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Faithfulness and Faith in Acts 3:16

Many of the commentaries question the quality of writing in Acts 3:16—even to the point of suggesting that the verse as written in “bad Greek”! For example, D. Bock says, “It is written in very contorted syntax”. I. H. Marshall says, “The Greek construction is obscure and the sentence is repetitious”. On v. 16a, J. A. Fitzmeyer says, “The sentence is not well written . . . a cumbersome passage” and C. K. Barrett says, “the Greek of this verse is intolerably clumsy” and goes on to spend over two pages of his commentary discussing how and why it could have been written, starting off with the possibility that Luke mistranslated an Aramaic source!

Following J. A. Bengel (1687-1752) in his *Gnomon of the New Testament*, however, I think it is possible see that the sentence is neither bad Greek, nor repetitious nor obscure. The problem seems to me to have arisen since the commentators and all bible translations translate the Greek word *pistis* as “faith” in both its occurrences in this verse. However, this word means both “faith” and “faithfulness”, as can readily be verified, e.g. Strong’s Concordance: “*pistis*—faith, faithfulness”.

If this distinction is present in Acts 3:16, then the Greek of this verse becomes much more acceptable. In this chapter of the present book, the view is defended that in the first half of the verse, it is the Name of Jesus, on the basis of (*epi*) the faithfulness of the Name of Jesus, that makes the man well, and that in the second half, it is faith through (*di*) Jesus that makes him well. Peter is describing a profound theological truth here: the possibility and ground of our faith is His prior faithfulness! The structure of the verse then is not really repetitious, rather it is describing the two complementary aspects of this truth: it both “models” and “reflects” this truth. J. A. Bengel puts it very well:

Ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει, [on account of, or] upon the faith. The faith (i.e. faithfulness) of the name of Jesus is an expression drawn from the fact, that this name is a name *πιστὸν*, faithful, and sure (to be firmly relied on): and to this faith (or faithfulness) corresponds, presently after, the faith which is through (by) Him, viz. the faith which was in Peter, and began to be in the lame man. The correlatives are, the name of Christ, and the faith of the saints.

A possible structural analysis for this verse is given in Figure 5.1. Peter has

structured this verse so that “the Name // of Him” comes at the middle of the verse by word count.

We note that Jesus is present *in His Name*—Peter is here describing the healing event of Acts 3:6. (c.f. Matt. 18:20—“*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*”). In commenting on Acts 3: 16, William S. Kurz says, “Biblically, a name represents the presence and power of the person named”, and commenting on Acts 3:6 he says, “To act “in the name of Jesus” means to act under His authority, united to Him, invoking his presence and power”. Jesus’ presence with those who act or meet in His name is the New Testament equivalent or fulfilment of what we read about in the Old Testament where God’s presence and His dwelling are associated with His Name.

For example, in the Temple— 2 Chronicles 20:9:

“If, when evil cometh upon us, as the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we stand before this house, and in Thy presence, (for Thy Name is in this house,) and cry unto Thee in our affliction, then Thou wilt hear and help.”

Also Deuteronomy 12:5:

“But you shall seek the Lord at the place which the Lord your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His Name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come.”

In connection with the offerings at the Tabernacle, we read in Exodus 20:24,;

“An altar of earth you will make for Me, and you will sacrifice on it your ascension offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause the remembrance of My Name I will come to you, and I will bless you”.

An additional point here is that there is a “heaven and earth” aspect to the way the verse is structured. It is the faithfulness of the Name of the risen and glorified Lord in heaven that brings the healing, and also makes possible the faith through Jesus of the people (Peter and John and possibly the lame man himself to some extent) on earth that also brings the healing.

