

Faithfulness—A Few Thoughts

By Tim Hegg

Recently I've been re-reading *The Letter Writer*, a book about Paul's background and Torah perspective I wrote in 2002. In the Prologue, I sought to express the importance of understanding "faith" and "faithfulness" from the vantage point of the biblical text itself rather than through the lenses of Greek or even Gnostic philosophy that so quickly engulfed the early emerging Church. The unfortunate result of the Greek dualism that became so pervasive in the theology of the early Church is that it viewed faith as an inward, mental exercise and divorced it from the outward expression of faithfulness. Once this concept was well entrenched in the theology and teaching of Christianity, statements of Paul such as "For by grace we have been saved through faith..." (Eph 2:8) were understood to mean that one's salvation resulted from one's mental or intellectual agreement with the truth. Acceptance of "the creed" became the litmus test of who was "saved" and who was not. In the Prologue to *The Letter Writer*, I sought to show that for the biblical authors, and for Yeshua Himself, faith and faithfulness were two sides of a single coin that could never be separated. The fact that both the Tanach as well as the Apostolic Scriptures represent the concepts of "to believe, have faith, or be faithful" all by the same word groups makes this fact eminently clear. The consistent message of the Scriptures is that genuine faith always results in faithfulness, and faithfulness is the fruit of genuine faith.

Faithfulness in the Tanach

As I have been contemplating this relationship between faith and faithfulness, I asked myself a simple question: how is faithfulness to be measured? Or to put it another way, by what criteria does *God* measure faithfulness? This led me to retrace some of my former studies and to take a second look at the key terms that represent "faithful" or "faithfulness" in the Scriptures. These key terms are primarily the Hebrew word for faithfulness, אֱמוּנָה (*'emunah*) and its Greek counterpart, πιστός (*pistos*). Even a cursory look at how these two terms are used offered some important insights.

'Emunah is found 49 times in the Tanach. Its first appearance is in Ex 17:12, describing the hands of Moses. The story is well known. The Israelites were fighting Amalek, with Moses watching from a hill. As long as Moses' hands were raised, Israel prevailed. When Moses became tired and lowered his arms, Amalek prevailed. So Aaron and Hur stationed themselves on either side of Moses to hold up his weary arms. As a result, his arms remained "faithful" (our English translations use a word like "steady") until sunset. This gives us a picture-definition of the word *'emunah*—it has the sense of remaining steadfast, not turning from what is right or good.

What is also informative is the way in which *'emunah* is often paired with other terms in poetic parallelism. For instance, in Deut 32:4, our word describes the character of God Himself:

The Rock! His work is perfect,
For all His ways are just;
A God of faithfulness and without injustice,
Righteous and upright is He.

Note that this verse is made up of two pairs of parallel lines. The second pair contains our word *'emunah*, and the parallel terms help give us further insight into its meaning. As an attribute of God, His faithfulness is marked by justice, righteousness, and uprightness. More specifically, the parallel to faithfulness in the second line of the pair is "righteous" (*tzadiq*). This reminds us of Gen 15:6, where Abraham *believed* (the verbal form of *'emunah*) and it was reckoned to him for *righteousness* (*tzedaqah*).

Likewise, in Hab 2:4, a text that became a focal point for Paul (cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11), we see that “the righteous one (*tzadiq*) will live on the basis of his faith[fulness] (*'emunah*).”

Note as well Ps 40:10

I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart;
I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation;
I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation.

and Ps 143:1

Hear my prayer, Adonai,
Give ear to my supplications!
Answer me in Your faithfulness, in Your righteousness!

The same pairing of *'emunah* and *tzedaqah* is found in 1Sam 26:23, this time of people: “Adonai will repay each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness....” We learn from these parallels that from a biblical perspective, “faithfulness” and “righteousness” go together. To be “faithful” to God means to act righteously. This is the very point that is made in 2Ki 12:15 (cf. 22:7) where no audit of funds was imposed upon those repairing the Temple because they “dealt faithfully,” that is, they were known for being righteous in their work.

Quite often, our word *'emunah* is found together with *chesed*, usually translated “lovingkindness.” Included in the catalog of technical covenant terms, these words when found together regularly signify loyalty to a covenant or treaty. Consider Ps 89, where the Davidic Covenant is in view:

I will sing of the lovingkindness of the Adonai forever;
To all generations I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth. (v. 1)

For I have said, “Lovingkindness will be built up forever;
In the heavens You will establish Your faithfulness.” (v. 2)

My faithfulness and My lovingkindness will be with him,
And in My name his horn will be exalted. (v. 24)

But I will not break off My lovingkindness from him,
Nor deal falsely in My faithfulness. (v. 33)

Where are Your former lovingkindnesses, Adonai,
Which You swore to David in Your faithfulness? (v. 49)

The book of Proverbs offers more examples of how “faithfulness” is equated with righteousness. In 12:17, we read: “He who testifies faithfully speaks truth, but a false witness *speaks* deceit” and 12:22 reiterates the same idea: “Lying lips are an abomination to Adonai, but those who do faithfulness are His delight.” Clearly the ninth commandment (“you shall not bear false witness”) is in view here. Prov 28:20 says “A man of faithfulness abounds in blessings, but one who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.” We should most likely understand “hastens to be rich” to mean gaining wealth through theft, prohibited by the eighth commandment. Thus, in these wisdom sayings, faithfulness and righteousness are bound together, for faithfulness to God is the same as obeying His commandments.

An interesting phenomenon in the study of *'emunah* is that all but one time in the Psalms, the Lxx translates it with the Greek word ἀλήθεια, *aletheia*, “truth” rather than with the Greek word πιστός, *pistos*, “faith/faithfulness” used elsewhere to translate our word. This may reflect that fact that both

'*emunah* “faithful” and אָמֵן, '*emet* “truth” derive from the same Hebrew verb אָמַן, '*aman*, “to be firm, trustworthy, safe.” Thus, since in the Psalms “faithfulness” (whether of God or people) is viewed within the context of covenant, “to be true” to the covenant is what is meant by being “faithful.” Similarly, the Hebrew word *chesed*, “lovingkindness,” a covenant term as well, is often found in tandem with '*emunah* (69x, e.g., Gen 47:29; Ex 34:6; Josh 2:14; Ps 25:10).

Faithfulness in the Apostolic Scriptures

The same categories that describe '*emunah* in the Tanach are found in the Apostolic Scriptures with the Greek word πιστός (*pistos*). *Pistos* describes God as the One Who is faithful, meaning that He acts in righteousness and in accordance with His own word or promise (1Cor 1:9; 10:13; 2Cor 1:18; 1Thess 5:24; 2Thess 3:3; 2Tim 2:13; 1John 1:9). Likewise, Yeshua is described as “the faithful witness” (Rev 1:5), meaning that He speaks the truth and does not engage in deceit.

Like '*emunah*, *pistos* can mean either “faith” or “faithfulness,” being derived from the verb πιστεύω (*pisteuo*) “to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one’s trust, to believe.” Thus, the plural form of *pistos* is used to describe “believers” in Yeshua (e.g., Acts 10:45; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1), not only because they have confessed their faith in Him as God’s Messiah and the Savior of sinners, but because their lives are characterized as “faithful” to what God has declared is righteous. Conversely, ἀπίστος (*apistos*, literally, “without faith,” “unbelief”) is used of those who lack faith in God and in Yeshua His Messiah and whose lives, therefore, are not characterized by righteousness (1Cor 6:6; 7:12-15; 10:27; 14:22-24; 2Cor 4:4; 6:14-15; 1Tim 5:8; Titus 1:15; Rev 21:8).

As would be expected, “faithful” is used to describe those who were fulfilling their spiritual service within the body of Messiah. For example, Timothy is described as Paul’s “faithful son” (1Cor 4:17) and Tychicus is called a “faithful minister or servant” (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7) as is Epaphras (Col 1:7). Onesimus is referred to as “our faithful and beloved brother” (Col 4:9), all of which accords with Paul’s statement in 1Cor 4:2, “...it is required of stewards that one be found faithful.” In a very real sense, all who are believers in Yeshua are “stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1Pet 4:10) and therefore must be “faithful” in the discharge of their calling to “walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8).

Once we have seen that faithfulness and righteousness go hand in hand, it is clear that “faithfulness” is a near synonym for “obedience.” What God has declared to be righteous, we accept as righteous and seek to live in accordance with this righteousness. Even as God’s faithfulness is seen in His righteous actions, so our faithfulness is seen as we live righteously. The repeated command “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8; 1Pet 1:16) reinforces the idea that “faithfulness” to God is wrapped up in doing what He commands—that which pleases Him.

But what is the standard of God’s righteousness? Surely He is Himself the standard of righteousness, for all that God does is righteous (Deut 32:4; Ps 145:17; Rev 15:3). But how has He revealed His righteousness to us? He made His righteous ways known to us first in His Torah:

Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole Torah which I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:8)

It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before Adonai our God, just as He commanded us. (Deut 6:25)

Now with this in mind, we can better understand why Yeshua considers even the “smallest stroke” of the Torah to be important (Matt 5:17–20), for it is in “this *whole* Torah” and by observing “*all* this commandment” that God’s righteousness is revealed. Our desire, then, is to do all that would please Him, even in regard to what some might consider the “smallest stroke.” And it is for this reason that Yeshua

instructed His disciples, as they went to make more disciples among the Gentile nations, that they should teach them “to observe [lit. “to keep”] *all* that I commanded you” (Matt 28:20). True disciples of Yeshua are those who are seen to be faithful to God, that is, who obey His commandments.

Ultimately, He has revealed His righteousness in His Son, Yeshua. Thus, Yeshua perfectly reveals the Father, for He is the “radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb 1:3). If the Torah given to Moses at Sinai is the revelation of God’s righteous standards, then the Living Torah, Yeshua, is the full and complete revelation. “. . .if you knew Me, you would know My Father also” (John 8:19); “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him” (John 14:7). To walk in the footsteps of the Messiah is therefore to live in accordance with God’s righteous standards. Faithfulness to the Father is faithfulness to the Son, and *visa versa*. Thus when Yeshua said “If you love Me, you will keep *My* commandments” (John 14:15), He was not suggesting that His commandments were in conflict with those of the Father but were in perfect harmony with them. Being one with the Father, His commandments were consistent with and even a reiteration of the commandments given by His Father. Indeed, Yeshua equates His words with those of the Torah, for just as the Psalmist declares of the Torah: “Forever, Adonai, Your word is settled in heaven,” (Ps 119:89), so Yeshua states “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (Matt 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). Given these clear parallels, it is obvious that if faithfulness to God includes obeying His commandments, then it equally involves walking in the footsteps of Yeshua, for Yeshua embodies the quintessential pattern of obedience to the Father. Faithfulness to the Father means becoming more and more like Yeshua. And as we are conformed to the image of the Son, we may anticipate hearing those most sought-after words: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21, 23).