

Introduction: Problems and Prospects for a New Testament Debate

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Since Richard Hays published his doctoral dissertation *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, there has been considerable debate in New Testament studies concerning whether or not the expression πίστις Χριστοῦ (*pistis christou*, lit., the “faith of Christ”) should be interpreted as an objective genitive (i.e., faith in Christ), as a subjective genitive (i.e., the faithfulness of Christ), or as something in between (e.g., the faith that is of Christ). The phrase, and slight variations thereof, occurs at key junctures in the Pauline letters including Romans, Galatians, Philippians, and Ephesians. Far from being insignificant, this short expression is crucial for understanding the Apostle’s conception of righteousness by faith and how Paul construed the story of salvation in relation to the Mosaic Law. It is little wonder, then, that such a short grammatical expression has prompted so much attention and discussion. Despite the fact that nearly thirty years have passed since Richard Hays effectively re-opened the debate, it remains in full swing and shows no sign of abating. Interest in the subject remains firm and this is evidenced not only by the appearance of this volume but also by the publication of three dissertations in 2007 that all focus quite specifically on this very subject.¹

The πίστις Χριστοῦ debate continues, no doubt, because it is significant on a variety of levels. It is significant exegetically because it affects how Paul’s syntax and arguments are construed in their literary

¹ Desta Heliso, *Pistis and the Righteous One: A Study of Romans 1:17 against the Background of Scripture and Second Temple Jewish Literature* (WUNT 2.235; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Benjamin Schließer, *Abraham’s Faith in Romans 4: Paul’s Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6* (WUNT 2.224; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Karl Friedrich Ulrichs, *Christusglaube: Studien zum Syntagma pistis Christou und zum paulinischen Verständnis von Glaube und Rechtfertigung* (WUNT 2.227; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

context, which in turns impacts exegetical observations and even Bible translations.² The debate is also significant theologically because at stake is nothing less than the very architecture of the Christ-event and the nature of the summons to faith and the life of discipleship that flows from it. As Sigve Tonstad writes: “The notion that ‘the righteousness of God’ has come to light in ‘the faithfulness of Jesus Christ’ cuts a wide swath in the theological landscape and rearranges the perspective around a new center.” He adds, “Radical as it may seem our reading of πίστις Χριστοῦ [i.e., the subjective genitive], which on the surface may seem like a minor revision, lays the groundwork for an entirely different paradigm in the theology of the NT.”³ Mark Reasoner further outlines what is at stake in this debate:

² Contrast the following translations of the TNIV, NET, and ISV:

	TNIV	NET	ISV
Rom. 3:21–22	But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.	But now, apart from the law, God’s righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed – namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe.	But now, apart from the law, God’s righteousness is revealed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets – God’s righteousness through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe.
Gal. 2:15–16	We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ . So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.	We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ . And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.	We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ . We, too, have believed in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by the works of the law, for no human being will be justified by the works of the law.

³ Sigve Tonstad, “πίστις χριστου: Reading Paul in a New Paradigm”, *AUSS* 40 (2002): 56, 57.

Why does it matter whether we read *pistis Christou* as objective (faith in Jesus) or subjective (Jesus' faith)? First, the degree to which we emphasize faith in the human affects how we present the gospel. Proponents of the subjective genitive, who hold that Christ's faith is what saves, will not call for a distinct, conversion-constituting act of placing one's faith in Jesus. They will rather call people to join the church that lives out in a concentric pattern the faith that Jesus displayed. Second, we will begin to read Paul's gospel not as primarily based around the dichotomy of works and faith, which both have a human subject, but rather as a dichotomy between law and Christ. Third, this view of *pistis Christou* moves students of Paul's letters to see that justification by faith is part of a bigger theme in Paul, participation in Christ.⁴

As one can plainly see, the arguments are about far more than syntax and grammar. The interpretation of πίστις Χριστοῦ affects a whole constellation of issues about the nature of salvation, the person and work of Christ, the contents of faith, the character of the church, and even Bible translations.

Moreover, while this may appear to be a deliberation restricted to studies in the minutiae of Pauline exegesis, it is worth pointing out that there are several other places in the New Testament that seem to reflect a similar grammatical ambiguity regarding the relationship of Jesus Christ to faith. Consider the following examples: (1) In Acts 3:16 we find reference to "the faith that is through him [i.e., Jesus] (ἡ πίστις ἣ δι' αὐτοῦ) has given him this complete health"; (2) Revelation 14:12 states: "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those keeping the commandments of God and holding fast to the faith of Jesus (τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ)"; (3) James 2:1 says: "My brothers, do you with your acts of favoritism really have the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? (τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης)". The translations, meanings, and significance of these passages are disputed – but they all contain a similar grammatical ambiguity about "faith" and "Jesus Christ" analogous to that found in Romans 3:22 and Galatians 2:15–16. It is quite evident, then, that the discussion about the relationship between "faith" and "Jesus" goes far beyond isolated phrases in Galatians and Romans and incorporates the wider New Testament as well.⁵

⁴ Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 39–40.

⁵ Unfortunately restrictions of length prevented us from being able to include more substantive analyses of the Catholic Epistles, esp. Hebrews, the Petrine Epistles,

In addition, if the debate is not restricted to Paul's letters it cannot be limited to grammatical argumentation either. The notion that Jesus' faithfulness and obedience have intrinsic saving value is an evidently important theme in Pauline theology and even for New Testament theology as a whole.⁶ If one chooses to identify the faithfulness of Jesus as an expression of the faithfulness of God then one will very naturally arouse the interest of systematic theologians for this discussion as well. If we take into account the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective-history) of the New Testament in the ancient church, including its translation and reception, then further vistas of study open up as to how the key phrases were interpreted by Christian exegetes and how patristic authors understood Jesus' faithfulness and obedience operating in relation to the economy of salvation. Thus, the debate about the faithfulness of Jesus Christ revolves around far more than grammatical, syntactical, and contextual matters restricted to Paul's epistles. It encompasses a whole range of exegetical, biblical, historical, and theological issues as well.

The upshot of all this is that the purpose of this volume is to attempt to give a global and panoramic perspective on the debate by demonstrating the dividing lines, showing the points of contention, and illustrating how the debate has developed in recent years in order to allow readers to make up their own minds about this ongoing conversation in New Testament studies. As such, no particular view of the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate is being singularly propounded. Rather, what follows are discussions that present the various arguments for each particular position and highlight the different factors that shape the discussion.

In *Part I* several background issues are brought forward. Debbie Hunn presents a brief survey of the debate in the twentieth century and notes how the discussion has largely orbited around the areas of lexical word studies, grammatical and syntactical arguments, and theological models. She observes that arguments based on grammar and language have singularly failed to provide an adequate answer for either side of the

Jude, and the Johannine Epistles. On Hebrews, see Todd D. Still, "Christos as Pistos: The Faith(fulness) of Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews", *CBQ* 69 (2007): 746–55.

⁶ Cf. Richard Longenecker, "The Obedience of Christ in the Theology of the Early Church", in *Reconciliation and Hope New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday* (ed. R. Banks; Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 142–52; idem, "The Foundational Conviction of New Testament Christology: The Obedience/Faithfulness/Sonship of Christ", in *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 473–88.

debate. Subsequent exegetical studies on the key texts have multiplied questions as to how πίστις Χριστοῦ relates to a plethora of other concepts in Paul's letters. Hunn also raises a legitimate question as to whether or not the subjective, objective, and adjectival readings of πίστις Χριστοῦ really create the theological dichotomies related to justification and the New Perspective on Paul that some scholars allege.

Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts engage the subject from the vantage point of lexical and syntactic considerations. They focus on the role of lexical semantics in sense disambiguation, offer a description of the Greek case system, reframe the debate in terms of lexis and case, and then present an analysis of the results. They advocate that lexical, grammatical, and syntactical factors are immediately relevant – though they are often minimized in the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate in favour of exegetical and theological observations. In their view, the imprecision of the debate is due to a failure to grasp the lexical relationship between genitives and their head term since the genitive case restricts the meaning of the head term but does not determine it. Much of the exegetical discussion assumes a grammatical choice between “subject” and “object”, whereas the real issue lies in the various forms of modification and their relation to a head term like πίστις. Porter and Pitts maintain that, in light of case semantics, every time πίστις functions as an anarthrous head term with a preceding prepositional modifier it has an abstract function. Therefore Χριστοῦ delineates “Christ” as the realm of faith rather than specifying Christ's own faith. They do not think that the contours of the discussion can be settled exclusively by Greek linguistics. Nonetheless, they draw attention to the fact that a linguistic approach seems to favour the sense in pertinent texts that Christ was the object of faith.

Part II brings to the forefront some new and innovative analyses of the primary texts of contention from the Pauline corpus. Two scholars argue for the subjective genitive interpretation of πίστις Χριστοῦ and similar phrases. Two other scholars argue for an objective genitive reading of the same material. Douglas A. Campbell, who is now a veteran in this debate, sets a cracking pace. His essay on Romans 3:22 begins by noting that Paul's prepositional qualifiers to πίστις in Romans and Galatians indicate instrumentality, and the quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17 must be correlated with this. Moreover, Paul's emphasis on instrumentality in Romans 3:21–22, whereby the δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ is disclosed or revealed by means of the πίστις of Jesus Christ, can only be adequately accounted for by a subjective genitive interpretation of the “faithfulness of Christ”. Campbell, following Hays, argues that Paul

refers to the story of Christ's passion metonymically so that one element may evoke a wider narrative discourse. Furthermore, he finds grounds for plausibly regarding Habakkuk 2:4 as a messianic proof-text for Paul which references ὁ δίκαιος with a christological meaning. It is crucial for Campbell that the act of faith is firm evidence of God's saving action, but human faith is entirely unable to disclose the revelation of the δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ. That implies that Paul has to be talking about something other than human faith when he refers to the πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. For Campbell, the programmatic texts of Romans 1:17 and 3:22 state that the faithfulness of Christ – understood broadly as his obedience, death, and resurrection – has revealed the saving righteousness of God.

R. Barry Matlock attributes the persistence (and inconclusiveness) of the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate to its having become a “proxy war” between a corporate, participationist reading of Paul and an individual, forensic reading. Matlock resists the ideological bind that this imposes on πίστις Χριστοῦ (“detheologizing” the debate); and he persists in seeking out evidence that can be debated across or irrespective of such boundaries, particularly linguistic semantic evidence regarding the sense of πίστις (“faith”, “faithfulness” or whatever) and the relation of Χριστός to πίστις (“subject”, “object” or whatever). He focuses on the four πίστις Χριστοῦ texts that include additional πίστις / πιστεύω phrases: Galatians 2:16; 3:22; Romans 3:22; and Philippians 3:9. This rhetorical phenomenon of repetition has often been supposed to favour the subjective genitive reading. On Matlock's analysis, these additional phrases offer semantic information, directly or indirectly, about Paul's πίστις Χριστοῦ phrases, helping to select the sense, the subject, and the object of πίστις as according to the objective genitive reading. Matlock posits that these and related features of the Pauline contexts were sufficient to establish this reading among Paul's early readers, native Greek speakers for whom the subjective reading of πίστις Χριστοῦ was not explicitly rejected but rather literally unheard of.

Paul Foster presents an array of arguments for the subjective genitive reading of Philippians 3:9 and Ephesians 3:12. He finds the case for the subjective genitive in Philippians 3:9 to be finely balanced, but he is persuaded by the use of πίστις language with names or pronouns where it signifies the faith *of* an individual, rather than faith *in* an individual. What is more, he claims that the context of Philippians 3:3–9 suggests that righteousness is imputed on the basis of Christ's act of fidelity. Foster alleges that an even stronger case for the subjective genitive can be made in Ephesians 3:12 given the presence of the definite article

and the similarities with Ephesians 2:18, which together indicate that the access to God that the Gentiles enjoy is a consequence of Christ's faithfulness in undergoing a sacrificial death.

In contrast to Foster, Richard Bell in turn argues for the objective genitive of faith in Christ in Philippians 3:9 and Ephesians 3:12. He advocates that, in Philippians 3:2–11, Paul writes of two different attitudes: one is concerned with a righteousness which comes by Law (which gives rise to confidence in the flesh), and the other is concerned with a righteousness which comes from God. Philippians 3:9, like Romans 10:3, contrasts one's own righteousness with the righteousness that comes from God and contrasts righteousness "by Law" with that "through faith in Christ". The objective genitive is suggested not only by the proposed structural analysis of Philippians 3:9, but also by the parallel objective genitive of "knowledge of Christ" in 3:8 and the parallel of Philippians 3:9–10 with Philippians 1:29. He also faults the subjective reading on several points, including the assumed relationship between human faith and Christ's faithfulness and the mistaken view that faith is the result of participation in Christ. "Faith in Christ", he argues, is the correlate of "the gospel concerning Christ" and it is this gospel, this word of reconciliation, which creates faith in the hearer. In regard to Ephesians 3:12, Bell contends for an objective translation based on parallels with Romans 5:1–2 and Ephesians 4:13. He then proceeds to contest the subjective genitive reconstructions of Paul Foster, Markus Barth, and Peter T. O'Brien. In his concluding remarks he suggests that some advocates of the subjective genitive have mistakenly read ideas of Jesus as the "faithful one" found in Hebrews and Revelation into Paul.

Part III includes some mediating perspectives and further proposals as they relate to Pauline exegesis, Pauline hermeneutics, and Pauline theology more broadly. Mark Seifrid takes up an interpretation of "the faith of Christ" that was prominent in earlier phases of the debate but has been largely overlooked in recent discussion. He argues that the expression describes Christ as the author and source of faith. In an attempt to lend grammatical precision to earlier proposals, he claims that the phrase πίστις Χριστοῦ is not best described as bearing either a "subjective" or "objective" genitive (which presuppose a purely verbal noun). Rather, he says, it is more helpful to describe it in terms of categories such as quality, source, and possession that are associated with a nominal sense of πίστις. He proceeds to give examples from Josephus, Philo, Ignatius, and Acts that illustrate this very point. Seifrid argues for the anticipation of the concept in Romans 1:17 where faith

has its source in the faithfulness of God. He understands Romans 3:26 to indicate that God justifies the one who has the faith that comes from Jesus Christ. The same nominal genitives can be found in Galatians where, for example, Galatians 2:16 implies a genitive of authorship since just as works arise from the Law, so faith arises from Christ. Seifrid takes the “righteousness of God” in Philippians 3:9 to denote the righteousness that God effects through the faith which comes from Christ. He concludes by saying that, for the Apostle Paul, to believe in Jesus Christ is not merely to act, but to be acted upon by God in his work in Jesus Christ. If Seifrid is correct, this could potentially dissolve many of the dichotomies in the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate as to how faith(fulness) is effected by God through Christ – and it would give the entire discussion a theocentric shot in the arm at the same time.

Francis Watson brings his expertise on Pauline hermeneutics to the topic and focuses on Paul’s use of the faith-formulations (e.g., ἐκ πίστεως and διὰ πίστεως) in order to refute the subjective genitive interpretation that has gained currency in English-speaking scholarship. He argues that in Galatians and Romans these faith-formulations all derive from the ἐκ πίστεως (“from/by faith”) of Habakkuk 2:4. This is Paul’s basic formulation, which is then extended into the double genitive ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ (“from/by faith of Christ”) in order to counterbalance ἐξ ἔργων νόμου (“from/by works of the Law”). Watson also rejects a messianic reading of Habakkuk 2:4 along the lines of “the Righteous One”, and he maintains that the citation more probably refers to the righteousness of the generic individual who has faith grounded in Christ and the divine saving action enacted in him. In Watson’s opinion it is unhelpful, then, to play off an apparently virtuous christocentric reading of Paul’s interpretation of Habakkuk 2:4 against a purportedly bad anthropocentric one.

Preston Sprinkle presents the case for a “third view” of the πίστις Χριστοῦ as “Christ-Faith”, which is equivalent to the gospel message about Jesus Christ (viz., the gospel and its content). Sprinkle presents an exhaustive survey of proponents of this “third view” and notes the various subtleties of each advocate. This approach takes πίστις Χριστοῦ as a singular entity rather than as two components of “faith” and “Christ”. Proponents also identify πίστις Χριστοῦ as something objective to a person’s faith in God and Christ. It is Sprinkle’s contention that this reading may solve the apparent incongruity of how faith can be the instrument that reveals the “righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17 and 3:21–22. He then proceeds to test this conclusion against the text of Galatians, where he maintains that πίστις Χριστοῦ signifies the

“event of the gospel itself”. In so doing he also draws attention to some pertinent texts in Ignatius and Origen that might have a bearing on the debate. Sprinkle acknowledges that this “third view” does not account for all of the textual data (e.g., Phil. 3, where he favours an objective genitive) but suggests that it can fill in a sizeable gap in the debate between subjective and objective interpretations of the genitive.

Ardel Caneday analyzes the theme of Christ’s faithfulness in the theology of Galatians as indicative of Paul’s theology as a whole. He sees ἔργα νόμου and πίστις Χριστοῦ as reflecting Paul’s antithetical pairing of Torah and Christ. This polarity means that the contrast is between two distinct covenants – one bounded by Law the other bounded by Christ. According to Caneday, the source of this polarity is an underlying narrative about Israel incurring the curse of the Law for its unfaithfulness to the covenant and those who belong to the “works of the Law” being under the curse of Torah. In contrast, Christ’s faithfulness through his curse-bearing death serves to redeem others from the curse of the Torah. The coming of πίστις is the coming of Christ’s faithfulness to undo the curse of the Law.

Part IV explores the wider witness of the New Testament in order to see how the concept of Jesus’ obedience and faithfulness is expressed in the theology and narrative of the biblical authors outside of the Pauline writings. Peter Bolt brings material from the Synoptic Gospels and Acts into the sphere of the debate and contends that this material not only supports the subjective genitive but also makes it a better option. He examines Mark 11:22 to the effect that Jesus reminds his disciples that they have the faithfulness of God to his promises. Mark 9:23 suggests that Jesus has what the disciples do not have – namely, a faith in God to work miracles. And Matthew 27:43 speaks explicitly of Jesus’ entrusting himself to God. Bolt adds that these texts need to be seen in light of a broader Christology of Jesus as the “Servant of the Lord” which provides a serious picture of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and also provides an additional substructure for the “faith of Christ” in the Pauline sense.

Bill Salier surveys the Fourth Gospel and notes the centrality of the theme of Jesus’ dependence upon God and his obedience to the Father throughout. The obedience of the Son is set within the context of a sending-sent relationship where Jesus comes to Israel in order to make the promises of God a reality. In addition, his obedience is also displayed in the “hour” which is the singular moment of his death and resurrection and its redemptive achievement. According to Salier, the Gospel of John provides a fine balance between depicting Jesus as an exemplary model of faithfulness and portraying Jesus as the object of faith.

Bruce Lowe explores the significance of James 2:1 (“My brothers show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory”). He rejects the view of ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“our Jesus Christ”) as a conjectural emendation and instead locates the phrase as part of the wider rhetorical discourse of James 2:1–13. Lowe argues that “glory” is a cipher for understanding matters in light of honour and that “Jesus’ faith” is not a reference to his faithful law-abiding life but more properly denotes confidence in the eschatological reward of God in the midst of suffering.

David deSilva draws attention to the relevance of the book of Revelation for the debate in its representation of faith and faithfulness. He acknowledges the overall significance of the semantic domain of the πιστ-word group and he is cognizant of Barry Matlock’s observation that varying uses of nouns and verbs can appear within a single span of text and that less ambiguous constructions should clarify the potentially more ambiguous ones. Here deSilva covers the semantic evocations of the adjective πιστός and the noun πίστις in Revelation (the verb πιστεύω does not appear in the book). In his view, John the Seer’s use of the adjectival form places emphasis on the quality of loyalty or faithfulness as part of John’s program to promote an ethos of discipleship characterized by fidelity to Jesus and God. Jesus himself is a reliable witness (Rev. 1:5; 3:14), and in deSilva’s reckoning this is evocative of the trustworthiness of Jesus’ word. He identifies in Revelation 2:19; 13:10 an employment of πίστις as connoting the moral quality of “trust” and “faithfulness”, while in Revelation 2:13 and 14:12 πίστις carries the sense of an objective genitive evoking “faithfulness” shown towards Jesus. According to deSilva, John the Seer does not use πίστις / πιστός to evoke the sense of an inner disposition of trust in regard to what is trustworthy. In his view, John casts discipleship in terms of imitating the pattern of Jesus especially with respect to Jesus’ own faithfulness – even if the direction and object of that faithfulness (towards God or towards the disciples) is not explicated. For deSilva this is part of John’s larger agenda of fostering a Christian witness under trying circumstances.

Part V attempts to push the horizons of the debate wider than usual by taking into account insights from church history and perspectives from systematic theology. Mark Elliott surveys material from the Apostolic Fathers, the church fathers, the medieval period, and even from some modern christological debates about Jesus’ faith (done largely in dialogue with Ian Wallis and R.A. Harrisville). He contests the study of Wallis and maintains that the objective genitive seems to have been the norm among the church fathers. However, Elliott does detect in Ignatius

of Antioch a more complex relationship between Jesus and “faith” in so far as Jesus is author of faith, and he is faithful in so far as God is faithful. He finds much the same in medieval studies of faith and Jesus, but he notes how the Catholic tradition of modern theology has given more room to accommodate a place for Jesus’ own faith (e.g., Balthasar). Elliott concludes that the attempt to reintroduce Jesus’ faith/faithfulness into theology is an attempt to emphasize the earthly humanity of Jesus as a factor in salvation. Unfortunately it does so only by going against the grain of Christian tradition and Christian theology.

Benjamin Myers draws attention to Karl Barth’s unique contribution to the debate through his conception of God’s faithfulness as revealed in the πίστις of Jesus. He detects a pervasive Paulinism, running from Barth’s *Römerbrief* to the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, which places God’s operations in the context of cosmic apocalyptic action rather than seeing them as the outcome of salvation-history. Myers shows how Barth regards faith as essentially God’s faithfulness revealed in Jesus Christ, and human faith as the obedience that participates in Jesus’ own obedience to the Father. Myers also regards the construal of the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate as a contest between “anthropological” and “christological” readings to be a false dichotomy since Barth’s own model shows that the human subject need not be erased in order to make room for divine action.