[*JGRChJ* 9 (2013) 213-220]

The Interpretation of μέτρον πίστεως in Romans 12.3—A Rejoinder to Porter and Ong*

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In the fall 2012 issue of the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, I authored an article on the interpretation of the puzzling phrase μέτρον πίστεως in Rom. 12.3.[1] It was my contention that the phrase should be interpreted 'measure of a trusteeship' and thus refers to the believer's charism (by which I mean χάρισμα, 'gift') in Rom. 12.6. Like most scholars, I was hopeful that my article would be interacted with closely. I am therefore grateful to Stanley Porter and Hughson Ong for having recently published a response to it in this journal.[2] Porter and Ong maintain that the 'old' interpretation of μέτρον πίστεως I seek to resuscitate 'poses some significant problems that can be neither resolved nor sustained by the arguments and evidence [Goodrich] marshals' (p. 97). Although I disagree with their assessment, Porter and Ong raise several issues deserving of attention and I appreciate the opportunity to respond to them here.

It is appropriate to begin, however, by noting that Porter and Ong present an almost entirely negative argument. They seek to discredit my view, yet inadequately explain their own. In fact, while they provide a brief summary of Rom. 12.1-21 in their conclusion, it is unclear to me what interpretation of μέτρον πίστεως they adopt and with which other scholars they agree. It is not enough simply to translate the phrase and reiterate what Paul himself says in Romans 12, as they do in their closing paragraph, for the phrase can be taken in several interpretive directions. They must better explain *what* a 'measure of faith' is, *how* it regulates

* I wish to thank Orrey McFarland for his helpful comments on this article.

1. John K. Goodrich, '"Standard of Faith" or "Measure of a Trusteeship"? A Study in Romans 12:3', *CBQ* 74 (2012), pp. 753-72.

2. Stanley E. Porter and Hughson T. Ong, '"Standard of Faith" or "Measure of a Trusteeship"? A Study in Romans 12.3—A Response', *JGRChJ* 9 (2013), pp. 97-103. Page references to this article appear within the text.

one's self-estimation, and *how* and *why* the exercise of gifts and proper behavior are 'grounded firmly upon' it (p. 103). They also seem to have quite strong views on several related issues, including the use and meaning of χάρισμα, the primary topic of Rom. 12.3-8, the letter's occasion and its 'major theme'—'exhorting the Romans to behave properly based upon [Paul's] own life experiences and observations' (p. 103). However, while their opinions on these matters significantly factor into their critique of my case, Porter and Ong hardly disclose, much less develop and defend, their views on them. Nevertheless, it is the content of their various claims with which I take primary issue and to which I respond below.

Responding to Methodological Claims

The first part of my response concerns Porter and Ong's methodological claims about the priority of Romans 1–11 and 12.1-2 in the determination of the meaning of μέτρον πίστεως. They assert, '[T]he meaning of πίστις here should be strictly constrained by the theological context of Paul's discussion up to this point in his letter to the Romans' (p. 102). They explain how Romans 1–11 focuses on God's redemptive work and then suggest that the parallel phrases διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ (12.1) and διὰ τῆς χάριτος τῆς δοθείσης μοι (12.3) 'should indicate that the meaning of πίστις is governed by and related to God's gracious gift' (p. 100). Regarding my argument, however, they protest that '[Goodrich] limits his investigation to Rom. 12.3-8, 16 and thus ignores the theological context Paul discusses in 1.18–8.39 and chs. 9–11, the critical transitional text at 12.1-2, and the intervening text in 12.9-15, which probably belongs to the entire unit of 12.9-20' (p. 99).

A number of thoughts can be offered in return. To begin, while I concede that it might have been beneficial for me to explain how Romans 1–11 grounds Romans 12, I had no space in my already lengthy article to provide an exposition of those initial eleven (!) chapters, or even of 12.9-21—which my critics hardly refer to themselves, suggesting that these verses are not as significant for the exegesis of 12.3 as they insist. Nonetheless, I never deny that Romans 12 is theologically linked to Romans 1–11, or that 12.3-8 logically follows on 12.1-2. Indeed, I state explicitly that Paul's discussion of the renewed mind in 12.2 leads into 12.3, while also noting the thematic congruity of 12.3 with much of the rest of the chapter.[3]

3. Goodrich, 'Standard of Faith', pp. 769-70.

What is not clear to me is that the theological context of Romans 1–11 and the notion of God's gracious gift to Paul at the beginning of 12.3 must 'govern' the meaning of πίστις at the end of that verse. πίστις takes on a variety of meanings in those initial chapters,[4] and, as many scholars notice, the term takes on a still different nuance in Romans 14 (vv. 1, 22-23), a passage no less grounded in God's redemptive work.[5] So, while Paul's ethical discourse in Romans 12–15 is linked to Romans 1–11, it does not follow that the referent and semantic content of πίστις, or of most of the other terms in Romans 12, must be derived directly from the earlier portions of the letter. This is apparent in 12.4-5, where Paul for the first time in the epistle refers to the church as a σῶμα ('a unified group of people, *body*', BDAG), a term used with numerous other meanings and referents not only throughout Romans 1–11, but also in 12.1. Surely those earlier occurrences of σῶμα should not determine the meaning and referent of these later usages. In the same way, the meaning of πίστις in 12.3 should not be 'strictly constrained' by the content of Romans 1–11 and 12.1-2 just because 'Paul's ethical exhortation concerning right behavior is grounded in his theological position regarding the work of Christ' (pp. 99-100).[6]

What should be clear, then, is that authors are free to use terms in a variety of ways. To force a word to mean only what it has already meant in an earlier portion of the same document is senseless, for it would prohibit any semantic variation. I am by no means denying the importance of context in the determination of a word's meaning. I am only suggesting that larger contextual spheres have their limitations. As Moisés Silva remarks, 'What must of course be avoided is the ignoring or violating of the smaller circles of context through excessive concern for the larger ones'.[7] In fact, this was the point I sought to establish by studying Paul's other uses of μέτρον, μερίζω, and ἑκάστῳ (ὡς). Although I could have been clearer as to my intentions, I was not insisting that Paul's other uses of μερίζω and ἑκάστῳ on their own determine his meaning of μέτρον πίστεως, as my respondents suppose (p. 101). Rather I was seeking to establish the immediate context of the passage by exploring how Paul uses

4. John J. O'Rourke, '*Pistis* in Romans', *CBQ* 34 (1973), pp. 188-94.

5. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 836.

6. Cited by Porter and Ong from Stanley E. Porter, *Romans* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, forthcoming), *in loc*.

7. Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rev. ed., 1994), p. 159.

μερίζω and ἑκάστῳ elsewhere.[8] Porter and Ong rightly note that μερίζω and ἑκάστῳ 'in and of themselves have little or no meaning without a linguistic and literary context' (p. 101). But the same is true of the phrase μέτρον πίστεως, which is why one should not ignore its adjacent terms and how Paul characteristically uses them. Because Rom. 12.4-8 explicitly concerns ecclesial roles and functions, it is plausible that Paul already had those concepts in mind by the end of v. 3 where he employs several other terms he often uses in contexts involving ecclesial roles and functions.

Thus, while Romans 1–11 should be taken into consideration in the study of 12.3, as should 12.1-2, it is the context of 12.3-8 as a literary unit, including the two uses of πίστις therein, that is most important to consider in the interpretation of our phrase. And within that context, one must adequately explain the logical progression from v. 3 to vv. 4-8 (note the γάρ in v. 4), though this is basically ignored by my respondents. Instead, they focus on the mention of grace at the beginning of v. 3, which they believe grounds the verse in God's redemptive work. But there Paul specifically refers to the grace given to *him* (μοι), not his audience. Moreover, that this reference to grace points specifically to Paul's salvation is questionable, since χάρις (+ δίδωμι) here and at certain other places in Romans seems to refer to Paul's specific gift of ministry or apostleship (1.5; 15.15-16; cf. 12.6).[9] Porter and Ong also suggest that '[t]he phrase κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως at 12.6, though nearby, may not necessarily be related to the μέτρον πίστεως at 12.3 at all' (p. 100).[10] 'One reason', they suggest, 'is that v. 6 commences with the first δέ in ch. 12, which may signal a shift of topic, especially after Paul's explication of the importance of unity using the human body metaphor' (p. 100). But this is actually the *third* occurrence of δέ in the chapter, the conjunction also appearing once in each of the previous two verses (vv. 4-5), where it does not serve a strong contrastive or topic-changing function. In fact, Kenneth Berding has, in my opinion, argued convincingly that vv. 4-8 comprise a single sentence and vv. 3-8 a thematically-unified paragraph.[11]

8. I say so most explicitly in Goodrich, 'Standard of Faith', pp. 768-69, 771-72.

9. See, e.g., Seyoon Kim, '"The grace that was given to me…": Paul and the Grace of Apostleship', in G. Maier (ed.), *Die Hoffnung festhalten: Festgabe für Walter Tlach zum 65. Geburtstag* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1978), pp. 50-59.

10. It is unclear to me how Porter and Ong interpret πίστις in v. 6 and its relationship to προφητεία, so I can hardly assess their reading.

11. Kenneth Berding, 'Romans 12.4–8: One Sentence or Two?', *NTS* 52 (2006), pp. 433-39 (esp. 437).

Moreover, as a number of commentators have noted, 'The word ἀναλογία is virtually synonymous with the word "measure"' in v. 3.[12]

There seem to be compelling reasons, then, for considering μέτρον πίστεως as semantically close to the phrase τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως in v. 6 and conceptually related to Paul's discussion of πράξεις and χαρίσματα in vv. 4-8. In order to provide additional theological basis for the believer's sober thinking, Paul explains that God has allocated a discreet measure of trusteeship to each believer (ἑκάστῳ ὡς ὁ θεὸς ἐμέρισεν μέτρον πίστεως, v. 3). For while the church consists of many members (vv. 4a, 5a) who do not all share the same function (πρᾶξις, v. 4b), they as a unified body are individually members of one another (v. 5b) and have differing gifts according to God's grace (ἔχοντες δὲ χαρίσματα κατὰ τὴν χάριν τὴν δοθεῖσαν ἡμῖν διάφορα, v. 6a), such that each gift of prophecy is in proportion to one's (prophetic) trusteeship (εἴτε προφητείαν κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως, v. 6b), each gift of service is different with respect to one's service (εἴτε διακονίαν ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ), each teacher is different with respect to one's teaching (εἴτε ὁ διδάσκων ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ, v. 7), and so on.[13] The entire passage seems to hold together quite tightly with this interpretation of πίστις in vv. 3 and 6. Perhaps other readings are equally coherent. In my opinion, however, this interpretation makes the most sense of the immediate context while also accounting for the semantic range of πίστις.

Addressing Evidentiary Omissions

The second part of my response addresses as well as redresses some of my alleged failures to provide evidence. On several occasions at the end of their critique Porter and Ong protest that I do not support certain assumptions and claims. However, in those instances the evidence they demand is either inaccessible or so widely assumed as to render unnecessary its inclusion in my original study.

For instance, while Porter and Ong make no objections to my case for the non-Christian use of πίστις as 'trusteeship' or for the availability of this meaning of the term to Paul, they claim that 'one has to adequately

12. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), p. 656. Cf. Moo, *Romans*, pp. 765-66.

13. I understand each of the ἐν + noun phrases in vv. 7-8 as equivalent to the dative of respect.

show…why Paul would have used πίστις in Rom. 12.3 instead of οἰκονόμια' (p. 102), a more familiar near-synonym. This is a curious demand, for it goes well beyond the exegetical task. My respondents themselves explain that 'the choice of particular words or phrases is dictated by the concept in the author's mind and the subject matter he wishes to talk about' (p. 101). Accordingly, they are expecting me to explain why this concept entered into Paul's mind to begin with, and why others did not. This seems excessive, for any proposal will undoubtedly be quite speculative. The best anybody can do is to explain how the term that is actually chosen functions within its context. Still, in my article I do hypothesize that Paul used πίστις in Rom. 12.3 for the sake of maintaining terminological continuity in the epistle, as he does in 14.1 and 14.22-23.[14] I should also add that a term such as οἰκονόμια carries its own unique connotations, including (in certain contexts) notions of hierarchy and servility.[15] Perhaps Paul employed πίστις rather than οἰκονόμια to safeguard his audience from making unwanted inferences. All of this is conjecture of course, but I am afraid it is impossible to offer an explanation beyond that. However, allow me to turn the question on my critics: Why did Paul employ μερίζω and μέτρον if he were seeking to establish humility through the giving of personal faith? These are administrative terms that Paul nowhere else uses in relation to that topic. In fact, even though Paul elsewhere stresses the ecumenical ramifications of justification by faith (cf. Rom. 3.27-30), the notion that God is the source of such faith, as the conventional reading of Rom. 12.3 would imply, is quite rare in the rest of Paul's letters (e.g. Phil. 1.29).

Porter and Ong's final critique focuses on the main theme of Rom. 12.3-8 and the occasion of the letter. Responding to a suggestion near the end of my article that 12.3-8 primarily concerns ecclesial unity, they complain, 'Goodrich still needs to show that Paul was actually dealing with a disintegrating community in Rome' (p. 103)—an assumption that they apparently reject. Aside from the fact that such a case would have added significantly to the article's length, the belief that ecclesial divisions existed in Rome, especially among law-observant and non-law-observant believers, seems at present to be the dominant scholarly opinion.[16] Richard Longenecker is representative of many when he

14. Goodrich, 'Standard of Faith', p. 771.

15. John K. Goodrich, *Paul as an Administrator of God in 1 Corinthians* (SNTSMS, 152; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 71-102.

16. So says John M.G. Barclay, '"Do we undermine the Law?": A Study of

suggests that one of Paul's reasons for writing Romans was

> to counsel regarding a dispute that had arisen among Christians who called themselves 'the strong' and other Christians who were designated 'the weak', either within or between various house churches at Rome, as he does in 14:1–15:13 (and seems to recall in the further admonitions given in 16:17-20a).[17]

Of course whether Rom. 14.1–15.13 represents live issues in the church or is simply a rewritten version of 1 Corinthians 8–10 has been a matter of some debate. Nonetheless, there appear to be good reasons for believing that Romans 14–15 reflects actual disputes within the Roman church (even if some of the paraenesis is adapted from 1 Corinthians). As John Barclay observes,

> Our passage differs from 1 Corinthians 8–10 not just in omitting certain items specific to Corinth (such as reference to εἰδωλόθυτα) but in adding certain specifics, such as the eating of vegetables (Rom 14.2) and the observance of days (14.5), which limit rather than widen the applicability of the instruction. Moreover, the space which Paul devotes to this theme, his careful description of opposing positions and the prominence of this passage at the end of the paraenesis all suggest its immediate applicability in Rome. The fact that Paul can confidently number himself among 'the strong' (15.1) also indicates that he knows the issues involved. If he can predict his allegiance with one of the two groups in the debate, he must know where they stand: he would hardly donate his authority as a blank cheque cashable by any Pauline group claiming to be 'the strong'.[18]

For these reasons and more, I find it most plausible that Paul was responding to divisions between believers in Rome. In any case, the matter itself is superfluous to the central thesis of my article.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the alleged shortcomings of my interpretation of μέτρον πίστεως are little more than the byproduct of Porter and Ong's mistaken

Romans 14.1–15.6', in his *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (WUNT, 275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 37-59 (38).

17. Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 159. Cf. Karl P. Donfried, (ed.), *The Romans Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, rev. ed., 1991); A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988).

18. Barclay, 'Do we undermine the Law?', p. 38.

methodological and historical assumptions. This article has sought to respond to their criticisms while strengthening my own case. I do not pretend to have finally settled the issue, either here or in my original piece. (In fact, the earlier article does little more than provide lexical and contextual support for an increasingly popular interpretive trajectory).[19] Still, I am grateful to Porter and Ong for challenging me to clarify the basis for my interpretation of this tricky yet significant phrase.

19. For those who share my view or one close to it, see Goodrich, 'Standard of Faith', pp. 754 n. 3, 761-63.