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## **“Faith so as to Remove Mountains” What Faith and What Mountains in 1 Cor 13:2?**

### **0. Introduction: from lexicography to semantic analysis**

Effective translation begins with an adequate lexicographical analysis of the source text (ST). The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission [1993: 33-34], *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, distinguishes “linguistic” from “semantic” analysis,<sup>1</sup> although what the Vatican text is talking about could be better understood with the expression “lexicographic analysis” from which then it is possible to proceed to a more careful “semantic analysis”. Lexicographic analysis means, in fact, study of the meaning of the various lexemes that make up a given language, with particular attention to the nuances of each individual word. After all, it is very naïve to think that each word corresponds to a single meaning [Basta 2021]. If we take, for example, the Greek noun *βῆμα*, the dictionaries and lexicons show that it can mean “step, platform, tribune, seat, court, bench”, with the consequence that only the context better clarifies

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<sup>1</sup> (Translated in many languages). Further terminological clarification in Aletti, Gilbert *et al.* [2005].

the nuance of meaning. At this level concordances are useful, because the examination of all the occurrences of a single term provides decisive help in comparing the various meanings and also in catching any nuances that would otherwise be impossible to obtain from the vocabulary alone. This kind of analysis can be done diachronically, insofar as it shows how words change meaning through the ages. However, it sometimes also happens that authors from different epochs use the same word with identical nuances, or that authors from the same epoch use a term in a different way. Consequently, historical lexicographic analysis, of which Kittel's *TWNT* is an excellent example, should be applied with all due caution.<sup>2</sup>

Lexicographic analysis is very useful to define the precise meaning of a given word, but the step of semantic analysis of the concept is required to bring out and make explicit the components of thought conveyed by the ideas brought to expression by the words. In the case of *βῆμα*, for example, one cannot stop at the meaning of "tribune" without considering the metaphorical value of the word when used to indicate the "tribunal of Christ", or a "high place of judgment". Without penetration to the semantic level of concepts, translation runs the risk of becoming flat and remaining at an elementary level, whereas it already constitutes a first moment of exegesis.<sup>3</sup>

In order to make explicit how semantic analysis is capable of introducing important elements of comprehension into the interpretation and even into the translation of a text, moving in the direction of a historical – but not necessarily only diachronic – examination of ideas, conceptions, and expressions coming from the ancient world, I resort to an exemplary case, from which I hope to show how knowledge of rabbinic literature illuminates the meaning of expressions that otherwise would be condemned to obscurity. I refer to the New Testament formula

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Barr's powerful criticism regarding the indiscriminate use of biblical language in theology, in his very well known *The Semantics of the Biblical Language*. After establishing the importance of knowledge of linguistics for a good biblical exegesis, he condemns in no uncertain terms the way many exegetes used Gerhard Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch des Neuen Testaments* in their research. His denunciation turns around three points: 1. the use of etymology is not the only criterion to establish the meaning of words; 2. there is a strong contrast that cannot be ignored between "biblical and Greek mentality and language"; 3. never make exegesis from the meaning of words actually separated from their context. For a full review cf. Barr [1961; 1978; 1984].

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bovati, Basta [2012: 7-12].

“faith so as to remove mountains”, with particular reference to Paul’s enigmatic use of it in 1 Cor 13:2.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. The occurrences of *πίστις* in 1 Cor 12-13

In 1 Cor 12-14<sup>5</sup> the word *πίστις* falls within a context that raises many questions about the semantics and, consequently, the understanding of certain problematic expressions. Below is a table of the passages which require our attention:

12:9a	ἐτέρῳ πίστις ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ πνεύματι	another <b>faith</b> by the same Spirit,
13:2	καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητείαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθὲν εἰμι.	And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have <b>all faith</b> , <b>so as to remove mountains</b> , but have not love, I am nothing.
13:7	πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει	Love bears all things, <b>believes</b> all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
13:13a	Νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα	So now <b>faith</b> , hope, and love abide, these three.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, when Joseph Ratzinger was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he had the opportunity to express himself on the difficulty of the expression “moving mountains”, but with reference to the synoptic equivalent, recognising on the one hand the semantic difficulty, and on the other hand offering a possible, but erroneous, solution in Ratzinger [2001: 38-39]: “Q. Jesus says: ‘If you have faith like a mustard seed, you will be able to say to this mountain: Move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.’ A. This is indeed one of the most enigmatic passages in the New Testament, at least for me. Even the Fathers of the Church, the great theologians and the saints have struggled to find an interpretation for these words. In this case too – just as in the passage that says ‘Pray and you will be heard’ – we cannot be satisfied with a banal interpretation to the effect that, since I firmly believe, I must be able to say to the mountain of Monte Cassino: Go away! What means here are actually those mountains that obstruct the path of our existence. And which are more important than the mountains on the map. I can cross these mountains if I trust in God”.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive and detailed presentation of the main literary and rhetorical structures proposed for 1 Cor 12-14 cf. Aguilar Chiu [2007: 19-156]. On the rhetorical articulation of 1 Cor 12-14 cf. also the contributions of Standaert [1986], Smit [1993].

At first reading these passages do not seem to raise any difficulties,<sup>6</sup> but if one analyses the context, obscurities begin to crop up in abundance.

## 2. Is faith a charism? The case of 12:9

The chapter opens with a brief instance of litotes in 12:1: “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed” (*οὐ θέλω ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν*),<sup>7</sup> which is followed by a remark concerning the time when the Corinthians, as pagans, followed dumb idols. This is a topos dear to Judaism, according to which the idols of the people are dumb. In this way, the current condition of ignorance with regard to spiritual gifts (*πνευματικά*) is equated with their contact with dumb idols in the past: whoever is faced with a dumb idol cannot access knowledge originating from speech.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore a matter of having a word and a meaningful word. For the Apostle, this knowledge concerns the statement of his *propositio*: the oneness of the Spirit, the Lord and God.

Having established his founding paradigm centred on the oneness of the Spirit of God, Paul goes on to emphasise, with regard to the variety of charisms,<sup>9</sup> that what counts is not so much the individual charism, but the direction it takes. Believing that the specificity of a charism leads to its prevalence over others means losing sight of the true uniqueness, which is not the charism itself, but the Spirit that unifies the gifts. The charism is, in fact, a manifestation of the Spirit, a vehicle through which the Spirit expresses itself. It is the Spirit who fills the Christian community with charisms. Consequently, to focus on exhibiting one’s own charism as if it were the most important means losing the true priority, which is not the charism, but the reference to the Spirit who bestows it. The Spirit pours out the charism for the common good, not for the personal enjoyment of the

<sup>6</sup> Among the commentaries on 1 Cor commentaries not noticing inconsistency cf. Barrett [1968]; Conzelmann [1969]; Fee [1987]; Senft [21990]; Schrage [1991]; Merklein [1992]; Barbaglio [1995]; Kremer [1997]; Horsley [1998]; Collins [1999]; Lindemann [2000]; Thiselton [2000]; Garland [2003]; Schnabel [2006]; Fitzmeyer [2008].

<sup>7</sup> On the general framework of 1 Cor 12 cf. Frid [1995].

<sup>8</sup> *Contra* Vanhoye [2008: 49] who, while noting the contrast between the silent idols and the repeated action of speaking, nevertheless considers this aspect “not significant”. On the well-known exegetical difficulties of 1 Cor 12:1-3 cf. Vos [1993].

<sup>9</sup> About the concept of charism cf. Dupont [1983]; Schatzmann [1987]; Nardoni [1993].

charismatic people, because in the Christian community there are brothers and sisters in mutual service, and not just individual people.

Having established these indispensable premises, Paul moves on in vv. 7-10 to list the nine manifestations of the Spirit given to the Corinthians.<sup>10</sup> The starting point, however, is the fact that everything happens in the same Spirit (v. 11). In the list of the nine charisms he starts in vv. 8-9a from the so-called gifts of knowledge: “to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom (λόγος σοφίας), and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit (λόγος γνώσεως), to another faith by the same Spirit (πίστις)”.

If the translation of the first three charisms does not present particular difficulties, the case of their semantic rendering is different. In fact, with *λόγος σοφίας* and *λόγος γνώσεως* two different realities should be understood. Why this division between wisdom and knowledge?<sup>11</sup> Certainly it refers to the charism of the *didaskaloi*, people with gifts for teaching, able in their discourses to deliver wisdom and knowledge. What is the difference between these two kind of discourses? Were they *catechesis*, instructions based on biblical tradition, general discourses about God, or Scriptural explanations? Is there reference to the difference between the charism of people able to create new discourses by virtue of a great gift of intelligence and the gift of someone knowing how to transfer them by virtue of an equally effective skill of instruction? Certainly it is the charism of people able to offer a teaching.

At this point we find the charism of faith (*πίστις*), whose presence in the list raises significant difficulties. In fact, should not faith be the common basis of the charisms and not a particular gift? What faith is being spoken of, given that Paul includes it in the elenchus of the nine particular manifestations of the Spirit? Is it the same reality spoken of whenever the triad of faith, hope and charity appears (cf. 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8; 1 Cor 13:13a)? If this is the case, why do hope and love not appear in the same list? Evidently, the text is not speaking here of faith understood as “adherence to” (the truth, the gospel, etc.), but of a very precise *πίστις*, whose contours will be better defined later. For now, let us content ourselves with observing how the Apostle places it in third position, and thus in a good ranking.

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive examination of the list of charisms, excellent guidance in Vanhoye [2008: 65-73].

<sup>11</sup> On the distinction between word of wisdom and knowledge, sharp indications in Barbaglio [1995: 652-653]; Garland [2003: 581]; Fitzmyer [2008: 466].

As *πίστις* occurs in 1 Cor 12:9, it is as an important charism, one not common to all but limited to those selected by the Spirit. Moreover, its position immediately after *λόγος σοφίας* and *λόγος γνώσεως* suggests that it is related to the gifts of *didaskalia* typical of community teachers. Consequently, it is an important charism, related to knowledge and speech. It is probably the charismatic ability related to speaking and teaching, and so articulating a profound vision of faith. Even the humblest member of the church (an unschooled person or a poor woman) could be endowed with this “faith,” such that one so gifted by the Spirit effectively stood alongside the community’s theologians and *didaskaloi*. Thus the *πίστις* of 12:9 must be differentiated from the common faith of simple people, and, most certainly from that popular faith which sometimes constitutes the privileged ground of bigots, whose way of adhering to God is more the product of a ritual mixed with idolatry and fear than of serious and profound knowledge of the Gospel.

Paul therefore places wisdom, knowledge and faith in quick succession, making them the three dimensions of a single whole, as also shown by the fact that in the subsequent hymn to charity, these three charisms appear again in sequence: “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge (*πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν*), and if I have all faith (*πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν*), so as to move mountains, but had not love, I would be nothing” (13:2). The contiguous placement of knowledge and faith is a further element to reflect on, given that it is a binomial construction that has divided the history of humanity for hundreds of years, while Paul places science, obviously not understood in scientific terms, and faith close together. What does this mean? Once again, that in *πίστις*, knowledge is implicit as a penetrating, vital comprehension, and not just a notion.

### 3. The triad of wisdom, knowledge and faith

Paul, therefore, organizes the list of charisms in the sequential order of wisdom, knowledge and faith. There are small differences between the language of wisdom and knowledge, even though they both belong to the same ministerial sphere of teachers and doctors. In the early church there were people who practised teaching on the basis of different skills. Some were capable of delivering speeches rich in biblical wisdom, with continuous and appropriate references to the OT. The charism of knowledge, on the other hand, found its field of application in theological reflection, moral

evaluation, and *didaskalia*. The difference between teachers and prophets was remarkable. The prophet spoke under inspiration, as if the source of the message came from within him, as his speech was unstructured. Teachers and doctors, on the other hand, taught by study and reading. In the Jewish context, the gifts of wisdom and knowledge were held in high esteem and only recognised by a few rabbis. It is interesting to note how Paul mentions the gifts of wisdom and knowledge first, almost as if he wanted to subvert the hierarchy of gifts developed in Corinth, where wisdom and knowledge were probably placed on the lowest rungs of the spiritual ladder.

In third position we find, finally, *πίστις*, a location producing questions given that faith should be, as already mentioned, the basis of the charisms, rather than a specific spiritual gift in itself. On close reading, it becomes evident how Paul considers *πίστις* a charism to be linked to wisdom and knowledge. Why? Perhaps the gift of *πίστις* should be understood as the ability to read the personal and historical events of oneself and others with a sensitivity matured by the light coming from a vision of faith. If so, the connection with wisdom and knowledge would seem to be consistent, because knowledge is implicit in faith. It remains true, however, that the interpretation of life on the basis of a vision of faith was rather the privileged domain of the prophets. On the other hand, Paul places the charisms of wisdom, knowledge and faith close together, as if they belonged to the same sphere, placing prophecy only in the sixth position. To speak of faith (*πίστις*) as a spiritual gift remains, in the present state of our research, difficult to understand. What then is meant by *πίστις* in 1 Cor 12:9a?

#### 4. The charism of prophecy

The charisms of healing (*χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων*) and working miracles (*ἐνεργήματα δυνάμεων*) are beyond the scope of this study. The same is true for the discernment of spirits (*διακρίσεις πνευμάτων*), on which it is fitting to make a brief comment, since various hypotheses bring it close to the gifts of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> In all likelihood, within the Christian communities there were some believers who were able to understand whether a person had good or bad, luminous or dark spirits. Not all spirits are the same. Sometimes Paul observes that behind a spirit of light there may be

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Martucci [1978]; Grudem [1982 : 263-288].

a spirit of darkness: it is a matter of the ability to distinguish good from evil. It is, however, difficult to specify the detailed nature of the charism because there are few texts speaking of this charismatic activity within the first Christian communities.

The case of prophecy, another fundamental macro-area on which literature abounds, is different.<sup>13</sup> Great attention should be paid to this charism, since in 13:2 it is mentioned next to faith: “If I have prophetic powers (*προφητείαν*), and understand all mysteries (*τὰ μυστήρια πάντα*) and all knowledge (*πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν*), and if I have all faith (*πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν*) so as to move mountains, but had not love, I would be nothing”. Often misunderstood by those who reduce *προφητεία* to the ability to cross the barriers of time and history, in reality prophecy is neither divination nor shamanism.<sup>14</sup> In fact, *προ-φήτης* (on the etymological basis of *προ-φημί*) means first and foremost to speak in the place of God. Sometimes prophecy also contemplates divine phenomena, since the inspired man is often able to see beyond the barriers of space and time. This attitude is, however, residual, while the deepest core of prophecy consists in pronouncing a word as coming from God and useful for the interpretation of the present. In the earliest prayer assemblies, community prophets delivered messages by helping the brothers to read the present of their history. Was a member of the church going through a particularly critical period in his personal history and struggling to find a way out? The prophet approaches him with a word coming directly from God. Consequently, prophecy is not so much linked to the future, but rather to the present, on whose clarification it seeks to speak. Just like the great prophets of Israel, from Isaiah to Jeremiah, from Ezekiel to Hosea, extraordinary men who helped Israel interpret a history often difficult to read and understand.

From these considerations, it clearly emerges that even the charism of prophecy, like the discourses of wisdom and knowledge, and perhaps even of faith, represents a gift of speech. This is a word whose importance Paul has already stressed at the beginning of the chapter, recalling the value of meaningful speech compared to the condition of muteness: “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you

<sup>13</sup> On Prophecy in the Ancient World and Early Christianity cf. Aune [1983]; Callan [1985]; Carson [1987]; Martin [1992]; Corsani [1993]; Forbes [1995]; Gillespie [1995: 97-164]; Turner [1998].

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pesce, M. [1983]; Bovati, Basta [2012: 105-111].



were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.”

### 5. “Faith so as to remove mountains” in 1 Cor 13:2

In 1 Cor 12, Paul has repeatedly emphasised that every charism is poured out by the Spirit for the building up of the Church, with the common good as the basic criterion. If this is the rationale, it is very easy to imagine how much the Apostle was annoyed by the disputes arising over the preeminent charism. The Corinthian congregation had lost the meaning of the spiritual gifts, if the main question was about the greatest of all these. Paul, however, plays along with the dispute and points out the best way in *ἀγάπη*. The foremost charismatic is the one who practices charity.

From a rhetorical point of view, the famous chapter 13 is an *encomium*, whose function is to sing the praises of a virtue.<sup>15</sup> It is a fairly widespread literary genre in the ancient world, where several authors tried to extol a virtue (*ἀρετή*). Among these, Plato admires the *eros*, understood as the form of passionate love driving all desire. If you do not have passion, you do not cultivate interests, you do not pursue goals. Passion is necessary for study, music, sport. It is truly the greatest virtue. On the other hand, Tyrtaeus praises physical vigour, according to Spartan ideology. 4 Ezra commends the greatness of truth. In the Christian sphere, Maximus of Tyre honoured freedom, considering it a value to be followed with all necessary commitment.<sup>16</sup>

In the same manner, Paul uses a literary method of his time to compose his *encomium*. Having ascertained the competitive spirit in the Corinthian community with regards to the charisms, he proposes as a response his delineation of *ἀγάπη*, by beginning v. 31 with an invitation to aspire (*ζηλοῦτε*) to the best charisms. The Corinthians have hitherto been zealous in the possession and exhibition of the spiritual gifts. The apostle invites them to cultivate zeal for charity. In the OT, zeal accompanies true spiritual men, like Elijah (1 Kings 19:10). To those Corinthians who want to be truly zealous in their desire for the highest charisms, Paul shows the most sublime way. The text is easily divided into three parts (although, generally speaking, the *encomium* should have five):

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Penna [1991]; Smit [1991]; Sigountos [1994].

<sup>16</sup> For detailed presentation cf. Basta [2020: 153-154].

A charity alone has substance (vv. 1-3)

B description of charity (vv. 4-7)

A' charity alone is infinite (vv. 8-13)

The faith that moves mountains falls in A (vv. 1-3), a subsection with a very simple structure:

	<i>crescendo</i>	refrain	<i>decrecendo</i>
v. 1	<b>If</b> I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,	<b>but have not</b> love,	I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
v. 2	And <b>if</b> I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains (ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι),	<b>but have not</b> love,	I am nothing.
v. 3	<b>If</b> I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned,	<b>but have not</b> love,	I gain nothing.

The three sentences are organised on the basis of a very clear structure. There is a *crescendo* of actions from less to more:

1. speaking in tongues of men and angels (charisms of prayer);
2. gift of prophecy, knowledge of mysteries and faith that moves mountains (teaching charisms);
3. handing over of goods and body (more eminent actions at the beginning and at the end of discipleship).

Followed by the repetition of the refrain “but I have not love” (*ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω*), while in the final sentences they decrease from *maior* to *minus*:

1. I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal;
2. I am nothing;
3. I gain nothing.

Therefore, an ascending trend parallel to a descending one, cadenced by a *megaric* style structure “if... but I have no charity... (ἐὰν ... ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω ...)”. Three sentences similar in scansion, of extraordinary density, with the first two referring to some charisms previously reviewed.

If the tongues of men and of angels belong to the sphere of glossolalia<sup>17</sup> and more generally of liturgy, the second area (v. 2) refers to the charisms of prophecy, knowledge and faith. These spiritual gifts are linked to teaching, and no longer to worship. Even in this field it is possible to operate without *ἀγάπη*. One can be a great prophet or *didaskalos*, knowing every mystery, having faith that moves mountains, but without being endowed with charity. Paul has already pointed out in 1 Cor 8:1 how knowledge puffs up, while charity builds up.

In the hymn to charity the teaching charisms are, therefore, taken up again in 13:2 according to this sequence: “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains”. As in 12:8-9a, faith is again linked to manifestations of knowledge and teaching, these verses being in part a reprise of the list of spiritual gifts. How then should we understand *πίστις* here? Is it the generic adherence to or trust in that which grounds manifestations of the Spirit, or is it rather a specific charism? The second occurrence of *πίστις* in the broader context of chapters 12-13 suggests an answer in the specification: “all faith so as to remove mountains” (*πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι*).

## 6. Faith that moves mountains in the Synoptics

The designation of faith as the ability to move mountains echoes a similar expression in the Gospels:

Mk 11:22-23: And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ (*ἔχετε πίστιν θεοῦ. ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ὃς ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ὄρει τοῦτω· ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν*), and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him”.

Mt 17:19-20: Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “Because of your

<sup>17</sup> Glossolalia and tongue interpretation know many different hypotheses. Among the many possible contributions to glossolalia cf. Scippa [1982]; Engelbrecht [1996]; Mills [1997]; Hovenden [2002]. Although dated, on the tongue languages, still of good value Best [1975]; Thiselton [1979]. Another perspective in Fabbro [1998].

little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move (ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, ἐρεῖτε τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ· μετάβα ἔνθεν ἐκεῖ, καὶ μεταβήσεται), and nothing will be impossible for you”.

Mt 21:21: And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen (ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν καὶ μὴ διακριθῆτε, οὐ μόνον τὸ τῆς συκῆς ποιήσετε, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ εἴπητε· ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, γενήσεται·)”.

In the context of the Synoptic tradition, the faith capable of moving mountains is clearly understood as trust in the power of God, and also of Jesus, to perform extraordinary wonders. It is therefore not a specific charisma, but the religious belief/trust that the believer has placed in the Lord. There is no reference to the gifts of speech, teaching or prophecy; πίστις is operating instead in the broad area of reference we saw in 1 Cor 12:9a and in 13:2. Thus the Synoptic parallels to the expression *πάσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι* of 13:2 do not provide any help in answering our initial questions: it never at any time links πίστις to the charisma of teaching.

## 7. Moving the mountains in Jewish literature

By broadening the investigation to Jewish literature, some light may be shed on the mystery. First of all *bBer* 64a3-4:

R. Abin the Levite said: Whoever tries to force his [good] fortune will be dogged by [ill] fortune, and whoever forgoes his [good] fortune will postpone his [ill] fortune. This we can illustrate from the case of Rabbah and R. Joseph. For R. Joseph was ‘Sinai’ and Rabbah was ‘**an uprooter of mountains**’. The time came when they were required [to be head of the Academy]. They [the collegiates] sent there [to Palestine] to ask, As between ‘Sinai’ and an ‘**uprooter of mountains**’, which should have the preference? They sent answer: Sinai, because all require the owner of wheat. Nevertheless, R. Joseph would not accept the post, because the astrologers had told him that he would be head for only two years. Rabbah thereupon remained head for twenty-two years, and

R. Joseph after him for two years and a half. During all the time that Rabbah was head, R. Joseph did not so much as summon a cupper to come to his house.

This Talmudic text talks about the choice that the members of the Academy had to make one day to decide who should be their leader. The short-list of candidates was limited to only two names: Rabbi Joseph (nicknamed “Sinai”) and Rabbah (nicknamed “**uprooter of mountains**”). “Sinai” referred to a very erudite teacher with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the traditions, while “**uprooter of the mountains**” referred to a sharper rabbi, exceptionally skilled in dialectics. The preference fell on Rabbi Joseph because everyone demanded “the owner of the grain”, meaning the one who knew the authentic traditions, the sources.

A second text of considerable interest for our study is *bSanh* 24a7-8:

The Gemara asks: Is that so? Was it in character for Reish Lakish to speak of Rabbi Meir with such reverence when disagreeing with his ruling? But doesn't Ulla say: When one sees Reish Lakish studying Torah in the study hall it is as though he is **uprooting mountains and grinding them into each other**? Reish Lakish was evidently very sharp in his analyses. Ravina said in response: What is the difficulty? But is it not so that when anyone sees Rabbi Meir studying Torah in the study hall, it is as though **he is uprooting the highest of mountains and grinding them into each other**? Rabbi Meir was a greater scholar than Reish Lakish, so it was fitting for Reish Lakish to speak of him with reverence.

The protagonist of this colourful Baraita is Reish Lakish, to whom the Talmud dedicates further high praise in *bTa'an* 8a3:

That is like this practice of Reish Lakish, who would review his studies forty times, corresponding to the forty days in which the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, and only afterward would he go before Rabbi Yoḥanan to study from his teacher. Similarly, Rav Adda bar Ahava would review his learning twenty-four times, corresponding to the twenty-four books in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, i.e., the Bible, and only afterward go before Rava to study with him.

According to Jewish tradition, Reish Lakish was man whose extraordinary physical strength made him the leader of a gang of thugs. One day Rabbi Yochanan ben Nappachah came across the criminal and was so fascinated by his physical strength, leadership, high intelligence and spiritual potential that he suggested to Reish Lakish to devote himself with all his

might to Torah study. At first, the bandit did not agree, but when offered Rabbi Yochanan's beautiful sister as wife in exchange for giving up his criminal life to devote himself to the Torah, Reish Lakish finally accepted the deal. He thus began to study the Torah with all his might, achieving incredible results that earned him wide acclaim. The text of bTaanit 8a records how he would prepare a section of the Mishnah no fewer than forty times before going to Rabbi Yochanan's class. In bSanhedrin 24a Ulla, one of the foremost experts on the Torah, it is stated that Reish Lakish's logical analyses were so powerful as to give the impression that he was uprooting and grinding mountains.

Whenever Jewish texts are quoted to support the interpretation of the NT, the problem of their dating arises, since many important parallels are found in texts whose final redaction was made later than the NT, especially the Talmud. Similarly, many writings are attributed to rabbis who lived after the authors of the NT. How shall we treat them? Exclude them from the interpretation of the NT, as Fitzmyer did in an excessive way, considering them of little usefulness in virtue of the very unflattering judgment that a large number of scholars, both Jews and Christians, passed – (for example) on Strack-Billerbeck? However, authoritative specialists in Jewish literature, such as David Daube and Samuel Lieberman, have not hesitated to make use of rabbinic sources. Even so, the most enlightened opinion remains that of Samuel Sandmel, who considered it very useful to employ rabbinic tradition if done judiciously. Last but not least, Neudecker emphasized that it is never possible to give a general judgement on such problems, since each case must be studied for itself. In a world where the written and the oral Torah are constantly intertwined, many writings redacted and finalized at a later point nonetheless contain materials of significance.<sup>18</sup>

In our case the problem of dating does not exist. In fact, the two rabbis nicknamed “mountain mover” lived in the period of the Amorites (Reish Lakish between 200 and 275; Rabbah bar Nachmani died in 320), a long time before the Babylonian Talmud was written, which therefore suggests the tradition's remarkable antiquity. However, and not insignificantly, the same expression is also used to describe Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes, one

<sup>18</sup> For some of this information cf. the lecture given at the biblical conference at the conclusion of the Centenary Year of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (3-8 May 2010) by Neudecker [2011], “Studi Rabbinici e Nuovo Testamento”, and subsequently published in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 162: 457-463.

of the greatest Tanna of the fourth generation (135-170): the Mishnah remembers him well. This confirms the use of this nickname at least three centuries before the aforementioned Talmudic references. It seems that the expression “moving mountains” (*oker harim*) began to apply to rabbis with great skill in the art of dialectic of Hellenistic origin, whose appearance in the land of Israel coincides with the bet Hillel (contemporary with the emergence of early Christianity), the first to use and disseminate the art of interpretation based on the fusion of hermeneutical rules of both Greek and Jewish origin.

Consequently, these Talmudic texts (others could be added as well) clarify that Judaism, since the earliest times, used the appellation or circumlocution “moving, uprooting mountains” to refer to people with considerable teaching charism. In particular, the expression “mountain mover” (*oker harim*)<sup>19</sup> designates rabbis who were able, with their art of argumentation, to change the point of view of people particularly rigid in their convictions, or immovable like a mountain. So, we finally receive decisive help in answering our initial questions.<sup>20</sup> The charism of *πίστις* of 1 Cor 12:9 is well-placed among the spiritual gifts of teaching, if it includes an activity of knowledge and *didaskalia*, to which its resumption and clarification in 13:2 clearly point.

## 8. Conclusion: Meaning of the “faith that moves mountains” in 1 Cor 13:2

In 1 Cor 13:2 the charism of *πίστις* appears in a verse in which the gifts of knowledge and teaching, from prophecy to the knowledge of mysteries to the faith that moves mountains, are again contained. In the light of these rabbinic texts, where the expression “movers of mountains” (*oker harim*) indicated masters so skilled in the art of discourse they were able to convince even the hardest of minds, *πίστις* as it relates to “movers of mountains” in the hymn to charity and in 12:9 is more likely a reference to the real charism of knowledge and teaching than a reference to faith in some general sense. The miracle of persuading the most stubborn minds and hearts (= moving mountains) could easily be attributed to a special charism possessed by some members of the Christian community, whose

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hahn [1879].

<sup>20</sup> About the help that knowledge of Jewish literature can give to interpretation and translation cf. again Neudecker [2009].

discourses of faith were endowed with such convincing power that they were able to move even the most obstinate and inflexible people to change their convictions, just as the most stringent dialectical demonstrations did. It is highly probable that in the Christian community there were some believers with such an effective and incisive vision of faith that they were able to offer teachings and speeches to their audience, perhaps in relation to problematic situations of life in need of change, to be recognised as inspired charismatics and defined by their gift of *πίστις*, capable of moving mountains. Moreover, this also coincides with the usual Pauline conception, according to which faith is a very powerful reality, linked not so much to rituals aimed at offering security to people, but rather to a high vision of life and history, which consists ultimately in the acquisition of the same view that God has on the world and on the personal affairs of each person.

The lexicographical analysis of *πίστις* on the basis of Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch des Neuen Testaments* would have been of no help in gaining a better understanding of the semantic complexity behind the charism of faith spoken of in 1 Cor 12:9 and 13:2. To achieve greater accuracy in the interpretation of *πίστις* understood as charism, it was necessary to resort to the semantic help offered by the Aramaic language, whose colourful expressions often underlie the Greek of the New Testament. For the purposes of literal translation there is not much to do because “ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι” is well rendered by “if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains.” However, if some greater precision, attentive to the semantics of the concept of charismatic faith, is desired, we could resort to a paraphrase: “if I have all the ability to pronounce discourses of faith so as to convince people as immovable as mountains, but have not love, I am nothing”.

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#### ABSTRACT

The presence of πίστις in the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12:8-10 is problematic. Should not faith be the common basis of the charisms and not a particular gift? What means "faith" in 1 Cor 12:9, given that Paul includes it among the nine manifestations of the Spirit? How to understand and to translate it? Evidently, "faith" points here not simple adherence, but a very precise form of πίστις. In fact, Paul places wisdom, knowledge and "faith" in rapid succession, making them the three principal dimensions of the teaching charisms. As reflected in the repetition of the same gifts in the sequence of 13:2. Some Jewish texts talk about rabbis able to change the point of view of people whose convictions were as immovable as a mountain. They were nicknamed "mountain mover" (*oker harim*). Thanks to the support of rabbinic literature it becomes possible to explain the presence of πίστις among the teaching gifts in 1 Cor 12:9 and 13:2, offering a translation, certainly broad but more attentive to the semantics of the charism of faith: "if I have all the ability to deliver discourses of faith from which to convince people as immovable as mountains, but I do not have charity, I am nothing".

**Keywords:** semantic analysis, translation, faith, charisma, moving mountains