



## JULIAN THE APOSTATE AND THE ΠΙΣΤΙΣ OF ABRAHAM\*

### ABSTRACT

*In his brief comments on the Abraham-episodes of Genesis 15:1–11, Emperor Julian the Apostate indirectly attacks the apostle Paul’s interpretation that Abraham exhibited πίστις as a justifying ‘faith’. Through a close reading of the biblical text, he interprets Abraham as, rather, receiving a divine πίστις—a ‘pledge’ or ‘confirming sign’—during two theurgical rituals. Although modern scholars have overlooked Julian’s subtle argument, Cyril of Alexandria recognized Julian’s strategy and responded directly. Attention to Julian’s and Cyril’s competing accounts shows that different conceptual grammars, tied to rival traditional narratives, lay behind their incompatible claims to Abraham and his πίστις.*

**Keywords:** Julian; Abraham; Cyril of Alexandria; *pistis*; theurgy; religious epistemology; conceptual grammar

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Gen. 15:6 in Jewish and Christian traditions. The declaration that Abraham ‘believed’ (LXX ἐπίστευσεν) God/the Lord who ‘reckoned it to him as righteousness’ spawned a multitude of developments in early through second-temple Jewish thought.<sup>1</sup> Then, in his Epistle to the Galatians and in his Epistle to the Romans the apostle Paul cemented the passage in Christianity by using it as the grounds for treating Abraham as the father of Jews and Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> It would be impossible to quantify its influence in early Christian thought through modern scholarship, where Gen. 15:6 continues to draw interest for (among other reasons) the connection between Abraham’s πίστις and Christ’s.<sup>3</sup>

This centrality of Gen. 15:6 in emerging Christianity highlights the exegetical and intellectual ingenuity of Rome’s last pagan emperor, Julian (died 363), whose rearing in the church made him, from a Christian perspective, ‘the Apostate’ after his embrace of Iamblichean Neoplatonism. In his now-fragmentary tract written against Christians,

\* My thanks to Matthew Crawford, Aaron Johnson and Nathan Tilley for helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> B. Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith in Romans 4: Paul’s Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6* (Tübingen, 2007), 152–220; L.L. Bethune, ‘Abraham, father of faith: the interpretation of Genesis 15:6 from Genesis to Paul’ (Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1986). J. Levenson notes about Gen. 15:6 that ‘already two and a half centuries before Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians, some Jewish sources had detached the verse from its immediate context in Genesis 15 and interpreted it as a summary comment about the character of Abraham’s relationship to God’ (*Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* [Princeton, NJ, 2012], 120; see also 64–5).

<sup>2</sup> Gal. 3:2–9; Rom. 4:1–25.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of early Christian and rabbinic engagement over Gen. 15:6, see G. Stemberger, ‘Genesis 15 in rabbinic and patristic interpretation’ and J. Frishman, ‘“And Abraham had faith”: but in what? Ephrem and the Rabbis on Abraham and God’s blessings’, in E. Grypeou and H. Spurling (edd.), *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2009), 143–62 and 163–80 respectively. For an example of the role of Gen. 15:6 in modern debates over the πίστις Χριστοῦ, see G.H. Visscher, *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul: Faith Embraces the Promise* (New York, 2009), 135–220.

*Against the Galileans* (hereafter *C. Gal.*), Julian devotes several paragraphs to the two narrative episodes that flank Gen. 15:6. Although he does not comment directly on the sixth verse, his subtle suggestions about its surrounding episodes show that this central verse was indeed his target—or, more precisely, how its import has been misconstrued by Christians since Paul. For Paul, Abraham's πίστις was the pivotal principle by which membership in Abraham's family (and thus in God's people) extended beyond Israel. Based on Gen. 15:6, he concludes that 'those ἐκ πίστεως—those are the ones who are sons of Abraham' (Gal. 3:6–7). And that includes Gentiles.

Julian, too, found πίστις at play in Abraham's story. Though Genesis 15 has only the verbal form ἐπίστευσεν, Julian (following Paul)<sup>4</sup> uses the noun πίστις. Also like Paul, Julian looked to Abraham for lessons in religious epistemology and practice. But, taking advantage of the term's wide semantic range, he subtly incorporates πίστις as something different from—and even antithetical to—Paul's sense of 'faith'.<sup>5</sup> Julian pushes beyond the common trope of Abraham as an astrologer and diviner, and he appeals to the fine texture of Genesis 15 to depict Abraham as an early but skilled theurgist in the Hellenic tradition.<sup>6</sup> Far from being a meritorious 'faith' that resides in the *human* actor, πίστις for Julian is rather an ingredient in theurgic rituals and derives from the *divine* actor as confirmation of a divine message. Julian knew that the emergence of Christianity as the legitimate extension of ancient Judaism depended absolutely on Paul's reading of Genesis 15. By providing a rival construal of Abraham's πίστις, he sought to undercut Gentile Christians' self-understanding as children of Abraham 'by faith' at a fundamental juncture.

Although scholarship on Julian (rightly) notes the Hellenistic tropes about Abraham,<sup>7</sup> to my knowledge, the centrality of πίστις in his interpretation (and thus the argument's deeper bite) has gone entirely unnoticed—at least among Julian's modern readers. Cyril of Alexandria (died 444), who preserves almost all our extant fragments of Julian's treatise, knew exactly what Julian was attempting: in his response, Cyril summarizes that Julian 'perverted' the 'πίστις of the Holy Scriptures'.<sup>8</sup> The penultimate section of this article will return to Cyril's counter-construal of Abraham, and the conclusion will draw on that comparison to suggest that incommensurable conceptual grammars underlie the linguistic differences in Julian's and Cyril's arguments about Abraham's πίστις. But first, the article provides a brief overview of

<sup>4</sup> From the statement ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραὰμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην (Gen. 15:6), Paul extrapolates in Rom. 4:4–5 that πιστεύοντι δὲ ... λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην (cf. 4:13–25).

<sup>5</sup> For Paul's sense, see LSJ s.v. πίστις I; for Julian's, s.v. πίστις II. For a recent study of the semantic range of πίστις, see T. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> For tropes about Abraham as astrologer in Hellenistic literature, see E.S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley, 1998), 146–53; A.Y. Reed, 'Abraham as Chaldean scientist and father of the Jews: Josephus, *Ant.* 1.154–68, and the Greco-Roman discourse about astronomy/astrology', *JSJ* 35 (2004), 119–58; J. Siker, 'Abraham in Graeco-Roman paganism', *JSJ* 18 (1987), 188–208; L. Feldman, 'Abraham the Greek philosopher in Josephus', *TAPhA* 99 (1968), 143–56.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Bouffartigue's treatment of Julian's fragments on Abraham in *L'empereur Julien et la culture de son temps* (Paris, 1992), 395; A. Finkelstein, *The Specter of the Jews: Emperor Julian and the Rhetoric of Ethnicity in Syrian Antioch* (Oakland, CA, 2018), 15, 63, 78, *passim*; W.J. Malley, *Hellenism and Christianity* (Rome, 1978), 335–8; J.G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Tübingen, 2004), 276–9.

<sup>8</sup> *Against Julian* (hereafter *C. Iul.*) 10.40.1–2 (C. Riedweg, W. Kinzig and T. Brüggemann [edd.], *Kyrrill von Alexandrien: Gegen Julian*, 2 vols. [Boston, 2016–2017]). All translations are mine.

*C. Gal.* and its argument, followed by a close reading of fr. 87–8 revealing how Julian appropriated Abraham as a Hellenic theurgist. A wider look at the theurgical tradition on which Julian drew follows, showing how he inserted Abraham into a different (namely Hellenic) interpretative world that gave rival meaning and intelligibility to Abraham's πίστις and practices in Genesis 15.

#### JULIAN'S AGAINST THE GALILEANS

Wilken wrote of Julian that 'Few critics of the Christians could command such inside knowledge of biblical interpretation and theological reasoning.'<sup>9</sup> Julian's early life explains something of how he came by this 'inside knowledge' and why he turned it against Christians. The half-nephew of Emperor Constantine, Julian was a first-generation native of the Christian-favouring Empire. After Constantine died, his heirs kept Julian away from the imperial centre, having spared his life probably only because of his young age.<sup>10</sup> Even in quasi-exile, however, Julian received a world-class education under the watch of bishops, in both the curriculum of classical *paideia* and Christian Scriptures.<sup>11</sup> According to Cyril, he was baptized,<sup>12</sup> and Gregory of Nazianzus reports that he was an official 'reader' in the church.<sup>13</sup>

Julian himself recounts his departure at age 20 from Christianity, reportedly under the influence of students of Iamblichus.<sup>14</sup> He kept his new commitments secret for almost a decade, but after Emperor Constantius died unexpectedly in 361 and Julian became the uncontested emperor, he quickly reopened the pagan temples and restored the traditional cultic sacrifices.<sup>15</sup> A thinly veiled 'myth' of his own telling suggests that he considered himself personally selected by the gods to restore the empire to its former grandeur.<sup>16</sup>

Two groups could not be accommodated within Julian's generally inclusive vision for religious and philosophical reform:<sup>17</sup> the Cynics and the Christians (whom he derisively called 'Galileans' to denote their lowly, geographically peripheral origins).<sup>18</sup> Rather than physical coercion,<sup>19</sup> Julian resorted to rhetoric and argument, producing two

<sup>9</sup> R. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw them* (New Haven, CT, 2003<sup>2</sup>), 191.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 22–3.

<sup>11</sup> For Julian's early educations, see P. Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian and Hellenism: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 1981), 13–30. Eunapius reports in *VS* that young Julian knew the Scriptures 'so thoroughly by heart' that his early teachers 'fretted at the scantiness of their erudition, since there was nothing that they could teach the boy' (*Philostratus and Eunapius: The Lives of the Sophists*, transl. W.C. Wright [Cambridge, MA, 1922], 429).

<sup>12</sup> *C. Iul. Praef.* 3.22–3.

<sup>13</sup> *Or.* 4.97.

<sup>14</sup> For Julian's retrospective recounting, see *Ep.* 111.434d. Eunapius reports about Julian's influences in *VS* (Wright [n. 11], 427–39); Athanassiadi-Fowden (n. 11), 31–7.

<sup>15</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 22.5.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Or.* 7.227c–234c.

<sup>17</sup> Julian suggested, for example, that many leading claims from philosophical schools about describing the good life were different paths to the same destination (*Or.* 6.184c–186b).

<sup>18</sup> See A. Marcone, 'The forging of a Hellenic orthodoxy: Julian's speeches against the Cynics', in N. Baker-Brian and S. Tougher (edd.), *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate* (Llandysul, 2012), 239–50.

<sup>19</sup> See H.C. Teitler, *The Last Pagan Emperor: Julian the Apostate and the War Against Christianity* (New York, 2017).

treatises against the Cynics as well as *C. Gal.*, composed mere months before his death on a Persian battlefield in 363.

Though *C. Gal.* exists only in fragments, Julian's treatment of Genesis 15 is still locatable in the treatise's broader context. He explains his principal goal as exposing the 'fabrication of the Galileans' as a 'forgery' by mapping their double apostasy.<sup>20</sup> Originally members of Julian's own Hellenic tradition, Galileans opted to forsake the worship of all the gods and join a lesser people who worship only one member of the divine cosmic hierarchy: the Hebrews, whose local ruling god spoke through Moses. Julian found this first apostasy puzzling but intelligible—they moved *from* a superior Hellenic tradition which, in its broad scope, mapped the world's many cultic and religious traditions and *to* one of those localized inferior traditions. But he found the second apostasy inexcusable. Julian traces within the early Hebrew tradition a deviant strand represented by the prophets, who subtly but fundamentally corrupted Moses' teachings and texts.<sup>21</sup> This strand eventually catalyzed the full-blown apostasy of the Christian sect, which began almost as if by accident and then, after early populist successes, took off. The descent of the Galileans is tragic in cosmic proportions: no longer worshipping or receiving care from the greatest of gods with the Hellenes, or even *one* of the gods with the Hebrews, their second apostasy left them with no gods whatsoever, leading instead to worshipping a 'corpse of the Jews' (fr. 43.16).

Julian's rhetorical strategy can be aptly described as 'outnarration'.<sup>22</sup> His contemporary Christians had a way of construing ancient Israel, Moses, the prophets, et al. as part of the story that explains their own identity and place in the cosmos. They told a narrative with a cosmic scope that traced the work of God—starting with creation, leading through the election of Abraham and Moses' revelation given to his descendants, and culminating in Jesus and the Age of the Church. Julian's goal was to show that this Christian narrative was true to neither the facts of history nor religious experience. He undermined the Christian story partly by showing inconsistencies within the account, such as the Christians' claim to be heirs of Moses while not following his 'eternal' laws.<sup>23</sup> But his goal was also to show that the characters and events that fail to make sense in the Christian version become intelligible when reinterpreted in his own Hellenic narrative. Julian insists that careful attention to Moses' texts reveals that he was one of the world's many sages who, under the supervision and guidance of the Hebrews' local deity, provided wisdom and cultic prescriptions for his people. Such an understanding of Moses makes perfect sense in Julian's Hellenic construal of the cosmos, and he spends much of his energy in *C. Gal.* illustrating in detail how well Moses' texts make sense against this Hellenic backdrop.

Julian took his outnarrating project forward after Moses—through the prophets, Israel's tumultuous political history, and Jesus and his opportunistic early followers—and right down to his present day. But he also took the outnarrating project backward in Israel's history to their traditional founder, Abraham.

<sup>20</sup> *C. Gal.* fr. 1.1–3 (E. Masaracchia [ed.], *Giuliano imperatore: Contra Galilaeos, introduzione, testo critico e traduzione* [Rome, 1990]). All translations are mine.

<sup>21</sup> See especially frs. 34 and 58 and, for a more extensive analysis, next n.

<sup>22</sup> For a fuller explanation of 'outnarration', see B. Boswell, 'Moses the Hellenic sage: re-reading *Against the Galileans*', *J ECS* 30.2 (2022), 245–74.

<sup>23</sup> Julian offers to give 'not only 10 but 10,000 witnesses from the [laws] of Moses' attesting to those laws' enduring force (fr. 75.6–9).

## THE ΠΙΣΤΙΣ OF ABRAHAM

The final step in Julian's argument of *C. Gal.* is to show how the Galileans departed from the Hebrew tradition and 'turned themselves onto their own way' (ιδίαν ὁδόν).<sup>24</sup> His comments on Abraham come at the very end of our extant fragments, where he provides example after example of how Christians abandoned the Hebrew tradition. Toward the end of this litany, Julian introduces Abraham who, he insists, was Chaldean and thus 'from a holy and theurgic (θεουργικοῦ) race'. Though he acknowledges not observing the Jewish festivals, Julian claims to 'worship always the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', unlike the Christians who fail to imitate Abraham's practices, like his frequent building of sacrificial altars (fr. 86.7–15).

Though Julian's introductory remarks about Abraham largely mirror stock treatments of Abraham as a Chaldean, his interpretation of Genesis 15 in the following two fragments take the argument to a new level. In these fragments, both aspects of the outnarrating strategy outlined above are at play. Julian posits an internal incoherence in Christian claims about Abraham, who cannot make sense as the forerunner of Christians because they do not imitate his cultic worship. He also insists that Abraham does make sense as an ancient Hellenic-style theurgist. Both objectives are accomplished simultaneously by his interpretation of Genesis 15. After tracing Julian's argument, we can consider the subtle role πίστις plays.

'Abraham', Julian begins, 'used to sacrifice like we, too, do—always and continually. And he used the divinatory art (μυντικῆ) connected to shooting stars—this, equally, is also Hellenic—and, even more impressively, he bird-augured (οἰωνίζετο δὲ μειζόνως)' (*C. Gal.* fr. 87.1–4). With this summary, Julian provides the outline for two exegetical arguments, tied respectively to Genesis 15:1–6 (illustrating astrological skill) and 15:7–11 (illustrating bird-auguring).<sup>25</sup>

Julian intentionally grounds his arguments in the religiously authoritative text of Genesis: 'But if any of you are unsure, I will clearly point out the very things that were said by Moses about these matters'. He then quotes the LXX Genesis passage (essentially verbatim) where Abraham asks how he will receive a promised 'very great reward' while childless. 'Immediately', quotes Julian from Genesis, 'there came to him a voice from god (φωνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ)', which promised that Abraham would have a son of his own as inheritor (Gen. 15:4; fr. 87.5–11).

Understanding Julian's argument requires careful reading of his next biblical excerpt. Gen. 15:5 says ἐξήγαγε[ν] δὲ αὐτὸν [ἐξέω] καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ—'and he/it took him out and said to him ...'. The sentence's subject is not entirely clear: it might seem to be 'god', but to realize what Julian is suggesting, we must note that it was a φωνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ that came to Abraham (15:4), and not, strictly speaking, God himself.

Regardless of the identity of the voice's owner, Abraham is then taken outside and shown the stars, after which he believes, and this act 'is reckoned to him as righteousness' (Gen. 15:6). After quoting these verses, Julian poses a question and subtly recalls the ambiguous "φωνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ": 'Why did the one delivering the oracle—whether an angel or a god (ὁ χρηματίζων ἄγγελος ἢ θεός)—take him out and show him the stars?'

<sup>24</sup> For Julian's own outline of his argument, see fr. 3.1–8.

<sup>25</sup> Julian also suggests that Abraham employed a συμβολικόν—something like a divinatory sign-reader—in his house, though he seems not to have pursued the claim further. If Cyril's response accurately reflects Julian's drift, then Julian was referring to Abraham's anonymous servant in Genesis 24 who sought out a wife for Isaac (*C. Iul.* 10.41.14–46).

Did [Abraham] not know while he was inside how great the multitude of stars is ...? If Abraham already knew the stars' vast number, Julian intimates, then he did not need to go outside to see how many offspring he would have. What was the point, then (fr. 87.16–19)?

Julian suggests that the angel/God 'wanted to show the shooting [stars] to him, to offer the heaven's decree (which fulfils and obtains all things) as a clear πίστις for the words (τῶν ῥημάτων ἐναργῆ πίστιν)' (fr. 87.20–1). In other words, the truth of the message given to Abraham is confirmed in the astrological practice. Here emerges the first hint of what Abraham's πίστις is, for Julian: a clear 'assurance' or 'guarantee' of a prior promise of divine origin. The sequence of events in Gen. 15:1–6 thus manifests an ancient Hebrew version of the sort of astrological divination familiar in Julian's Hellenic tradition.

To show that this interpretation is not 'forced', Julian says that he will 'confirm' (πιστώσομαι) Abraham's divinatory prowess with the second episode in Gen. 15:7–11. As before, he quotes essentially verbatim from Genesis, wherein the god (θεός) appears again to Abraham and promises him a land. Abraham then addresses this being as 'lord master' (δέσποτα κύριε) and asks how he can know he will receive this second promise. In response, Abraham receives instructions for a sacrificial ritual in which he gathers, cuts in two, and arranges several animals. Birds then fly down to the sacrifice, and 'Abraham sat with them'.

Julian then offers his interpretation. He again subtly highlights the ambiguous identity of the interlocutor while also identifying a precise order of operations that culminate in a confirming sign: 'See how the prediction of the angel—or god (ἀγγέλου ... ἦτοι θεοῦ)—who appeared was strengthened through the omen, not as we (ἡμεῖς) do in an incidental manner, but with the divination perfected (τῆς μαντείας ἐπιτελουμένης) along with the sacrifices.'<sup>26</sup> At this point, reconstructing the precise original text becomes more difficult. Cyril's text has φησὶ δέ, which typically indicates that he is no longer excerpting a continuous passage of *C. Gal.* Whatever the case, Cyril reports Julian as claiming that this 'prediction' was then shown 'secure (βεβαίαν) by a flight of birds' (fr. 88.14–19). Cyril's authorial voice again breaks in to remind readers that Abraham's πίστις is still Julian's focus (*C. Gal.* fr. 88.19–23 = *C. Iul.* 10.39.18–22). Cyril says:

And [Julian] brings up the πίστις of Abraham, and he adds that 'any πίστις without the reality (ἀληθείας) seems to be silliness and folly. It is impossible to see the reality from a bare word (ῥήματος), but it is necessary that following on the words there be a clear sign (ἐναργὲς σημεῖον) which, when it occurs, will confirm the prophecy that is made about the future.'

Julian seems to have detected in Gen. 15:7–11 a precise order of operations that follows the pattern of the dramatic action of 15:1–6. First, there is the reception of a message from the divine (a φωνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ reporting ῥήματα in 1–6 and a πρόρρησις from an ἄγγελος/θεός in 7–11), then a classic ritual (scrutinizing the heavens, and offering a carefully arranged animal sacrifice), and finally the appearance of a divine omen

<sup>26</sup> Some editors prefer the variant reading ὑμεῖς instead of ἡμεῖς—in which case Julian is suggesting that the pattern of prophecy-fulfilment alleged by Christians is erratic and unconvincing. But if ἡμεῖς stands, Julian can be read as offering a passing critique of his co-religionists' lax practices (like he does in *Mis.* 361d–362b) and as upholding Abraham's piety as instructive. Finkelstein probably overstates how much Julian looked to Jewish practice for his Hellenic reform program, but the thesis plausibly fits this comment in fr. 88 ([n. 7], 66–85).

(the shooting stars and the flight of birds). In the first episode, Julian explicitly calls the omen a πίστις. For the second, Julian offers a general principle: the ‘word’ of a promise requires a clear σημεῖον that ‘confirms’ (πιστώσεται) the ἀλήθεια, and the σημεῖον of his principle seems correlated with πίστις. In both episodes, then, Abraham follows a multistep process of discerning and confirming a divine message, and πίστις is something that comes from the divine side at the end of the procedure to confirm the initial message.

Julian’s familiarity with the Christian Scriptures has long been acknowledged as central to his anti-Christian argument, but the interpretative ingenuity he brings to Genesis 15 is noteworthy. He looks for odd details in the text as indicators of deeper meaning. After all, why did Abraham’s first interlocutor take him outside, given that he already knew the stars’ countless number? And why does the text bother mentioning extraneous birds that join the sacrificial scene and with whom Abraham merely ‘sits’? Julian implies that such details create problems for Christian interpretations of Abraham in Genesis 15: Christians, who claim (based on 15:6) to be heirs of Abraham through πίστις, cannot provide adequate explanations for all the details in their central passage.

But this troubling of Christian claims about Abraham is only one layer of Julian’s argument. While exegetically dislodging Abraham from the Christian interpretative framework, Julian also inscribes him in the Hellenic interpretative world. We have already noted the broad (and stock) framework of this renarration of Abraham: he was an accomplished theurgist from Chaldea. What remains now is to see how Julian plots Abraham in the fine-grained details of the world of Hellenic theurgy.

#### THEURGY, THE DIVINE HIERARCHY AND ΠΙΣΤΙΣ

Before assessing the full weight of Julian’s comments on πίστις, noting several theurgic resonances that Julian discovers in Genesis 15 will highlight his larger strategy of renarrating Abraham. For example, on Christian and Jewish readings, Abraham directly interacted with the one true God. But, as is emphasized above, Julian repeatedly observes that Genesis 15 is ambiguous about the identity of Abraham’s interlocutor, and he suggests that it makes better sense to read Abraham as interacting with other actors in the Neoplatonically defined cosmic hierarchy—as would a proto-Hellenic theurgist. As Johnston has explained, ‘theurgic metaphysics and theurgic soteriology—and therefore the rituals that drew upon the metaphysics and that underpinned the soteriology—all depended upon the concept of a stratified cosmos that became increasingly pure as one ascended, but also upon the possibility of interaction between humans and the entities inhabiting those higher strata.’<sup>27</sup> Although the steps of theurgic ascent were not rigidly standardized—it was a secretive affair<sup>28</sup>—the extant texts of Neoplatonism reveal discernible patterns, several of which are connected with the precise workings of the

<sup>27</sup> S.I. Johnston, ‘Magic and theurgy’, in D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden, 2019), 694–719, at 703–5.

<sup>28</sup> Iamblichus himself noted that, after a successful ritual of ascent, ‘only the theurgists know these things exactly through having made trial of them in practice’ (*Myst.* 229.13–230.5; translations from E.C. Clarke, J.M. Dillon, J.P. Hershbell [edd.], *Iamblichus: De Mysteriis* [Atlanta, 2003]). See also G. Luck, ‘Theurgy and forms of worship in Neoplatonism’, in J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs, P.V.M. Flesher (edd.), *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict* (New York, 1989), 165–94, at 187–8.

'stratified cosmos'. Of chief import to the present argument is that theurgists 'posited that there was an order of *angeloi* that was in charge of helping to illuminate souls' for ascent.<sup>29</sup> The theurgist did not go directly to the highest ranks of the divine but rather required assistance from lower orders. Julian reflects this understanding of the cosmos more clearly than in *C. Gal.* in his *Hymn to Helios*, where he explores how the soul moves through the cosmos' complex structure.<sup>30</sup> Souls once descended through its layers in Helios' 'divine rays', and through them they can eventually reascend by fellowship with 'those beings akin to God (τοῦ θεοῦ συγγενεῖς)' (152b). Such intermediaries may include what he explicitly calls elsewhere 'solar angels' (ἡλιακοὶ ἄγγελοι) (141b, 142a).<sup>31</sup>

With this wider background in mind, Julian's implied questions about the identity of Abraham's interlocutor(s) become significant: might the imprecise wording of Genesis betray an awareness about how theurgic interaction with the divine works? Could it be that not a 'god', strictly speaking, took Abraham outside, but a lower-order 'angel', who would help Abraham in the theurgic processes? One of Iamblichus' concerns in *De Mysteriis* was to rebut the suggestion that theurgical activities compelled the gods to descend to the theurgist, and he used the concept of the 'stratified cosmos' to explain human-divine interaction. Commenting specifically on divining with 'birds and stars', he explains: 'The gods produce the signs either by means of nature, which is subservient to them for the creation of each thing ... or through the agency of some daemons concerned with creation, who ... guide the phenomena' (*Myst.* 135.4, 135.10–15).<sup>32</sup> Such a concern to show that 'the gods are not brought down to the signs of divination' (143.10–11) could very well be behind Julian's reticence to identify Abraham's interlocutor unequivocally as 'god'. Though he does not spell out the Iamblichean cosmology in detail, Julian has left a breadcrumb trail for the curious reader to follow.<sup>33</sup>

Attention to a theurgic backdrop to Julian's interpretations is further suggestive: although Julian seems not to have cited the pericope's concluding verses (Gen. 15:12–20), another possible breadcrumb trail is discernible. In the uncited verses, a 'trance' (ἔκστασις) falls on Abraham, and several promises 'are said' to him

<sup>29</sup> Johnston (n. 27), 712.

<sup>30</sup> See J. Dillon, 'The theology of Julian's *Hymn to King Helios*', *Itaca: Quaderns Catalans de Cultura Clàssica* 14–15 (1999), 103–15.

<sup>31</sup> For Julian's theurgic reasoning, see I. Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition* (Göttingen, 2013), 136–48, according to which his writings suggest 'an open, general conception of theurgy as the highest degree of performance of whatever cultic activity', including the Hebrew Abraham's cultic example (140–1).

<sup>32</sup> Iamblichus does allot these methods to the lower, 'constructed form of divination' (τὸ τεχνικὸν εἶδος τῆς μαντικῆς, 135.3–6), but, as the quotation shows, they are still legitimate divinatory rituals.

<sup>33</sup> Evidence from contemporary Jewish debate further supports these speculations about Julian's intent to trouble the identity of Abraham's interlocutor. In the fourth-century compilation *Genesis Rabbah* (44:16.1.D), two rabbis are preserved as commenting on Gen. 15:4: 'It is written, "And behold the Lord ..." meaning that he in person came and spoke with him [and not through angels]'. J. Neusner suggests that 'At issue is whether God spoke through angels and other intermediaries or directly. The polemic ... is to set aside the notion that some other power, e.g. astrological or angelic, intervenes between Abram and God' (*Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis* [Atlanta, 1985], 1.132–3). This rebuke from Jewish scholars suggests that someone(s) wanted to frame the Abraham-story in a way incompatible with Jewish notions of divine interaction with the world. Julian's treatment of Abraham is an example of the kind of appropriation that might have evoked this rabbinic response. As an anonymous reader helpfully pointed out, Julian was not the first to interpret Genesis 15 in a way that unsettled Jewish commentators (see Philo, *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.8–9; Joseph. *AJ* 1.183–5), though his anti-Pauline focus on πίστις shaped his approach in novel ways.



(ἐρρέθη).<sup>34</sup> After dark, a ‘flame’ appears, and a ‘smoking vessel’ and a ‘lamp of fire’ pass through the middle of the severed animals that Abraham had prepared (15:12, 15:17).

Theurgic rituals and the divine communion they initiated were suffused with fire and light. The ‘theurgic entities’ themselves were ‘fiery and filled with light’; one category of rituals was known as φωταγωγία, ‘leading in light’.<sup>35</sup> The associations of light and fire in such rituals run from the *Chaldean Oracles*, one of the earliest sources for theurgic Neoplatonism, to Julian’s revered master, Iamblichus.<sup>36</sup> Iamblichus even discusses ‘divination in dreams’ in terms which, to a reader also familiar with Genesis 15, might immediately evoke Abraham’s revelation in a trance. Iamblichus says that true ‘godsent dreams’ often include a ‘sudden voice guiding us about things to be done’. At other times, ‘when a light shines brightly and peacefully, not only is the sight of the eye possessed, but it is also closed up after previously being quite open. And the other senses are awake and consciously aware of how the gods shine forth in the light ...’. Sometimes there is a ‘seizure similar to a blackout’ (*Myst.* 103.5–104.13).<sup>37</sup> It is entirely speculative, of course, to suggest that Julian thought of this passage from *De Mysteriis* when he read about Abraham’s ἔκστασις.<sup>38</sup> But the speculation illustrates the kind of subtle intimations he may have intended. Upon reading Genesis 15, Julian spotted a suggestive constellation of common theurgic ingredients in Abraham’s story, and he set a framework for readers familiar with the Neoplatonic tradition to follow his interpretative cues and thereby uncover further layers of meaning, as disclosed by the Hellenic interpretative world.

Such interpretative possibilities might have troubled attentive and learned Christians, but only if they followed out implicit lines of exegetical reasoning. Julian is explicit, however, about πίστις. Were Gen. 15:6 not central to Paul and subsequent Christians, Julian’s use of the term might seem incidental. But πίστις offers Julian an opportunity to illustrate simultaneously Abraham’s explanatory fitness in the Hellenic world and his resultant implausibility in the Christians’ self-constituting narrative. When Julian included πίστις in his analysis of Abraham’s order of theurgical operations and identified it as a confirming sign, he was situating Abraham in the established warp and woof of the Neoplatonic interpretative world, as further comments from Iamblichus will verify.

Julian’s correlation of σημεῖον and πίστις is the hinge of his reworking of Abraham’s πίστις. His central claim (which follows his recounting of Abraham’s divided sacrifices

<sup>34</sup> Julian would surely want us to note the passive formulation, allowing the speaker to remain unidentified.

<sup>35</sup> Johnston (n. 27), 709. In one of the few places where he mentions ‘theurgists’ explicitly, Julian speaks of a ‘divine light’ (τὸ θεῖον φῶς) that illuminates the soul in a properly executed ritual (ἀγιστεῖα) (*Or.* 5.178b–d).

<sup>36</sup> Johnston (n. 27), 710 n. 69 points to fr. 107 of the *Chaldean Oracles* and to *Myst.* 175.12–180.4 for examples. For an overview of the *Chaldean Oracles*, see P. Athanassiadi, ‘The *Chaldean Oracles*: theology and theurgy’, in P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (edd.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999), 149–84; S.I. Johnston and J. Finamore, ‘The *Chaldean Oracles*’, in L. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2000), 1.161–73.

<sup>37</sup> See also 113.6–10 for the suggestive correlation of light, fire and a trance-like state: ‘if the presence of the gods’ fire and an ineffable form of light from without invades the person possessed, these fill him completely with their power, and encompass him in a circle on all sides, so that he is not able to exercise any activity of his own; what sensation or consciousness or appropriate intuition would come to the one receiving divine fire?’

<sup>38</sup> Julian associates sleep, ἔκστασις and divine visions within his own autobiographical ‘myth’ (see n. 7 above). After his character utters a prayer, a ‘kind of sleep or ἔκστασις’ comes over him, and Helios appears (*Or.* 7.231b).

in Gen. 15:7–11) is worth citing again: ‘any πίστις without the reality seems to be silliness and folly. It is impossible to see the reality from a bare word, but it is necessary that following on the words there be a clear sign (ἐναργές σημεῖον) which, when it occurs, will confirm the prophecy that is made about the future’ (fr. 88.20–3). This formula strongly correlates σημεῖον and πίστις, and perhaps even equates them, given Julian’s parallel use of the same adjective (ἐναργές) for each term: after calling the shooting stars an ἐναργῆ πίστιν (fr. 87), Julian claims that an ἐναργές σημεῖον must confirm a prophetic word (fr. 88).<sup>39</sup>

This lexical association was embedded in Neoplatonic discourse, which reveals Julian’s interpretation to be an attempt to legitimately claim Abraham as a Hellenic theurgist. Iamblichus frequently speaks of the role of divine σημεῖα in divinatory acts, and at one point he also uses πίστις language in a way resonant with Julian’s use for the Abraham-episodes. Concerned to show that the divine is not ‘brought down’ by such rituals, he explains that the very character of certain signs manifests their divine provenance: in giving signs with inanimate objects such as ‘little pebbles, rods, or certain woods’, the divine power makes itself evident, ‘because it gives life to inanimate things and motion to things motionless’. Similarly, he says, when a ‘simple-minded human’ utters profound wisdom, ‘it becomes clear to all that this is not some human but a divine accomplishment’. The role of these signs is partially epistemic: they make discernible their origin in divine power. As he goes on to explain: ‘the god manifests to humans that the signs (σημεῖα) shown are credible (πίστεως ἄξια)’ (*Myst.* 141.11–142.9).

Though Iamblichus’ use of πίστις may seem at first more like Paul’s than Julian’s, attending to the larger context of their religious epistemology shows that Julian’s synonymous use of πίστις and σημεῖον belongs to the same conceptual grammar as Iamblichus’ comment about σημεῖα which are πίστεως ἄξια. For both Iamblichus and Julian, the language of πίστις belongs to the explanation for what happens on the divine side of a divine–human revelatory interaction. The incompatibility with Paul’s use of πίστις for Abraham is clear: in Iamblichus’ and Julian’s religious epistemology, πίστις is part of the divine initiative to render the results of divination believable, and thus πίστις cannot be (as in Paul’s reading of Abraham) meritorious ‘faith’ that a human agent produces within divine–human interaction.

#### ABRAHAM’S ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ACCORDING TO CYRIL

Cyril recognized both Julian’s subtle strategy and what, in terms of religious epistemology, was at stake in correctly construing Abraham’s πίστις. Though his response quickly dismisses Julian’s comments on the first, star-gazing episode of Genesis 15 without referring to πίστις, he lingers over Julian’s comments on the second episode.<sup>40</sup> A variant

<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, in fr. 88.20–3 Julian could be invoking the Pauline sense of πίστις as ‘faith’ (unlike in fr. 87.20, where πίστις is a confirming token) to say that any ‘faith’ absent the ‘reality’ believed in would be silly—in which case he is suggesting that, whatever πίστις is, it cannot be an admirable ‘faith’ which credits righteousness (as Paul would have it). That interpretation, however, would mean that Julian is sharply switching senses of πίστις within a tightly executed argument, which I find less persuasive.

<sup>40</sup> Cyril insists that a straightforward reading of the star-gazing of 15:1–6 adequately accounts for all the details: God showed Abraham—who was old and without heir—the stars as a ‘clear example of an immeasurable host’ to emphasize the magnitude of the promise. Cyril insists that the text mentions

reading allows Cyril to bypass Julian's interest in Abraham sitting with birds, and he focusses instead on why Abraham would participate in such an elaborate animal sacrifice in the first place.<sup>41</sup>

In short, for Cyril, rather than being an ingredient from the divine side of a divinatory ritual, πίστις squarely resides within Abraham as the foundation of his theological knowing. Cyril explains that God's promise to fill the land with Abraham's offspring (Gen. 15:7) was hard to accept—'the magnitude of the promise seemed somehow greater than he could hope for'—so Abraham asked for a sign. Though 'the old man should not have doubted when God spoke to him', says Cyril, 'because he was still at the beginning of having faith (πιστεύειν) [God] condescended to him and confirmed in him a foundation for piety' (C. Iul. 10.40.14–23). Cyril then unpacks exactly what this divine 'condescension' entailed: the Chaldeans had an ancient custom of making their strongest oaths by 'passing through the middle of two halved things'—just like the 'fire' of Genesis 15 that passes through the divided animals.<sup>42</sup> To confirm that Abraham recognized God's accommodating use of contemporary practices, Cyril notes that God tells Abraham only to collect the requisite animals and says nothing about what to do with them: 'Even though God only gave a command to collect the materials, the holy Abraham, being very perceptive, added the remaining [details] and, according to the custom of swearing, he cut in two what had been slaughtered and placed them in rows.' The condescension thus lay in God's accommodation to Abraham's vestigial Chaldean habits. Though Abraham should have fully believed the promise without any signs, God decided to support and 'confirm' his incipient faith by initiating an oath-swearing process that Abraham immediately recognized (C. Iul. 10.40.24–33).

Just as Julian had generalized about the relationship between πίστις and ἀλήθεια, so too does Cyril, but he inverts Julian's formula (showing, again, that he takes the right understanding of πίστις to be the primary point of disagreement). Julian had insisted that 'Any πίστις without the reality (ἀληθείας) is folly.' Cyril retorts that, in the case of Abraham, 'Rather, the real thing (τὸ ἀληθές) was added to his πίστις', which came first. Abraham's initial 'belief' was given confirmation, but this confirming ritual was not strictly necessary to produce πίστις. In fact, Cyril insists that the kind of divinatory ritual that Julian postulated from Abraham's story would directly undermine authentic πίστις ('faith'), because such rituals attempt to extract information out of the divine realm. He writes: 'what is accepted by faith (τὸ πιστεῖ παραδεκτόν) must not be irreverently probed (ἀπολυπραγμόνητον) ... How can something that has been tested (τὸ βασιανίζόμενον) continue to be held by faith (ἔτι πεπίστευται)?' (C. Iul. 10.41.6–10). Though for Cyril βασιανίζειν often denotes simple 'investigating', he here invokes its sense of presumptive 'cross-questioning' or 'questioning by torture'.<sup>43</sup>

nothing of 'shooting stars' or a future-predicting 'course' of the heavens. Rather, God took Abraham outside at 'exactly the right moment', when he was going to tell Abraham that 'Your offspring will be like this' (C. Iul. 10.38.18–25).

<sup>41</sup> Cyril argues that the birds were probably meat-eating vultures and would have spoiled the carefully arranged offerings, so of course Abraham 'drove them off' (σεσόβηκεν), as his Gen. 15:11 variant says—not 'sat down with them' (συνεκάθισεν), which Julian thought implied bird-auguring (C. Iul. 10.41.1–5).

<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that the fire itself connects to the broader cultural background, as evidenced by Sophocles' example of an oath-making ritual with fire passing through things (*Ant.* 264–5).

<sup>43</sup> LSJ s.v. βασιανίζω A II.

Were such methods legitimate for obtaining knowledge from the divine realm, he suggests, it would imply that the theurgist had some power over the divine messengers. This would fundamentally undermine the πίστις ('faith') that God requires from a human agent and that Abraham evidenced when he 'believed' (ἐπίστευσεν) God. Following Paul, Cyril insisted that Abraham's πίστις came from Abraham himself as faith in, trust of, and belief in the self-revealing God.<sup>44</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: JULIAN, CHRISTIANITY AND SEMANTICS IN INTER-TRADITION DISAGREEMENT

It is often recognized that Julian thought Christians should, by their own lights, keep the law of Moses—which would functionally bring them back into the Hellenic world, if at an inferior level.<sup>45</sup> If the argument above is correct about Julian's targeted reformulation of Abraham's πίστις, however, it suggests that Julian's outnarration of Christianity is even more layered and linguistically complex. He fully recognized that Paul used Gen. 15:6 to argue that, as Jon Levenson has put it, 'Moses and his laws are, so to speak, a parenthesis between the faith of Abraham in the distant past and its restoration in the early Christian community.' Thus, '[b]y appealing to Abraham, Paul enables Jesus (as he understands him) to trump Moses.'<sup>46</sup> By reconstruing Abraham's πίστις as a divinely sent confirming sign within theurgic rituals, Julian cripples the rationale by which Paul reconceives the Mosaic law and argues that the God of Israel is the God of the Gentiles, too.

This article ends with two concluding notes. First: on the one hand, some of the possible reasons for the modern underreading of Julian's strategy in fr. 87–8 are understandable. The fragments are relatively short, and one can begin to ascertain Julian's goal merely by noting the generic portrayal of Abraham as an ancient diviner. On the other hand, certain ways of understanding Julian actively make it harder to discern his tactics. Some scholars object to portraying Julian as having left behind a first tradition for another. Boin has recently argued, for example, that Julian never really left 'Christianity', because his portrayal as an 'apostate' and his own claims about 'Hellenism' actually reflect *intra*-Christian social-identity dynamics.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Elm

<sup>44</sup> Though Cyril himself does not delve into the place of πίστις in epistemology, larger trends in Christian thought accentuate the role of πίστις in polemical encounters with other philosophical schools. G. Boys-Stones has recently argued that early Christians (and especially Clement, one of Cyril's frequent sources and a second-century Alexandrian predecessor) used the concept of πίστις to subordinate the thought of other philosophical schools ('Difference, opposition, and the roots of intolerance in ancient philosophical polemic', in G.H. van Kooten and J. van Ruiten [edd.], *Intolerance, Polemics, and Debate in Antiquity* [Leiden, 2019], 259–81).

<sup>45</sup> Julian says that had Christians remained with Moses they would have been 'not wholly unfortunate' since they would have been still worshipping a single god (if only one of the gods) rather than 'many unfortunate men' [i.e. martyrs] (fr. 47.5–8).

<sup>46</sup> Levenson (n. 1), 122.

<sup>47</sup> D. Boin, 'The Maccabees, "apostasy", and Julian's appropriation of *Hellenismos* as a reclaimed epithet in Christian conversations of the fourth century CE', in M. Ludlow and R. Flower (edd.), *Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2020), 49–64. On Julian's terminology of 'Hellenism', see Alan Cameron, 'Julian and Hellenism', *AncW* 24 (1993), 25–9. In contrast, P. Athanassiadi-Fowden has regularly pointed out that Julian adopted positions that preceded him within Neoplatonism, especially in Iamblichus, and that many of his strongest precedents were rooted in an established tradition other than Christianity: 'The creation of orthodoxy in Neoplatonism', in G. Clark and T. Rajak (edd.), *Philosophy and Power in the Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford, 2002),

has suggested in an otherwise illuminating study of Julian and Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril's near-contemporary, that, '[f]ocusing on what united rather than divides Julian the emperor and Gregory the Theologian reveals that the boundary between pagan and Christian was so porous that these terms lose their analytical value.' From such suggestions, one might wonder whether, in Julian's case, 'Christianity' and 'paganism' (or 'Hellenism') are intellectually substantial enough to be useful analytical categories.<sup>48</sup> But such portrayals risk obscuring more than they illuminate. To notice that Julian attacks Paul by locating Abraham's πίστις in the broader Neoplatonic discourse and practice, we must take seriously that he intimately knew two competing and well-developed visions of the cosmos, each of which had a textured place for Abraham's example.

Which points to the second conclusion, about language in inter-tradition disagreement. πίστις had a massive semantic range in antiquity, including both possibilities that Cyril and Julian gave for the Abraham-episodes: 'faith', as Christians such as Cyril would have it, and 'assurance' or a confirming 'pledge', as Julian interpreted. That range made possible Julian's renarration of Abraham as a Hellenic theurgist. But the exegetical disagreement between Julian and Christians such as Cyril points to deeper dynamics. Julian and Cyril each claimed Abraham as an early and representative practitioner from their own tradition and, as such, a paradigmatic place to reflect on religious epistemology and practice. They each saw Genesis 15 as instructive, and both thought that Abraham's πίστις illustrated something important about interaction with the divine. So, what was his πίστις, as it appeared in that set of events from Genesis 15?

It should be clear by now that their interpretative resources for answering this question derived from the respective tradition-framing narratives of Julian's Hellenism and Cyril's Christianity. For Julian, the cosmic story of a hierarchy of gods, accessible through theurgic rituals, explains what one needs to know to understand the Abraham-episodes. A πίστις confirms a divine message within a careful theurgic operation and is received from a divine interlocutor at the conclusion of a ritual, just as Abraham illustrates. For Cyril, πίστις is produced by a person (Abraham, paradigmatically) and is prerequisite for knowing and obtaining favour from God: he elsewhere calls πίστις that 'through which—and only through which—the divine is seen by humans' (*C. Iul.* 6.14.28–30). Abraham's performance of πίστις is intelligible in the story of God's progressive self-revelation through accommodating interactions with humanity.<sup>49</sup> The disagreement between Julian and Cyril over πίστις thus cannot be pinned to the word's semantic range—it must be pinned, rather, to the different conceptual grammars and interpretative worlds by which life in the cosmos becomes intelligible. Stanley Cavell once suggested that 'we learn language and learn the world *together*.'<sup>50</sup> If that is true, then learning the world through rivalling narratives can entail incommensurate languages, even when

271–91; Athanassiadi-Fowden (n. 11), 6–8, 121–60. For Julian's specifically Iamblican influence, see also G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA, 1995), 2.

<sup>48</sup> S. Elm, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley, 2012), 11; also M. Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures c. 360–430* (Aldershot, 2007), 29–30.

<sup>49</sup> For the theme of divine accommodation in early Christianity, see S.D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, NY, 1993).

<sup>50</sup> S. Cavell, 'Must we mean what we say?', in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, 2002<sup>2</sup>), 1–40, at 18 (emphasis original).

the same word-stock is in use.<sup>51</sup> What was Abraham's πίστις and, connectedly, right religious epistemology and practice? Julian's and Cyril's competing answers are literally worlds apart.

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<sup>51</sup> See also A. MacIntyre, 'Tradition and translation', in A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (South Bend, IN, 1989), 370–88; C.K. Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven, CT, 2016), 175–258.