# The Meaning of Faith in the Christian Bible

*A Historical, Lexical, and Theological Study Across the Hebrew Bible, the Greek New Testament, the Ante-Nicene and Nicene Fathers, and the Catholic and Protestant Traditions*

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# Abstract

This paper traces the meaning of "faith" through the two Testaments of the Christian Bible and across the major stages of Christian reception. It begins with the Hebrew root *ʾāman* and its cognates (*ʾĕmûnâ*, *ʾĕmet*) in the Masoretic Text, tracks how the Septuagint renders these terms with *pistis* and its cognates, and examines Second-Temple Greek and New Testament usage in light of recent scholarship on the Graeco-Roman *pistis / fides* word-field, most notably the work of Teresa Morgan (Oxford). It then follows the term through the Ante-Nicene Fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen), the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers (Athanasius, the Cappadocians, John Chrysostom, Augustine), and medieval scholasticism (chiefly Thomas Aquinas). It reviews the Reformation reformulation (Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin), the counter-formulation of the Council of Trent, and the trajectories of Vatican I, Vatican II, and the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. It surveys how Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Anglican, Baptist, Wesleyan/Methodist, and Pentecostal traditions have inflected the term. Finally, it evaluates the popular contrast between "trust" and "blind belief," arguing—on the basis of the lexical, historical, and theological data—that the biblical concept is best translated as covenantal, evidenced trust that issues in loyalty, and that the "blind faith" definition popularized by the New Atheists is not attested in either the Hebrew or Greek biblical text.

## 1. Introduction: Why the Word "Faith" Needs Careful Handling

Few theological words in English are as heavily freighted, or as widely misunderstood, as the word *faith*. In colloquial modern usage, "faith" is often taken to mean belief without evidence, or belief held in the face of evidence to the contrary. Richard Dawkins, in *The God Delusion*, defines it as "persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence," and elsewhere as "belief that isn't based on evidence" (Dawkins 2006, 5, 28). Sam Harris, in *The End of Faith*, likewise treats "faith" as the acceptance of religious claims on the strength of no reason at all (Harris 2004). This popular usage, which has become a rhetorical commonplace, would have been unrecognizable to the writers of the Hebrew Bible, to the authors of the Greek New Testament, to the Ante-Nicene and Nicene Fathers, and to the theologians of the Middle Ages and the Reformation.

The purpose of this paper is to recover, as far as the primary sources allow, what the Christian Bible actually means by "faith," and to trace how the biblical vocabulary has been received and inflected in the great periods of Christian theology. The method is philological before it is theological: the paper begins with the Hebrew root *ʾ-m-n* in the Masoretic Text (MT) and tracks how the Septuagint (LXX) translators, working in the third and second centuries BCE, chose to render its various forms in Greek. It then reads the Greek New Testament (as reconstructed in the NA28/UBS5 critical text) in light of both its Septuagintal heritage and its wider Graeco-Roman lexical environment.

The paper then follows the term through the Ante-Nicene and Nicene periods, showing how the Fathers understood *pistis / fides* both as personal trust and as the content of the apostolic teaching (the *regula fidei*). It examines the medieval synthesis in Aquinas, the Reformation reformulation, the Tridentine response, and the trajectory culminating in the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. It surveys denominational inflections in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and the major Protestant families. It concludes with an assessment of the modern "trust vs. blind belief" debate.

# 2. Faith in the Hebrew Bible: The Root ʾ-m-n and Its Cognates

## 2.1 The Root and Its Lexical Range

The primary Hebrew word-field for what English translations render as "faith" is built on the triliteral root אמן *(ʾ-m-n)*. According to the standard Hebrew lexicons, the root's core meaning is "to be firm, steady, trustworthy" (Klein 1987; Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1906, s.v. ʾāman; Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT, s.v. ʾmn). From this root come a family of related words:

● ***ʾāman*** (אָמַן, verb, Qal): "to nurse, support, foster, carry" — used, for instance, of Naomi carrying the child Obed in Ruth 4:16 (Klein 1987; Balashon 2024).

● ***heʾĕmîn*** (הֶאֱמִין, verb, Hiphil): "to trust, believe, hold firm to." This is the form used of Abram in Genesis 15:6 — *wehe'ĕmin ba-YHWH*, "and he trusted / put his firm confidence in the LORD" (BDB, s.v. ʾāman; TDOT 1:292–323, s.v. ʾmn).

● ***neʾĕmān*** (נֶאֱמָן, Niphal participle): "faithful, reliable, trustworthy" — as in Moses being "faithful in all my house" (Num. 12:7).

● ***ʾĕmûnâ*** (אֱמוּנָה, feminine noun): "firmness, steadiness, faithfulness, fidelity." According to *The New American Standard Bible* concordance, the term is rendered "faith" only once, "faithful" three times, "faithfully" eight times, "faithfulness" twenty-five times, "honesty" once, "responsibility" once, "stability" once, "steady" once, "trust" twice, and "truth" five times (Strong 1890; NAS Exhaustive Concordance).

● ***ʾĕmet*** (אֱמֶת, "truth, reliability, faithfulness"): probably contracted from an underlying *ʾamint* (Klein 1987).

● ***ʾāmēn*** (אָמֵן, the liturgical "Amen"): from the same root, meaning "surely, it is firm, so let it be" (BDB, s.v. ʾāmēn).

The pattern that emerges is that the Hebrew concept clustered around this root does not primarily denote a mental state of assent to a proposition. It denotes *firmness* — the objective steadiness of a person, object, or covenant relationship — and, derivatively, the human recognition of and reliance upon such firmness. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, in a widely cited Hebrew essay tracked by lexicographer David Curwin, describes the semantic development as moving "from firmness, steadfastness to faithfulness, faith, fidelity, confidence to belief, dogma, religion" (Bin-Nun, cited in Balashon 2024).

## 2.2 Genesis 15:6 — Abraham the Paradigm

The single most consequential occurrence of the root in the Hebrew Bible is Genesis 15:6: *wehe'ĕmin ba-YHWH wayyaḥšəbêhâ lô ṣəḏāqâ*. The NIV translates: "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." The verb is *heʾĕmîn* (Hiphil of *ʾāman*), and the LXX renders it *episteusen* — "he trusted / had faith in / relied upon" — using a verb from the *pistis* family. This verse is quoted three times in the New

Testament (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23), where it becomes the paradigmatic example of what Paul and James both take to be biblical faith.

Two observations from the Hebrew text are important. First, the object of Abraham's *heʾĕmîn* is a person (YHWH), not a proposition. The preposition *bĕ-* ("in / with respect to") indicates the direction of trust. Second, the immediate literary context is a divine promise that Abraham cannot verify empirically — an heir will come from his own body, and his descendants will be as numerous as the stars — but he has already had prior experience of God's calling and deliverance (Genesis 12, 14). His trust is therefore neither propositional assent nor evidence-free credulity; it is reliance on a person who has already shown himself reliable in prior encounter. This is the philological ground on which the New Testament writers build.

## 2.3 Habakkuk 2:4 — "The Righteous Shall Live by His Faith(fulness)"

The second most consequential occurrence is Habakkuk 2:4b, which the MT reads: *wə-ṣaddîq bĕʾĕmûnātô yiḥyeh* — "but the righteous shall live by his *ʾĕmûnâ*" (BDB, s.v. ʾĕmûnâ; Robertson 1990, 176–180). The Hebrew noun *ʾĕmûnâ* in this context is best rendered "faithfulness" — that is, steady loyalty in the face of the coming Babylonian judgment — as most modern scholars recognize (Robertson 1990; Watts 2005; Andersen 2001).

The Septuagint reads: *ho de dikaios ek pisteōs mou zēsetai* — "but the righteous shall live by my (God's) faithfulness." The LXX translator has read a first-person suffix (*-î*) where the MT has a third-person masculine suffix (*-ô*), yielding a christologically suggestive rendering: it is not the righteous person's own faithfulness but God's faithfulness on which they live. Paul, quoting the verse in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, follows neither the MT nor the LXX exactly but writes *ho dikaios ek pisteōs zēsetai*, without any possessive pronoun. This omission has become one of the most closely studied features of Pauline exegesis and lies at the heart of the *pistis Christou* debate discussed below (Watson 2004; Campbell 2009; Hays 2002).

## 2.4 Other Hebrew Vocabulary for Trust

The *ʾ-m-n* root does not stand alone. The Hebrew Bible expresses the closely related idea of trust and reliance with several other terms:

- ***bāṭaḥ*** (בָּטַח, "to trust, feel secure, be confident"): used approximately 120 times, often for trust in YHWH as against trust in horses, chariots, wealth, or foreign powers (Ps. 20:7; Prov. 3:5; Isa. 26:3–4). BDB glosses it "to trust in, be confident, sure" (BDB, s.v. bāṭaḥ).

- ***ḥāsâ*** (חָסָה, "to seek refuge in"): used chiefly in the Psalter for taking shelter under YHWH's protection (Ps. 2:12; 34:8).

● ***qāwâ*** (קָוָה, "to wait expectantly for, hope in"): a term of patient, active reliance on God's coming action (Ps. 27:14; Isa. 40:31).

● ***yāḥal*** (יָחַל, "to wait, hope"): closely related to *qāwâ* (Ps. 130:5).

These verbs are not mere synonyms. They occupy overlapping but distinguishable niches in a covenant vocabulary of relational reliance. What they share, and what they do not share with a modern popular concept of "blind faith," is the presupposition that the God being trusted has already spoken, acted, and identified himself in redemptive history — most fundamentally in the Exodus. Hebrew *ʾĕmûnâ* is thus a response, not a leap in the dark.

# 3. Faith in the Greek New Testament: Pistis and Its Cognates

## 3.1 The Septuagint as Semantic Bridge

The New Testament writers wrote in Koine Greek but thought largely in the categories of the Hebrew Bible mediated through the Septuagint. The LXX translators consistently rendered the Hebrew *ʾ-m-n* family with the Greek *pist-* family: *heʾĕmîn* with *pisteuō*; *ʾĕmûnâ* with *pistis*; *neʾĕmān* with *pistos*. This translational choice is significant: the LXX loaded onto the Greek *pistis* word-field a specifically Hebraic connotation of covenantal firmness and relational reliance that pre-existing Greek usage did not necessarily emphasize (Bultmann 1968; Barr 1961).

## 3.2 Pistis in the Graeco-Roman Environment: Teresa Morgan's Thesis

The most important recent monograph on the Greek and Latin terms is Teresa Morgan's *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Morgan, then Professor of Graeco-Roman History at Oxford, brings the tools of ancient history, sociology, and philology to bear on how *pistis / fides* was actually used in the first-century Mediterranean world. Her central thesis is that early Christian *pistis* is far closer to its ancient Graeco-Roman social meaning than to modern Christian (Protestant or fideistic) constructions of "faith" (Morgan 2015; reviewed in Kok 2016; Ramelli 2017; Downs 2017).

For Morgan, *pistis / fides* in Graeco-Roman usage is fundamentally *relational* and *social*. It denotes the trust, trustworthiness, and loyalty that binds persons in relationships — patron and client, ruler and subject, friend and friend, lender and borrower, worshiper and god. It is almost never merely propositional ("belief-that") but overwhelmingly personal and dispositional ("trust-in"). Because trust is a two-way social bond, *pistis* can mean, in different contexts, either the trust one places in another, the trustworthiness the other displays, or the pledge / guarantee / evidence that undergirds the relationship. Bryn Mawr Classical Review calls Morgan's work "one of the best researched and most illuminating" studies on the topic (Downs 2017).

This lexical framework decisively shapes how we should read the New Testament. When the Gospel writers say a supplicant was healed "by your *pistis*" (Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50), or when Paul writes that we are justified *ek pisteōs* ("out of / on the basis of pistis," Rom. 3:28; 5:1; Gal. 2:16), the word is doing relational work, not primarily propositional work. It denotes a stance of trust and covenantal alignment toward Christ and toward the God of Israel, and it presupposes that Christ and God are themselves *pistoi* — trustworthy — in a way that grounds and makes possible the reciprocal trust of the disciple.

## 3.3 The Pistis Christou Debate

One of the most consequential exegetical debates of the last forty years concerns Paul's repeated phrase *pistis (Iēsou) Christou* (most notably Rom. 3:22; Gal. 2:16, 20; 3:22; Phil. 3:9). Traditional Protestant translations render it as an objective genitive: "faith in Jesus Christ" (i.e., the believer's faith directed

toward Christ). A rising minority reads it as a subjective genitive: "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ" (i.e., Christ's own covenant faithfulness on which the believer's justification is grounded). A third position, sometimes called the "Christ-faith" reading, holds that the phrase is a shorthand for the whole event of Christ's faithfulness eliciting the believer's reciprocal trust (Easter 2010; McFadden 2023; Bird and Sprinkle 2009).

The modern subjective-genitive reading was first defended by Johannes Haussleiter in 1891 and revived by Richard B. Hays in his 1983 dissertation *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Hays 2002). It has been developed further by Douglas Campbell (*The Deliverance of God*, 2009), Morna Hooker, and, most recently, Matthew Bates (*Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 2017), who argues that *pistis* in some Pauline contexts is better translated "allegiance." The objective-genitive reading continues to be defended by, e.g., R. Barry Matlock, James D. G. Dunn, and Francis Watson. Kevin McFadden (*Reformed Theological Review* 82, 2023) surveys recent developments and offers a mediating "third view" grounded in Greek linguistics.

What is significant for our purposes is not which reading is finally correct in each verse — the debate remains open — but that the debate is possible at all. It is possible because *pistis* in Paul's Greek can function as either the trust exercised by the believer or the trustworthiness / covenant faithfulness of Christ himself. Both meanings are lexically native to the word. Morgan (2015) argues that in many contexts the phrase carries both connotations simultaneously — a "trust-relationship" is being described in which both parties are *pistoi* to one another. Peter Leithart notes that until the Reformation the Vulgate's *fide Christi* was routinely read as subjective, and that the strongly objective reading is largely a Protestant innovation (Leithart 2011).

## 3.4 Hebrews 11:1 — The Nearest Thing to a Definition

The only passage in the New Testament that reads even superficially like a formal definition of faith is Hebrews 11:1, which in the NA28 Greek reads: *Estin de pistis elpizomenōn hypostasis, pragmatōn elenchos ou blepomenōn*. The NIV renders it: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." The Lutheran *Legacy Standard Bible* (LSB) has: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Two key Greek words carry the weight. *Hypostasis* (ὑπόστασις) literally means "that which stands under" — a substrate, a substructure, a foundation. In Hebrews 1:3 it denotes God's objective being ("the exact representation of his *hypostasis*"), and in Hebrews 3:14 the subjective confidence with which believers hold on ("we share in Christ if we hold firmly to our original *hypostasis* till the end"). Papyrological evidence, drawn from Egyptian legal documents recovered from the sands of the Fayum, shows that *hypostasis* was also used as a commercial-legal term for "title-deed" — the document that gives evidenced guarantee of ownership (Moulton and Milligan 1930, s.v. ὑπόστασις; Wilson 1947). *Elenchos* (ἔλεγχος) means "proof, evidence, that which brings conviction" — the same word Aristotle uses for the middle term of a demonstrative syllogism (*Rhetoric* 1.2.9).

Hebrews 11:1 therefore describes faith not as belief without evidence but as the *substructure* that undergirds hope and the *proof-bearing conviction* of realities not yet visible. The USCCB's New American Bible Revised Edition footnote acknowledges this is "not a precise definition" but a description of faith's function; it renders the two words as "realization" and "evidence," respectively (USCCB 2011, note on Heb. 11:1). Whether one takes the terms objectively or subjectively, the semantic field is one of grounded assurance, not credulity. The chapter that follows, "the roll call of faith," makes this concrete: each named figure — Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab — acted on divine speech and prior divine action, not on unsupported speculation (Heb. 11:2–40).

## 3.5 Johannine Belief: Pisteuō with Eis

The Johannine literature is notable for its heavy preference for the verb *pisteuō* over the noun *pistis* (John uses the verb 98 times and the noun only once, in 1 John 5:4). John often couples *pisteuō* with the preposition *eis* ("into") — literally, "believing into" Jesus (e.g., John 3:16). This construction, unusual in classical Greek, denotes a directional, relational commitment: entrusting oneself *into* Christ, not merely holding a proposition *about* him (Ueberschaer 2017; Morgan 2015, chap. 10).

John's Gospel is also emphatic that this belief is grounded in evidence. The stated purpose of the Gospel is: "But these are written that you may believe (*pisteuēte*) that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31, NIV). The evidence in view is the seven "signs" narrated in the Gospel — the water into wine (John 2), the healing of the official's son (John 4), the healing of the paralytic (John 5), the feeding of the five thousand (John 6), the walking on water (John 6), the healing of the blind man (John 9), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11), climaxing in the resurrection of Christ himself. Even the famous saying, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29), presupposes the apostolic testimony as the evidence base — Thomas, who did see, is not rebuked for demanding evidence but is contrasted with those whose belief is rooted in the disciples' evidenced witness (McDowell 2017; Lennox 2011).

# 4. The Ante-Nicene Fathers (c. 96–325 CE)

The Ante-Nicene Fathers, the Christian writers of the first three centuries, inherited both the Septuagintal and the New Testament vocabulary. In their hands, *pistis / fides* developed along two parallel tracks. On one track, it retained its personal, relational, trusting character. On the other, under pressure from Gnostic, Marcionite, and Judaizing challengers, it acquired a more objective, content-oriented sense — the *regula fidei*, the "rule of faith," meaning the summary of apostolic teaching that distinguishes the Church's message from its rivals.

## 4.1 The Apostolic Fathers: Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp

Clement of Rome (fl. 96), in *1 Clement* 32.4, echoes Paul directly: "All these [the patriarchs], therefore, were highly honored, and made great, not for their own sake, or for their own works, or for the righteousness which they wrought, but through the operation of his will. And we, too, being called by his will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that *faith* (*pisteōs*) through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men" (trans. Roberts and Donaldson, ANF 1). Here *pistis* is unmistakably trusting reliance on God's prior work — the same shape found in Paul.

Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. 108), writing on his way to martyrdom, treats faith and love as an inseparable pair. In *Ephesians* 14.1 he writes: "The beginning is faith, and the end is love; and the union of the two together is God" (trans. Roberts and Donaldson, ANF 1). For Ignatius, *pistis* is the ground of Christian existence, the flesh of Christ, in and by which believers live (*Trallians* 8.1). His usage is affective, relational, and Christocentric.

## 4.2 Justin Martyr: Faith and Reason

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165), a converted philosopher, is the first Christian writer to work out explicitly the relationship between Christian *pistis* and Greek *logos*. In his *First Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin argues that the Christian gospel is the fulfillment of the divine reason (logos) that had been partially glimpsed by Socrates and Plato. Christian faith, on this view, is not a retreat from reason but its consummation. Justin's account of Christian initiation (*First Apology* 61) requires that catechumens "be persuaded and believe" — a rational, evidence-weighing *peithō* (persuasion) is presupposed as the ground of *pistis* (Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61; ANF 1).

## 4.3 Irenaeus of Lyons: The Regula Fidei

Irenaeus (c. 130–202), bishop of Lyons and pupil of Polycarp (who was a hearer of the apostle John), gives the classic articulation of the Church's "rule of faith." In *Against Heresies* 1.10.1, he sets out the content of the *regula fidei* — the summary confession in one God the Father Almighty, in Christ Jesus his Son, and in the Holy Spirit — and insists that this rule is "the same everywhere" and preserved unchanged in the

churches founded by the apostles. Here *fides* begins to acquire its objective sense: it is not only the disposition of the believer but also the *content* that is believed. Yet Irenaeus never severs the two. Faith, for him, is trusting reception of the apostolic gospel — not a leap in the dark, but an alignment with the historical tradition traceable back to Christ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1; 3.4.1–2; ANF 1; Osborn 2001).

## 4.4 Tertullian: Ratio and Fides

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 155–230), the first great Latin Father, is famous for the aphorism attributed to him: *credo quia absurdum* ("I believe because it is absurd"). This slogan, however, is a later paraphrase; the actual Latin, in *De Carne Christi* 5, is *certum est, quia impossibile* ("it is certain because impossible"), and, in context, is a rhetorical argument that the sheer scandal of a crucified and risen God is precisely what the Christian message is — not something a human being would have invented if he were trying to construct a plausible religion (Sider 1971; Osborn 1997). Elsewhere Tertullian insists on the harmony of *ratio* and *fides*; in *De Paenitentia* 1.2 he writes that everything God has ordained is grounded in reason. Faith, for Tertullian, is reasonable reliance on God's self-revelation, not credulity.

## 4.5 Clement of Alexandria and Origen

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) develops a nuanced account of the relation between *pistis* and *gnōsis* (spiritual knowledge). In *Stromateis* 2.2, he argues that *pistis* is the necessary "first principle" (arche) of knowledge — the starting axiom, comparable to the indemonstrable first principles of geometry, on which all further understanding is built. This is not anti-intellectualism; it is Clement's recognition that all rational inquiry proceeds from prior commitments that themselves cannot be demonstrated (Osborn 2005; Heath 2020). Origen (c. 185–254) continues in a similar vein, treating faith as the entry-point into the deeper contemplation (*theōria*) of divine mysteries (*On First Principles*; Crouzel 1989).

# 5. The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (325 – c. 500)

## 5.1 The Nicene Creed and the Objectification of "the Faith"

The Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381) produced the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which begins *Pisteuomen eis hena Theon* — "We believe in one God." This creedal use of *pisteuō eis* preserves the Johannine directional sense ("we believe *into* one God") but attaches a highly specific doctrinal content: *homoousion tō patri* ("of one substance with the Father"). After Nicaea, "the faith" becomes, more emphatically than before, both the *act* of trusting and the *content* of the confession — a distinction Augustine would formalize (Kelly 1972; Ayres 2004).

## 5.2 Athanasius and the Cappadocians

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373), in *On the Incarnation* 54, articulates the famous formula that grounds later Eastern soteriology: "For the Son of God became man, that we might become god" (trans. Behr 2011). Faith here is trust in the incarnate Word's work, but it is inseparable from the trajectory of participation (*methexis*, *koinōnia*) that culminates in *theōsis* (deification). This participatory framework, developed by Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa (the Cappadocians), makes *pistis* the entry into a life-long process of transformation, not a one-time forensic transaction (Russell 2004).

## 5.3 John Chrysostom and the Antiochene School

John Chrysostom (c. 349–407), the greatest preacher of the Greek East, expounds Pauline *pistis* in his homilies on Romans and Galatians with unmistakable emphasis on faith's trusting, relational character. In *Homily 7 on Romans*, commenting on Rom. 4, he writes that Abraham "concluded, and had a full assurance that God is able to do that which He hath promised" (trans. Morris, NPNF 1.11). Faith is confidence in divine power grounded in divine promise.

## 5.4 Augustine of Hippo: Fides Qua and Fides Quae

Augustine (354–430) is the most consequential single voice on faith between Paul and the Reformation. In *De Trinitate* 13.2.5, he draws the classic distinction that has shaped Western theology ever since: *aliud est fides qua creditur, aliud est fides quae creditur* — "the faith with which one believes (*fides qua*) is one thing; the faith which is believed (*fides quae*) is another." *Fides qua* names the personal act of trusting; *fides quae* names the doctrinal content that is trusted (Augustine, *De Trinitate* 13.2.5; trans. Hill 1996; St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology, "Faith").

This distinction, adopted throughout Western Catholic theology and codified again in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (§150), is neither a Protestant nor a Catholic partisan invention. It simply names the two dimensions that were already at work in the New Testament and the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Augustine also formulated the classic principle *credo ut intelligam* — "I believe in order that I may understand" —

echoing Isaiah 7:9 in the Old Latin form *nisi credideritis, non intelligetis* (Augustine, *Sermo* 43.7.9). Faith is not the antonym of reason; it is the presupposition and orientation of reason (Anselm would later develop this in his *Proslogion*).

## 6. Medieval Synthesis: Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), in the *Summa Theologiae* II-II, questions 1–7, provides the most systematic pre-Reformation account of faith. Building explicitly on Hebrews 11:1, Augustine, and John of Damascus, Aquinas defines faith as "an act of the intellect assenting to divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace" (*ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 9). Three elements are held together: an intellectual dimension (the mind grasps content), a voluntary dimension (the will assents), and an infused dimension (grace enables the act).

Aquinas distinguishes three formal objects of belief (*ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 2): *credere Deo* ("to believe God" — trusting God as the reliable witness), *credere Deum* ("to believe God" as the material object of belief), and *credere in Deum* ("to believe into God" — the relational movement of the soul toward God). Only the third involves the will's reaching out in love, and only this is faith in its fullest, saving sense — what Aquinas calls *fides caritate formata* ("faith formed by love"; *ST* II-II, q. 4, a. 3–4). A merely intellectual assent without love is *fides informis* ("lifeless faith") — the faith James says the demons have (James 2:19; Di Ceglie 2020).

Aquinas thus preserves the Hebraic-Pauline shape: faith is trust that engages intellect, will, and affect together. He preserves the Augustinian *fides qua / fides quae* distinction but insists that the two are inseparable in the concrete act of believing.

# 7. The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation

## 7.1 Martin Luther: Fiducia

Martin Luther (1483–1546) reformulated the doctrine of faith by placing decisive weight on the third of Aquinas's dimensions — *fiducia*, personal trust — and by insisting that faith alone (*sola fide*), apart from any work of the believer, is the instrument by which the righteousness of Christ is received. In the *Large Catechism* (1529), Luther defines faith as follows: "That one's whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. . . . You lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely" (Luther, *Large Catechism* I.13–15; Kolb and Wengert 2000, 388).

For Luther, *fiducia* is not a purely psychological state; it is the God-created reception of the divine promise (*promissio*) attached to Christ. In the preface to Romans (1522), Luther writes that faith "is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God (John 1[:12–13]). It kills the old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, mind, senses, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing" (Luther, "Preface to Romans," LW 35:370–371). This is not "belief without evidence"; it is Spirit-empowered, promise-anchored trust that necessarily issues in a transformed life.

## 7.2 John Calvin: A Firm and Certain Knowledge

John Calvin (1509–1564), in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.2.7, gives what became the classical Reformed definition: "We shall now have a full definition of faith, if we say that it is a firm and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit" (Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.7; trans. Battles 1960). Calvin's definition is striking for its cognitive weight: faith is *firma et certa cognitio* — a firm, certain knowledge — but it is also relational (God's benevolence *toward us*), evidential (grounded on the truth of the promise), and pneumatological (sealed by the Holy Spirit).

Reformed theologians developed Calvin's account into the classic tripartite analysis: *notitia* (knowledge of the content of the gospel), *assensus* (intellectual assent to its truth), and *fiducia* (personal trust in Christ). J. I. Packer summarizes the mainstream Reformed tradition: *notitia* is what one learns from Calvin's *Institutes*, *fiducia* is what one learns from Luther, and both are essential to saving faith (Packer 1992; Ligonier 2020). Absent *fiducia*, James notes, one has only the faith of demons, who "believe — and shudder" (James 2:19; Ferguson 2020).

## 7.3 The Council of Trent (1545–1563)

The Council of Trent, in its sixth session (Decree on Justification, 13 January 1547), responded to Luther by affirming that justification is by grace through faith but rejecting *sola fide* as the Reformers had construed it. Trent held that faith is the "beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification"

(Decree, chap. 8), but insisted that faith must be "formed by love" (*fides caritate formata*, chap. 7) to be justifying, and that the justified person is genuinely and inherently made righteous, not merely accounted righteous by imputation. Canon 9 of Session 6 anathematized anyone who taught "that the impious is justified by faith alone, in such a way as to understand that nothing else is required to cooperate in obtaining the grace of justification" (Trent, Session 6, canon 9; Waterworth 1848; Britannica 2026).

Trent did not, however, teach that Catholics are justified by works apart from grace, and the caricature that it did has been repeatedly corrected by Catholic and Protestant historians alike. What Trent rejected was a particular Lutheran formulation, not the necessity of grace or the priority of faith. The 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, discussed below, confirmed that on the mutual understanding of both parties, the Tridentine anathemas do not apply to the Lutheran teaching as it is now articulated (Lutheran World Federation and Pontifical Council 1999).

# 8. Denominational Trajectories: The Meaning of Faith After the Reformation

## 8.1 Roman Catholicism: Trent, Vatican I, Vatican II

Roman Catholic teaching on faith has developed in three post-Reformation moments. Trent (as above) fixed faith as the beginning, root, and foundation of justification, "formed by love." Vatican I (*Dei Filius*, 1870) defined faith as "a supernatural virtue, whereby, inspired and assisted by the grace of God, we believe those things to be true which He has revealed" (Vatican I, *Dei Filius* 3). Vatican II (*Dei Verbum*, 1965) shifted the accent from propositional revelation to personal revelation, defining faith as "the obedience of faith (*Rom 16:26*) . . . by which man commits his whole self freely to God" (*Dei Verbum* 5). The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§§ 142–184) integrates all three moments and reaffirms the *fides qua / fides quae* distinction.

## 8.2 Eastern Orthodoxy: Faith as Participation

Eastern Orthodox theology has never had the sharp faith/works polarity of the Western Reformation debates. Following Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas, Orthodox theology understands salvation as *theōsis* (deification): the process by which believers, by grace and through the Church's sacramental life, participate in the uncreated energies of God. Faith is the entry into and the ongoing disposition of this participatory life. Kallistos Ware writes that "for Orthodoxy, our salvation and redemption mean our deification" (Ware 1993, 231). Georges Florovsky adds that "God has freely willed a synergistic path of redemption in which man must spiritually participate" (Florovsky, cited in Habets 2020). The Orthodox stress on *synergeia* (cooperation between divine grace and human freedom) means that the question "is salvation by faith or by works?" does not arise in the Western form: faith is trusting participation in Christ, which is inseparable from the ascetical, liturgical, and moral life through which it is expressed.

## 8.3 Lutheranism

Lutheran orthodoxy retains Luther's emphasis on *fiducia* as the heart of saving faith. The *Augsburg Confession* (1530), article 4, teaches justification "freely, on account of Christ, through faith, when we believe that we are received into grace and that our sins are forgiven on account of Christ" (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 39–41). The tripartite structure (*notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*) is affirmed, with the decisive weight resting on *fiducia*. In modern Lutheran theology, faith is understood as the gift by which the Holy Spirit unites the believer to Christ and his benefits (Elert 1962; Bayer 2008).

## 8.4 Reformed / Presbyterian

The Reformed tradition, following Calvin, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Westminster Confession (1647), teaches saving faith as knowledge, assent, and trust, wrought in the elect by the Holy

Spirit through the ministry of the Word. Westminster Confession 14.2 defines it thus: "By this faith a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word . . . acting differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth . . . but the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life" (Westminster Confession 14.2). Reformed theology holds that this faith always issues in good works but that the works are the *fruit*, not the *ground*, of justification (Berkhof 1938; Horton 2011).

## 8.5 Anabaptist and Radical Reformation

Anabaptist traditions (Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and their heirs), articulated in confessions such as the Schleitheim Confession (1527) and the Dordrecht Confession (1632), emphasize faith as covenantal discipleship (*Nachfolge Christi*). Faith is not merely inner trust but visible allegiance to Jesus expressed in believer's baptism, non-swearing of oaths, non-violence, and community of goods. On this reading, faith and obedience are indistinguishable in principle: to trust Christ is to follow him (Weaver 1987; Snyder 1995).

## 8.6 Anglicanism

The Church of England's *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1571), Article 11, follows Reformed and Lutheran language: "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort" (Church of England 1571). Anglican theology, however, has developed a *via media* between Rome and Geneva. Richard Hooker (1554–1600), in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, treats faith as the reasoned reception of divine revelation, ordered toward participation in Christ through Word and sacrament. Later Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical wings within Anglicanism have inflected the term differently, but the Formularies remain the doctrinal norm (McGrath 1998).

## 8.7 Baptist

Baptist theology (from the English General and Particular Baptists of the 17th century through the modern global movement) is defined less by a distinctive doctrine of faith than by a distinctive doctrine of the *subject* of faith. The *Second London Baptist Confession* (1689) largely reproduces the Westminster Confession on faith and justification, but Baptists insist that only those who have themselves personally exercised saving faith are proper subjects of baptism ("believer's baptism"). The individual, evidenced act of faith — expressed in credible profession and baptism — is thus foregrounded (Estep 1963; Weaver 2020).

## 8.8 Wesleyan / Methodist

John Wesley (1703–1791) inherited the tripartite Reformed analysis but added a strong emphasis on *assurance* as an experiential dimension of faith. In his sermon "Justification by Faith," Wesley writes: "Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself; but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for *my* sins, that he loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*" (Wesley, "Justification by Faith," II.5). Wesley's Aldersgate experience (24 May 1738) — "I felt my heart strangely warmed" — became the paradigm case: faith is the Spirit-wrought conviction that Christ has personally saved *me*, accompanied by the witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16) that "we are children of God." Wesleyan theology teaches that this assurance, while not necessary for justification, is a common privilege of believers (Collins 2007; Ayars 2025).

## 8.9 Pentecostal and Charismatic

Pentecostalism (originating in the Azusa Street Revival of 1906) inherits the Wesleyan-Holiness emphasis on experiential assurance and adds a distinctive stress on the ongoing operation of the Holy Spirit's *charismata* — including tongues, prophecy, and healing — as normative expressions of Christian life. Faith, in Pentecostal usage, is often described as active, expectant, and Spirit-empowered trust in God's present willingness to intervene supernaturally. Assemblies of God, Church of God (Cleveland), Foursquare, and Vineyard traditions all articulate faith in this active, expectant register (Anderson 2004; Dayton 1987).

## 8.10 The 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

On 31 October 1999, in Augsburg, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ). It has since been affirmed by the World Methodist Council (2006), the Anglican Communion (2016), and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (2017), so that as of 2017 the bodies representing approximately 75 percent of the world's Christians have formally endorsed it (Wikipedia contributors 2025b; Lutheran World Federation 2019).

The core confession of the JDDJ is: "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works" (JDDJ §15). Both parties acknowledged that the Tridentine anathemas do not apply to the Lutheran teaching as articulated in the Declaration, and that the Lutheran confessional condemnations do not apply to Catholic teaching as articulated in the Declaration (Official Common Statement, 1999). The JDDJ does not eliminate all differences, but it establishes that on the doctrine of justification "by grace through faith" the historic Catholic-Protestant impasse has been substantially overcome (Cassidy 1999; Anderson and Gros 2019).

## 9. Trust vs. Blind Belief: The Modern Controversy

The New Atheist movement — represented most prominently by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens — has popularized a definition of religious faith that is at odds with the entire lexical, theological, and historical tradition surveyed above. Dawkins defines faith in *The God Delusion* as "belief without, or in spite of, evidence" (Dawkins 2006, 232), and elsewhere as "the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence" (Dawkins, "Is Science a Religion?" *The Humanist*, Jan/Feb 1997). Sam Harris opens *The End of Faith* with the assertion that religious faith is "belief without justification" (Harris 2004, 19). Physicist Victor Stenger similarly writes that "faith is belief without supportive evidence" (Stenger 2007).

These definitions cannot be sustained lexically. As shown in sections 2–3, neither Hebrew *ʾĕmûnâ* nor Greek *pistis* means "belief without evidence." Both mean the trust that arises in response to a trustworthy person or covenant — trust that is characteristically grounded in prior experience, testimony, or divine self-revelation. Nor can the definitions be sustained historically. As shown in sections 4–7, no major Christian theologian from Justin Martyr through Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Newman has ever defined faith as "belief without evidence." The universal patristic, medieval, Reformation, and modern definition assumes that faith is grounded — in the divine self-revelation, in the historical acts of God, and (in Christian claim) in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth attested by eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1–4; 1 Cor. 15:3–8; 2 Pet. 1:16).

The critical philosopher of religion Alister McGrath, whose scientific training (D.Phil., Oxford, molecular biophysics) and theological training (D.D., Oxford) qualify him to speak in both fields, responds that Dawkins's definition "bears no relationship to the way that thoughtful and informed Christian believers actually understand or use the term. . . . The classic Christian tradition has always valued rationality, and does not hold that faith involves the complete abandonment of reason or believing in the teeth of the evidence" (McGrath 2005, 84–91; McGrath and McGrath 2007). John Lennox, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Oxford, argues at length that Christian faith is "an evidence-based response to what one has good reason to believe is true" (Lennox 2011, 42–49).

The exchange between Peter Boghossian and Richard Dawkins in October 2013 exposed the difficulty for the New Atheist definition. When Boghossian pressed Dawkins to specify what evidence would in principle persuade him of God's existence, Dawkins replied that even the physical return of Christ in the clouds would more probably be interpretable as a hallucination or a David Copperfield-style illusion, and eventually conceded that he was "starting to think nothing would" persuade him (Dawkins in Boghossian 2013). This is a strikingly interior-fideistic position for a spokesman of evidentialism, and it illustrates the internal instability of the popular contrast between "faith" and "evidence."

The correct contrast is not between "faith" and "evidence." The correct contrast is between (a) trust grounded in evidence, testimony, and prior relational experience — which is the biblical, patristic, and confessional understanding of *pistis / fides* — and (b) credulity, wishful thinking, or fideism, which the

Bible itself repeatedly warns against (Prov. 14:15; 1 Thess. 5:21 "test all things"; 1 John 4:1 "test the spirits"; 1 Pet. 3:15 "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have," NIV).

## 10. Synthesis: What the Christian Bible Means by "Faith"

From the philological and historical evidence surveyed above, the biblical concept of faith can be summarized in six theses:

**1.** Biblical faith is fundamentally **relational and covenantal**. Its Hebrew root (*ʾ-m-n*) and its Greek equivalent (*pist-*) both denote firm, reliable relationship — first the trustworthiness of one party, then the reciprocal trust of the other. The primary paradigm is the covenant faithfulness (*ʾĕmûnâ*) between YHWH and his people; the derivative sense is the trusting response of Abraham (Gen. 15:6) and, in the NT, of the disciples toward Jesus and the Father.

**2.** Biblical faith is **evidenced**, not blind. Abraham trusts God on the basis of God's prior calling and provision. Israel trusts YHWH on the basis of the Exodus. The disciples believe Jesus on the basis of his signs, his teaching, and — after Easter — his resurrection appearances. Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as *hypostasis* and *elenchos* — "underlying substance" and "evidence-bearing conviction" — not as absence of evidence but as its inner apprehension.

**3.** Biblical faith is **personal**, directed at a person (YHWH, Christ) rather than primarily at a proposition. The Johannine construction *pisteuō eis Christon* ("believe into Christ") captures this. Propositional content is essential — one cannot trust a person without believing certain things about him — but the propositions are in service of the personal relation, not the other way around.

**4.** Biblical faith is **active and loyal**. It expresses itself in obedience (Rom. 1:5; 16:26 "the obedience of faith"), in works of love (Gal. 5:6 "faith working through love"), and in a life-long trajectory of following. As Matthew Bates has argued from a New Testament studies perspective, in many contexts *pistis* is best glossed as "allegiance" — not to displace "trust" but to make explicit that biblical trust is loyalty, not sentiment (Bates 2017).

**5.** Biblical faith is **Spirit-enabled**. All the Christian traditions surveyed — Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, Pentecostal — agree that saving faith is not a mere human capacity but a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 2:8). Where they differ is on the modes of grace by which the Spirit works and on the relation of faith to human cooperation (*synergeia*) and to the sacramental life.

**6.** Biblical faith has an **objective content ("the faith")** as well as a **subjective act ("faith")**. This is the ancient *fides quae / fides qua* distinction, already implicit in Paul (Gal. 1:23 "he preaches the faith he once tried to destroy") and Jude (v. 3 "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints"), and formalized by Augustine. The two dimensions cannot be pried apart: the act of trusting is empty without content, and the content is idle without the act.

These six theses are common ground across the biblical, patristic, and confessional heritage. The popular caricature of Christian faith as "belief without evidence" corresponds to no serious theological definition

in the tradition. It is a rhetorical construction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and it dissolves on contact with the primary sources.

## 11. Conclusion

The Christian Bible does not present faith as intellectual capitulation or as an evidence-free leap. It presents faith as *trust in a trustworthy God* — a trust grounded in his self-revelation in creation, in the history of Israel, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the apostolic testimony to his death and resurrection. The Hebrew *ʾĕmûnâ* (from *ʾ-m-n*, "to be firm") names the two-sided steadiness of the covenant. The Greek *pistis* (with its Latin cognate *fides*) carries the same weight into the world of the early Church and the Roman Empire, denoting the trust, trustworthiness, and loyalty that bind persons to God and to one another.

Across two thousand years of Christian reflection — from Justin Martyr to Aquinas, from Luther and Calvin to Vatican II and the 1999 Joint Declaration — the great teachers of the Church have preserved this trinity of dimensions: knowledge (*notitia / fides quae*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia / fides qua*). The differences among the traditions are real — over the relation of faith and works, faith and sacraments, faith and assurance, faith and reason — but they are differences within a shared biblical grammar, not divergences from it.

If the Christian Bible is to be heard on its own terms, faith is neither a rejection of reason nor a substitute for evidence. It is the settled, loyal, evidenced entrustment of the whole self to the God who has shown himself faithful in Jesus Christ.

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