

# Romans 1.1-5 and Paul's Christological Use of Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17: An Underutilized Consideration in the Debate

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## Abstract

Romans 1.1-5 provides contextual evidence that Paul cites Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17 as a reference to Christ. Within the rhetorically and epistolographically significant expansion of the letter opening, Rom. 1.1-5 introduces the εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ as being about Christ and, more specifically, his resurrection – as promised beforehand ‘through the prophets in the holy writings’. Given certain recognizable correspondences between 1.1-5 and 1.16-17 and Paul’s continued association of Christ with the gospel in 1.9, Rom. 1.1-5 prepares the reader to hear ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται in 1.17 as a prophetic reference to Christ, the Righteous One who will live because of his faithfulness.

## Keywords

ἐκ πίστεως, ὁ δίκαιος, Paul's use of Hab. 2.4, πίστις Χριστοῦ, resurrection

To use the conventional options in contemporary scholarship, does Paul in Rom. 1.17 refer to the generic Christ-person (i.e., ‘believer’) in the phrase ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται<sup>1</sup> or to Christ himself?<sup>2</sup> While most scholars favor a Christ-person interpretation

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1. All Greek text comes from the NA27. All translations are my own.
  2. I would like to thank J.R. Daniel Kirk and Stanley K. Stowers for their comments and criticisms throughout the process of writing. Both significantly improved this article with their keen exegetical and historical eyes.

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(Heliso 2007: 3-4, 13-19), several argue for a ‘Christological’ construal of Hab. 2.4 by Paul in Rom. 1.17.<sup>3</sup> Numerous publications have appeared in the past several years tackling the issue in detail, both cogently re-asserting the Christ-person interpretation (Watson 2004: 40-77; 2007: 233-45; 2009) and supporting the minority Christological understanding (Kirk 2008: 46-49; Campbell 2009: 613-16). Desta Heliso (2007) devotes a monograph to arguing for the possibility of a Christological interpretation. In this article I argue that Rom. 1.1-5 provides contextual evidence that Paul deploys Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17 with reference to Christ as opposed to the generic Christ-person. While J.R. Daniel Kirk (2008: 46-49) and Douglas Campbell (2009: 615, 647) have suggested the relevance of 1.2-4 for this interpretive question, I hope to adduce a more comprehensive series of points strengthening that observation. In particular, I advance my argument in critical interaction with the recent contributions of Heliso and Francis Watson.

One of the parade arguments marshaled against the Christological reading of Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17 is that nothing in the immediate context signals this possibility. For Watson, ‘we would have expected a reference to christology in the antecedent – a clarification that Habakkuk’s “righteous one” really is to be identified with “Jesus Christ the righteous” (cf. 1 Jn.2.1)’ given ‘the explicit contextual interdependence of citation and antecedent’ (2004: 52; cf. Watts 1999: 16-17). Heliso identifies a broader version of this as ‘the main problem’ for a Christological reading (2007: 35-36) and expends considerable energy addressing it in his monograph. Curiously, though Heliso at times acknowledges the relevance of Rom. 1.1-5 to his analysis of 1.16-17, he fails to note how 1.1-5 offers precisely such a contextual signal (2007: 23, 80-82, 120, 151). In fact, in the place where he comes closest to examining this specific consideration, he rejects it.<sup>4</sup> Especially in view of Heliso’s and Watson’s claims, I propose to examine further the relevance of Rom. 1.1-5 to the debate. There, in the expanded letter opening, Paul indicates that ‘the gospel of God’ is, among other things, ‘concerning his son...the one appointed son of God in power with reference to the spirit of holiness by (his) resurrection from the dead’. For the following reasons we should identify Rom. 1.1-5 as a contextual reference suggesting a Christological sense for Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17.

3. For example, Hanson 1974: 39-51; Campbell 1994: 281-85; 2009: 613-16; Stowers 1994: 198-202; Hays 2005 [1989]; Keck 2005: 54; Heliso 2007; Kirk 2008: 46-49. See Campbell 1994: 281 n. 47 for further bibliography and Heliso 2007: 19-26 for a concise overview of several Christological advocates and their arguments. I use the label ‘Christological’ for convenience to designate interpretations understanding Paul to mean Christ in the phrase ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται in Rom. 1.17. I do not use this term to imply that such readings are ‘more Christ-centered’ or ‘less man-centered’ and thus supposedly more valid readings of Paul. As R. Barry Matlock (2000: 21-23; 2002: 309-14) and Francis Watson (2009: 159, 162-63) point out, that is disingenuous and/or anachronistic ‘theological’ logic.

4. While discussing whether readers would understand ἐκ πίστεως in Rom. 1.17a as a reference to Christ’s πίστις and 3.21-22’s relevance to this question, Heliso writes, ‘But would that have enabled the hearer or reader to construe ἐκ πίστεως in terms of Christ’s faithfulness? The answer could be “yes”, if she understood Romans 1:16-17 in light of the Christ event and in relation to 1:2-4’ (2007: 189-90). Heliso then dismisses this possible contextual significance of Rom. 1.2-4 in the following sentence: ‘But we cannot be certain about the competence of the hearer to say confidently that, on the basis of her general knowledge of Christ and what she heard 13 verses earlier, she’ interpreted Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17b Christologically (2007: 190).

1. In Rom. 1.1-7 Paul expands a conventional letter opening. Though ancient epistolary theorists show little interest in openings and closings of letters, some ancient writers, and Paul in particular, were aware that modifying conventional forms of openings helped them emphasize their main points and accomplish their purposes (Schubert 1939; Stowers 1986: 20-22; Byrskog 1997: 34-46). From such epistolographical and/or rhetorical standpoints numerous scholars have analyzed Paul's expansion of the opening in 1.1-7, exploring how 1.1-7 sheds light on the overall structure, themes, purposes and rhetorical strategies in Romans.<sup>5</sup> Its audience likely noticed not only how Paul expressed his relationship with them, but also the peculiarity of its particular expanded greeting (e.g., Byrskog 1997: 34-38). This likely amplified their attentiveness to the rest of the letter. With greater curiosity they investigated if and how the rest of Romans would elucidate the strange opening, in which they expected a condensation of the central matters and primary themes and contents of the whole letter.<sup>6</sup> So, especially if one considers 1.16-17 to be something like a 'thesis statement' for the letter,<sup>7</sup> 1.1-7's expanded opening should be expected not only to relate directly to Paul's claims in 1.16-17, but also to function prominently as a contextual orienter for readers.<sup>8</sup> These points obtain even more to the extent that recognizable connections exist between 1.1-7 and 1.16-17, to which I now turn.

2. In Rom. 1.1-5 Paul explicates the εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ in a specifically Christological manner. It concerns God's son (Christ), 'the one descended from the seed of David with regard to the flesh; the one appointed son of God in power with regard to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead'. Paul not only Christologically encodes the 'gospel' in his expansion of the letter opening, but also specifies Christ's resurrection as the decisive event in the transition to his current eschatological, royal-'messianic', and *pneumatic* existence (Stowers 1994: 215-19; Jewett 2007: 103-106; Kirk 2008: 39-44). Among other things, the gospel is about Christ and, more specifically, his resurrection.<sup>9</sup> Several sentences later in 1.16-17 Paul again writes of τὸ εὐαγγέλιον. However one construes the syntax of these verses, Paul's citation of Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17 serves to

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5. Though with differing results and emphases: e.g., du Toit 1989; Jervis 1991; Byrskog 1997; Kirk 2008: 33-55.
  6. Byrskog, for example, stresses these points and offers a preliminary analysis of Romans from this perspective (1997: 37-46). David Konstan's recent work (2006, 2009) on the training and enculturation of ancient readers-auditors to read 'actively' – critically following and assessing arguments, plots, characterizations *and* attentively looking for oddities, puzzles, missing details, breaks with convention, and the like – offers a potentially fruitful and related analytical vantage point. Though levels and sophistication of such training and enculturation into these shared practices obviously varied across time, local groups and classes (Konstan 2006: 8), Konstan stresses that different kinds of readers (including those of the 'middle levels of society' and 'the reading [including hearing] public') shared these practices and that authors produced texts with such varied readerships in mind (2006: 8-14, 17-18; 2009).
  7. A common view: e.g., Wilkens 1987: 82-92, 286; Dunn 1988: 37, 46; Jewett 2007: 135, 140-41, 146-47.
  8. Romans 1.2-4, then, is not some unremarkable passage that readers should be expected to have forgotten '13 verses' later when they hear 1.17, as Heliso implies (2007: 190).
  9. See also 1 Cor. 15.1-4. There too Paul talks about the gospel in a Christological manner, emphasizing Christ's death in behalf of 'our' sins, burial, and resurrection – 'according to the writings'.

validate his claim that ἐν αὐτῷ (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) ‘the righteousness of God is revealed ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν’ (Dunn 1988: 44, 46, 48; Watson 2004: 43, 47, 50-53). Given Paul’s Christological defining of εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ in the programmatic expansion in 1.1-5, it seems highly plausible that when he invokes Hab. 2.4 to authorize his positions about τὸ εὐαγγέλιον in Rom. 1.17, he does so as a reference to Christ and his resurrection life (Kirk 2008: 47-49; Campbell 2009: 615).

3. Related directly to point 2 above, in Rom. 1.9 Paul emphasizes yet again that the gospel is the ‘gospel of his son’: τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ νίου αὐτοῦ. However one understands the genitive here, in the few intervening sentences between 1.1-7 and 1.16-17 Paul again associates the gospel with Christ (Campbell 1994: 273-74). This continues Paul’s Christological encoding of the gospel in the context immediately preceding his positions about it in 1.16-17 and use of Hab. 2.4 to validate those positions. This does not necessarily militate against a Christ-person interpretation of Hab. 2.4. in Rom. 1.17. Watson, for example, would presumably fold this into his understanding of τὸ εὐαγγέλιον as the proclaimed message about what God did in Christ, who is ‘the embodiment of divine saving action’ and thus ‘the origin and object of faith’.<sup>10</sup>

4. In Rom. 1.2 Paul asserts that the εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ is something ‘which (God) promised beforehand through *his prophets* in the holy writings’. Whether one considers περὶ τοῦ νίου αὐτοῦ in 1.3 to modify εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ in 1.1 (the majority view) or γραφάς ἀγίας in 1.2 (Hays 1989: 85; Whitsett 2000: 674-75), here Paul claims authorization from the God of Israel’s ‘prophets in the holy writings’ for his gospel, the content of which is God’s son; more specifically, what 1.3-4 conveys about God’s son. In 1.16-17 Paul quotes from a *prophet* (Hab. 2.4) to legitimate his assertions there about the gospel (Watson 2004: 46, 52, 71-73). This provides yet another link between Rom. 1.1-5 and 1.16-17. Paul’s claim in 1.1-4 that the content of the εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ is Christ and his resurrection *as promised beforehand through ‘his prophets’ in the holy writings* primes the reader to hear Christ’s resurrection when Paul cites the written text of a *prophet* (Hab. 2.4) to substantiate his positions about τὸ εὐαγγέλιον in Rom. 1.16-17 (Campbell 2009: 615).

5. In the final three points I suggest further contextually orienting connections between Rom. 1.1-5 and 1.16-17 that plausibly would have made sense to a competent reader who heard 1.17 Christologically. For such a reader they would fit with the points I have argued above and reinforce the overall coherence of a Christological reading. Again, Rom. 1.4 includes Christ’s resurrection in the content of the ‘gospel of God...concerning his son’. To amplify the second point made above, my proposed Christological reading of Hab. 2.4’s ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται in Rom. 1.17 takes ζήσεται as a reference to Christ’s resurrection (Hays 1989: 36; Heliso 2007: 150-52; Kirk 2008: 39-49; Campbell 2009: 613, 698). This would establish another connection between 1.1-4 and 1.17. In 1.1-4 Paul writes about the gospel of Christ’s *resurrection* promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy writings. In 1.17 Paul represents a prophetic text (Hab. 2.4) writing of Christ’s *resurrection* (Kirk 2008: 47-48).

10. Watson 2004: 75-76; 2007: 218 n. 2, 234, 244. Watson would presumably stress that even though Paul thus Christologically associates the gospel in Rom. 1.9 (for example), he also does not introduce Christ into a passage about faith until his amplification of 1.16-17 in 3.21-22 (2004: 73-74).

6. In Rom. 1.4b-5 Paul writes that through ‘Jesus Christ our Lord...we received grace and apostleship for the purpose of (*εἰς*) the obedience of faithfulness among all the nations for the sake of his name’. While 1.1-4 delineates Christ as the substance of the gospel, 1.5 accents the inextricably linked purpose and scope of what ‘we’ received through Christ: *εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν*.<sup>11</sup> In 1.16-17 Paul reproduces this move from the gospel to its purpose and scope. In 1.16 the gospel is the power of God *εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι ἰουδαίω τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι*. I do not want to equate the purposes Paul articulates in 1.5 (*ὑπακοὴν πίστεως*) and 1.16 (*σωτηρίαν*), though a more in-depth study would elucidate relationships between them in Paul’s letters. That said, *ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν* of 1.5 corresponds to the ‘universal’ scope Paul indicates with *παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι ἰουδαίω τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι* in 1.16. Similarly, given my agreement with the subjective genitive approach in the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* debate, I also see 1.17’s *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν* reflecting this movement from Christ’s *πίστις* into (*εἰς*) Christ-person *πίστις*.<sup>12</sup> Stanley Stowers’s (1994: 202) and Campbell’s (2009: 379, 618) approaches align with taking *εἰς πίστιν* to express the purpose or reflex of Christ’s faithfulness among Christ-people. In this way *εἰς πίστιν* articulates a purpose or result of Christ’s faithfulness, just as 1.5 also lays out a purpose or result (*εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως*). One could also read *εἰς πίστιν* in 1.17 as indicating the scope of those affected by Christ’s faithfulness, just as 1.5 also specifies a scope of *ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν* for *εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως*. As such, *εἰς πίστιν* would mean ‘unto *πίστις*’, or perhaps ‘unto those characterized by *πίστις*’.<sup>13</sup> Though these connections between 1.1-5 and 1.16-17 do not necessarily pertain to the debate about Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17, they constitute relevant connections between 1.1-5 and 1.16-17. They function as contextual orienters further preparing one to hear 1.16-17 within the dynamics of how 1.1-5 delineates the gospel of God concerning his son, its purpose and its scope.

7. My Christological reading holds that Paul uses Hab. 2.4 to legitimate his position that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel through Christ’s faithfulness (*ἐκ πίστεως*; Rom. 1.17a). Paul’s use of Hab. 2.4 there does so by providing prophetic testimony that the Righteous One (Christ) will live because of his faithfulness (*ἐκ πίστεως*; Rom. 1.17b). Romans 1.1-5’s lack of an explicit reference to Christ’s faithful death would seem to be a problem for my overall argument. This, however, is not the case. Though 1.1-5 does not mention Christ’s faithful death, it depicts the contrast and transition between Christ’s existence *κατὰ σάρκα* versus his eschatological royal-‘messianic’ existence

11. My content versus purpose versus scope distinctions can confuse matters when it comes to Gentile-inclusion, which is not simply a matter of scope. See Stowers 1994 for a reading of Romans emphasizing Gentile-inclusion within the God of Israel’s eschatological rescue as a primary concern of Paul’s gospel and apostolic self-presentation. Gentile-inclusion is part of the substance and purpose of the gospel for Paul (*pace* Moo 1996: 27-29, 243-44).

12. Campbell 1994: 277-85; 2009: 618; Stowers 1994: 202. Charles Quarles rightly rejects the common interpretation of *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν* as a supposedly ‘intensive’ or ‘emphatic’ construction properly translated along the lines of ‘by faith from first to last’ (2003: 4, 7-8, 11, 13, 18; cf. Heliso 2007: 187-88).

13. Cf. Rom. 3.22: *δικαιούσῃ δὲ θεοῦ [πεφανέρωται] διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας*, οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή. Attempting to discern between scope and purpose may force some of these passages through a distorting set of categories. See n. 11 above.

κατὰ πνεῦμα ἄγιωσύνης effected at his resurrection (1.3-4).<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere in Paul this transition and exaltation for Christ follows, and even happens because of, his faithful submission unto death for others.<sup>15</sup> This logic is most apparent as the animating dynamic of Paul's notion that Christ-people participate in Christ; they die and rise with him; they share in and are conformed to his sufferings and resurrection; they share in his faithfulness; Christ undergoes and experiences the transformation first that they share in by identification with him.<sup>16</sup> The rest of Romans and Paul's other letters demonstrate that he conceives of the different phases in Christ's existence in 1.3-4 within these ideas about Christ involving his eschatologically efficacious faithfulness. These observations do not highlight an additional contextually recognizable way that 1.1-5 selects a Christological sense for Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17. They do, nevertheless, clarify how 1.3-4 operates within the same matrix as would a Christological understanding of 1.17's parallel occurrences of ἐκ πίστεως (one in 1.17's citation of Hab. 2.4), thus highlighting how my argument offers a coherent reading.

Paul's possible use of a preexisting and known 'creedal statement' in Rom. 1.3-4 may also explain the absence of πίστις language there with reference to Christ.<sup>17</sup> Especially if in the expanded letter opening Paul deployed this creedal statement to capitalize on its recognized legitimacy and thus bolster his own credibility and authority in the hopes of persuading his audience,<sup>18</sup> he may not have felt the adaptive freedom to insert a reference to Christ's faithfulness and to add his own peculiar emphasis until 1.16-17.<sup>19</sup> This, however, was not problematic for him. As discussed above, his use of the creed to represent phases in Christ's existence, transitioning with his resurrection, coheres perfectly with his thoughts about Christ's faithfulness; faithfulness because of which Christ, and Christ-people, will experience resurrection life. This approach to 1.3-4's relation to 1.16-17 possibly clarifies more precisely how Paul appropriates and re-contextualizes the creedal formula in relation to the rest of Romans. In 1.1-5 Paul introduces and defines the content of the gospel in terms of the modified creed's two phases of Christ's existence. In 1.16-17 he unpacks that

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- 14. My overall argument need not oppose, for example, interpreting 1.3-4 as a condensed reference to the Son of God as the Messiah of the Jews with respect to his human existence and as the Lord of the Gentiles with respect to his resurrection (e.g., Dunn 1988: 14, 23-24). I simply do not highlight matters this way in my reading of 1.3-4.
  - 15. E.g., Rom. 6.7; Phil. 2.6-11. For attempts to tease out Paul's underlying views of Christ along these lines: Stowers 1994: 213-26; Hays 2002 [1983]: 73-229; Kirk 2008: 39-44, 111-23 (Rom. 6.7); Campbell 2009: 640-48.
  - 16. The bibliography here is massive and I simply reference a few, not all subjective genitive-friendly treatments: Tannehill 1967; Stowers 1994: 194-329; 2008; Dunn 1997 [1975]: 308-42; 1998: 390-441, 461-98.
  - 17. See Dunn 1988: 3-5, 11-16 and Jewett 2007: 96-116 for bibliography and overviews of scholarship on the 'creed' in Rom. 1.3b-4. Whether or not Paul adapted a known creed and/or some 'traditional' language, I obviously take him really to mean what he writes there; it is fully part of Romans (Stowers 1994: 216; Whitsett 2000: 661-64).
  - 18. Du Toit 1989: 201-06; Jervis 1991: 42-52, 85, 158; Jewett 1995; 2007: 104-16; Byrskog 1997: 29, 37, 40-43.
  - 19. See Jewett 1995, 2007: 104-16 for a discussion emphasizing that Paul reworked the creed to fit his purposes.

content in discourse presumably even more tailored to the specific arguments and purposes he desires to pursue in Romans.<sup>20</sup> To adapt Kirk's comments, 'the "thesis" Paul takes up in 1.16-17 is none other than' a δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ and πίστις (Χριστοῦ) modulated version of 'the "topic enumerated" in the expansion of the letter opening' (2008: 49).<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Though I agree with Watson about the mutually interpreting relationship between Rom. 1.16-17a and Paul's use of Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17b (2004: 50-53), I disagree that this decisive preceding context (1.16-17a) militates against a Christological reading (2004: 52). The cumulative effect of my series of points is that 1.1-5 contextually prepares the reader to interpret both what 1.16-17 says about the gospel and how it uses the written text of a prophet within a web of Christological associations that Paul programmatically highlights in 1.1-5, part of the letter's expanded opening. As such, 1.1-5 provides a contextual signal for interpreting ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται in 1.17 Christologically. This does not settle the debate, since that involves other related issues: what ἐκ πίστεως modifies in 1.17b, broader views on the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate, Paul's use of Hab. 2.4 in Gal. 3.11, uses of (ὁ) δίκαιος in contemporary literature, whether Paul uses δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ to designate the same thing as δικαιοσύνη/δικαιόω for Christ-people, text-critical issues relating to Hab. 2.4, and numerous other specific exegetical decisions about Rom. 1.16-17. My argument does, however, address a primary perceived weakness of the Christological interpretation of Hab. 2.4 in Rom. 1.17. It also introduces a consideration with probable analytical value when it comes to weighing exegetical options for the related issues in this debate.

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20. This does not deny that Paul wrote the immediate antecedent of Rom. 1.17b under the discursive influence of Hab. 2.4 and even derived certain specific phraseology from there, ἐκ πίστεως for example (Campbell 1992: 99-103; 1994; Watson 2004: 43-53; 2009: 148-55).
21. Both Heliso (2007: 75-83) and Campbell (2009: 702-704) suggest δύναμις θεοῦ is the subject of ἔστιν in Rom. 1.16 and, furthermore, connect their respective interpretations of its significance there with 1.2-4. Heliso (2007: 80-83) contends that δύναμις θεοῦ is a 'linguistic image for Christ' and links it with ἐν δυνάμει (as power Christ now has) in 1.4. Bracketing the proposal about δύναμις θεοῦ as the subject of ἔστιν, Campbell thus advances another correspondence between 1.2-4 and 1.16-17, while Heliso goes further and proposes a reference to Christ in the clauses immediately preceding Rom 1.17b. If correct, this would address Watson's context critique of the Christological interpretation (2004: 52). I am not, however, convinced by Campbell's and Heliso's arguments, though I find them intriguing.

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