacceptable. Why should the righteous one be Christ? That is not from Habakkuk. While Campbell says that Paul must use EK PISTEWS throughout Romans and Galatians in exactly the same sense as in the context of Hab 2:4, he at the same time says that "the righteous one" plainly is Christ, something entirely foreign to Hab 2:4.

One can say that Christ was faithful unto death and was rewarded with resurrection for it. But that is not what Paul is talking about in this verse or in chapter 3 or in Romans or Galatians. And there is no contextual evidence from Romans to support that Paul is talking about faithfulness here, nor that it is the faithfulness of Christ. Campbell suggests that when the title "the righteous one" is used about Christ in Acts 3:14 (Peter), and 7:52 (Stephen) and "on the lips of Paul" in Acts 22:14 (but the words are from Ananias), then it can mean the same in Hab 2:4 or at least in Paul's use of Hab 2:4. This is the common exegetical mistake of importing an alien context and ignoring the immediate context. Paul does talk about the death of Christ as the redemptive background for justification, but he does not talk about resurrection. Paul mentions the resurrection of Christ in Rom 1:4, but since this is not in dispute in the Roman Church, he does not come back to it in this book. The Greek word ANASTASIS occurs twice in Romans in passing, but PISTIS occurs 40 times and the verb PISTEUW occurs 21 times, ERGON (works) occurs 15 times, NOMOS (law) 74 times, DIKAIOSUNH (justification, righteousness) occurs 34 times, DIKAIOW (justify) 15 times and DIKAIOS (righteous, just) 7 times. This gives an indication of what is Paul's concern in Romans.

I realize that Douglas Campbell in his paper did not intend to write a commentary on Romans that will deal in detail with the pros and cons of different interpretations of key phrases. His aim was to persuade his readers to accept his interpretation of key aspects of Romans.