

**RICHARD HOOKER'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF FAITH IN THE
A LEARNED AND COMFORTABLE SERMON OF THE CERTAINTIE AND
PERPETUITIE OF FAITH IN THE ELECT (1585)**

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Abstract. *A key aspect of Richard Hooker's doctrine of salvation is the epistemology of faith or his understanding of faith as means of knowledge, which is discussed primarily in his A Learned and Comfortable Sermon of the Certaintie and Perpetuitie of Faith in the Elect. The sermon was published in 1612, but it seems to have been delivered in 1585, when Hooker began his theological controversy with Walter Travers. The text of the sermon, Habakkuk 1:4 ("Therefore the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted"), proved to be the source of inspiration for other sermons, known under the name of A Learned Discourse of Justification, Workes, and How the Foundation of Faith is Overthrown. This particular sermon is of great importance because some of its theological themes are resumed by Hooker in other works, such as for instance Answer to Travers' Supplication and in the larger A Learned Discourse of Justification.*

Keywords: epistemology, faith, certainty, evidence, adherence

Introduction: Richard Hooker as Philosopher

Richard Hooker has been widely regarded as a philosopher primarily because of his use of the concept of reason. Although reason is present in Hooker's entire work, a special investigation of it proved to be a desired academic exercise, not so much by Hooker himself but rather by various scholars during the past two centuries. Accordingly, the research focused on reason and its influence on particular aspects of Hooker's thought, namely general and special revelation, and the doctrine of justification. Before the 1970s, scholars focused on Hooker's theories but they were not particularly interested in refuting each other's opinions. The academic spectrum changed, however, by the beginning of the 1970s. A new generation of scholars began seriously to question both Hooker's motivations in writing, and his proper work. Given this newly oriented research focus, the interaction between the different opinions on Hooker suddenly increased. The investigation concentrated on Hooker's idea of reason with special reference to different aspects of his theology. The research in this particular domain offers a salient image of Hooker that ranges from the shrewd controversialist to the mild pastor, and from the existentialist philosopher to the Reformed theologian. Opinions concerning the importance of reason as authority in theology beside Scripture obviously

differ. On the one hand, reason is of uttermost importance for Scripture, and there is no real knowledge of the supernatural without reason, because it is reason that proves the veridical character of Scripture. On the other hand, reason is important, but not vitally decisive, because Scripture is the sole authority that informs and transforms human life. Regardless, however, of how Hooker was perceived by various scholars in more or less recent scholarship, it is crucial to search his own perspective on what could be counted philosophical in his writings, namely the notion of reason and epistemology in general, as seen in his *Sermon on the Certaintie and Perpetuitie of Faith in the Elect* (1586).

Faith and Knowledge

Hooker begins his sermon with a description of his epistemology. This is very important to his theology as it sets the boundaries within which humans exercise their natural abilities in order to know and explore their existence. Although Hooker's first thought is directed towards faith, and the likelihood that faith is normally weaker rather than stronger even in holy people, like for instance the prophets, he then axiomatically establishes his twofold epistemology. The starting point of Hooker's epistemology begins from the delineation of two realms: the spiritual realm, and the natural realm. Hooker does not discuss whether there is an ontological gap between the two, although this should be apparent from his entire theology. At this point though, what is really clear in Hooker's formulation is that there is an epistemological gap between the spiritual and the natural realm. Thus he infers that there are two kinds of people. There are first natural men, and second, spiritual men. Hooker's actual statement only consists of the inference that natural men cannot acknowledge the things of God, which obviously belong to the spiritual realm.

Spiritual Men

This being the case, Hooker consequently assumes the existence of spiritual men also, who have three characteristics. Firstly, spiritual men have the illumination of the grace of God,¹ which is also acknowledged by Bradford.² Second, they are directly led by God, and thirdly, they have faith. The most important point that concerns Hooker at this stage of his argument is the quality of faith. Based on his observation regarding the daily existence of spiritual men in the natural realm, Hooker notices that the quality of their faith is faulty. He states that the faith of these men is weak: something is hindering them from exercising and practicing a strong faith. The importance of Habakkuk 1:4, on which the entire sermon is based, proves to be relevant to Hooker's argument. In Habakkuk 1:4, the prophet wrote: "Therefore the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." But for Hooker, this particular text is important because it reveals the weakness of faith with relation to the law. This is in line with Tyndale, who writes that the faith of justification is separate from the law.³ Apparently, spiritual men who have faith grow increasingly weaker in faith as they get gradually closer to the law. This is vital to Hooker's soteriology, because he understands that faith and the law as a means of apprehending

¹ For details about the importance of the Holy Spirit who enlightens reason see McAdoo, "The Influence of the Seventeenth Century on Contemporary Anglican Understanding of the Purpose and Function of Authority in the Church", in G. R. Evans (ed.), *Christian Authority. Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 262-263.

² Bradford, *Writings*, 371-372.

³ Tyndale, *Prologue to the Romans*, 123.

salvation are utterly exclusive. The more that spiritual men cling to the law, the weaker their faith is. The logical outcome of this reasoning is that only faith can really and factually appropriate salvation. Although this is only an inference, Hooker however discusses the problem of the law within his epistemology. Thus the law and faith become a means of knowledge.⁴ This is not to say that epistemology is on the same level as soteriology, or that Hooker confuses them. Hooker is only assessing law and faith from the perspective of the created order, in which the existence of both spiritual and natural men is clearly mentioned, though delineated. Hooker's exegesis of Habakkuk 1:4 leads him to write that law and faith as means of knowledge are utterly and irreconcilably exclusive. This means that man cannot fulfill the demands of the law without faith, which is the gift of God⁵ or without the external help from God,⁶ as also suggested in Barnes.⁷

The Concept of Science

As his argument is further developed, Hooker gently changes his terminology, in such a way that the law, which so obviously fails as a means of knowledge, is suddenly replaced by the concept of science.⁸ He consequently speaks of faith and science as means of knowledge. In this respect, Hooker displays his confidence in faith to the detriment of science:

That meere naturall men do not nether know nor acknowledge the thinges of god, wee do not mervail, because they are spiritually to be discerned. But they in whose harts the light of grace doth shine, they that are taught of god, why are they so *weeake in fayth*? Why is their assenting to the law so scrupulous, so much mingled with feare and wavering? It seemeth strange that ever they should imagine the law to fail. It cannot seeme strange if wee waigh the reason. If the thinges which wee beleve be considered in them selves it may truly be sayd that fayth is more certain then any science.⁹

Thus, for Hooker, it is clear that faith is qualitatively stronger than science in connection with the degree of certainty that they provide to men in their enterprise of exploring their entire existence with the specific purpose of grasping knowledge of it. Hooker apparently believes that existence itself goes beyond the boundaries of the created order. He writes that there are some things that we believe, and for him it is clear that they exist, and we know of their existence by faith. Science, however, as another means of knowledge, should be able to explore them also. In this respect, Hooker is sceptical with regard for the capability of science to explore those things which transcend the created or natural realm. These things are spiritual, so it is only faith that can actually get an accurate knowledge of them. Science is weaker than faith should they both attempt to explore the spiritual things of the realm beyond the natural created order.

⁴ See also Bethell, *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, 22.

⁵ See also Thornton, *Richard Hooker*, 56; Griffith Thomas (ed.), *The Principles of Theology*, 185; Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal*, 41.

⁶ Kirby, *Richard Hooker's Doctrine of Royal Supremacy*, 50.

⁷ Barnes, *The Supplication of 1531*, lxxxvii.a.

⁸ See also Harth, *Swift and Anglican Rationalism*, 41.

⁹ Hooker, *Certainie* (*Works* V, 69.16-24).

The Dual Concept of Certainty

Hooker's twofold epistemology becomes clearer when he introduces his dual concept of certainty. Strangely enough, Hooker does not attach his dual concept of certainty to science, but to faith, and more specifically to Christian faith. Hooker now abandons this discussion about science, because he considers that science is only concerned with the knowledge that we have through the senses. He seems to be convinced that any knowledge through the senses cannot but be associated with science, and science only offers fallible proofs and demonstrations. This is why he drops off his argument on science as a means of knowledge, and he begins to analyse the epistemology of the Christian faith, to which he attaches his dual concept of certainty. Thus, faith should be considered in relation to the certainty of evidence and the certainty of adherence: "That which we know either by sense or by most in fallible demonstration is not so certain as the principles articles and conclusions of Christian fayth concerning which wee must note that there is a certainty of evidence and a certainty of adherence".¹⁰ The next step for Hooker is to consider both the certainty of evidence and the certainty of adherence in greater detail.

The Certainty of Evidence

Hooker defines the certainty of evidence by attaching two basic concepts to it. First, the certainty of evidence is concerned with the human mind, and second it displays a manifestation of the truth. It is important to note that, for Hooker, the first aspect of faith is the assent of the mind with regard for the things to which faith is directed. When Hooker mentions the mind, it is clear that he points to human reason.¹¹

Hooker's picture of the certainty of evidence, which is directly linked to reason, offers a clear explanation of how man should investigate the surrounding reality. By the certainty of evidence, faith triggers human reason in order that it should grasp the manifestation of the things that it explores. Hooker, however, makes a vital observation. The function of human reason is to assent to or to get hold of the manifestation of things approached, but it cannot explore the truth of these things. Faith is obviously concerned with spiritual things. When he discusses the methodology of reason as an essential faculty of faith,¹² Hooker has in mind spiritual, not natural things, which are explored by science. Consequently, human reason

¹⁰ *ibid.* 69.24-70.1.

¹¹ For the importance of reason in Hooker, see also Shirley, *Richard Hooker and Contemporary Political Ideas*, 88; Hillerdal, *Reason and Revelation in Richard Hooker*, 71-75; Hoopes, *Right Reason in the English Renaissance*, 127; Speed Hill, "The Evolution of Hooker's *Laws of the Ecclesiastical Polity*", 117-158; Orrù, "Anomy and Reason in the English Renaissance", *Journal of the History of Ideas* XLVII/2 (1986), 186; Sykes, "Richard Hooker and the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood", *Sewanee Theological Review* 36/2 (1993), 200-214 or Sykes, "Richard Hooker and the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood", in Janet M. Soskice (ed.), *After Eve* (Colins, 1990), 119-137; Davis, "'For Conformities Sake': How Richard Hooker Used Fuzzy Logic and Legal Rhetoric against Political Extremes", in McGrade, *Richard Hooker and the Construction of Christian Community*, 339.

¹² For details about the faculty of reason in relationship to faith and grace, see Newey, "The Form of Reason: Participation in the Work of Richard Hooker, Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth and Jeremy Taylor", *Modern Theology* 18/1 (2002), 7.

obviously has the capacity of exploring spiritual things,¹³ but only to the extent that it assents to their truth. Human reason cannot fathom the truth of spiritual things; it can only acknowledge the truth of spiritual things. Hooker explains:

Certainty of evidence wee call that, when the mind doth assent unto this or that; not because it is true in it selfe, but because the truth thereof is cleere, because it is manifest unto us. Of things in them selves most certain, except they be also most evident, our persuasion is not so assured as it is of thinges more evident although in themselves they be lesse certayn.¹⁴

In this respect, Hooker's analysis of the certainty of evidence is important, because he introduces his concept of revelation. Thus, man explores the realm of his existence because there are two means of revelation which help him. Hooker firstly mentions the light of grace, and secondly the light of nature. It is clear for Hooker that human epistemology is directly conditioned by an external factor, such as revelation, which consists of the light of grace, and the light of nature. But what is important to notice is that both grace and nature are external to man. Accordingly, when man explores the things of the spiritual realm, he uses both the light of grace, and the light of nature, which are themselves external means of revelation.¹⁵

The certainty of evidence, however, is more concerned with the light of nature, because it reveals the evidence of truth as far as spiritual things are concerned. Human reason, which results in the certainty of evidence, based on the natural light,¹⁶ offers man the evidence or the clear manifestation of the truth of spiritual things. Despite that the light of grace should have a greater impact on human reason, Hooker is aware that human reason cannot but intellectually assent to spiritual things to the extent provided by the light of nature. In the spiritual realm itself, Hooker seems to have identified another epistemology, whereby the angels and the spirits of the righteous get their knowledge of spiritual things. Thus, following Cranmer,¹⁷ Hooker speaks of the light of glory, which is available only to those beings which exist in the spiritual realm.

As far as the inhabitants of the natural realm are concerned, whenever they want to explore the things of the spiritual realm they should first exercise their faith according to the light of grace and consequently obtain a sure evidence of the truth of spiritual things. Hooker, however, carefully observes the world, and sees that this is not what really happens. It is the light of nature that offers a foundational certainty to man, when he exercises his faith. The first aspect of human nature that faith touches is reason, and the proofs that reason needs are only given to it by the light of nature. Accordingly, man first obtains a certainty of evidence in relation with the spiritual things he tries to explore by faith. Hooker writes:

It is as sure if not surer that there be sprites as that there be men: but wee are more assured of these then of them because these are more evident. The trueth of somethinges is so evident, that not man which heareth them can doubt of them: As when wee heare, that a

¹³ For the role of reason in exploring spiritual things, see Tebeaux, "Donne and Hooker on the Nature of Man: The Diverging 'Middle Way'", 31.

¹⁴ Hooker, *Certainie* (Works V, 70.1-6).

¹⁵ Sommerville, "Richard Hooker, Hadrian Saravia, and the Advent of the Divine Right of Kings", 231.

¹⁶ See also Hunt, *Religious Thought in England*, 60.

¹⁷ See also Cranmer's discussion about the image of glory, in Cranmer, *Annotations on the King's Book*, 12.

part of anything is lesse then the whole, the mind is constrained to say this is true. If it were so in matters of fayth then as all men have equall certaintie of this, so no beleever should be more scripulous and doubtfull then another. But wee find the contrarie. The Angells and sprites of the righteous in heaven have certaintie most evident of thinges spirituall, but this they have by the light of glorie. That which wee see by the light of grace thought it be in deede more certain yeat is it not to us so evidently certain as that which sense or the light of nature will not suffer a man to doubt of.¹⁸

Next, Hooker resumes the duality of his epistemology. He seems to be convinced of the essentially different nature of the spiritual realm and of the natural realm. The certainty of evidence should be used as a means of knowledge in the natural realm, because it is normal that solid and sensible proofs should offer certainty to the one who explores the natural realm. Hooker, however, cannot totally separate the certainty of evidence from the spiritual realm. The reason why he is actually compelled to use the certainty of evidence for at least partially fathoming the spiritual realm is only evident later, when Hooker begins to discuss the righteousness of Christ,¹⁹ the very source of salvation,²⁰ which is similar to Cranmer's definition of salvation.²¹

At this point, it can only be inferred that faith needs the certainty of evidence due to the early existence of Christ. Although he is from the spiritual realm, Christ has lived in the natural realm. It is clear for Hooker that the certainty of evidence works better in the natural world. But the certainty of evidence is part of faith. Despite that the certainty of evidence primarily addresses the mind or human reason with respect for the things of the natural realm, it nevertheless acknowledges spiritual things. Christ, however, has lived in the natural realm; consequently, true faith²² in Christ must necessarily consist of a mental or intellectual assent of his existence, but this is not the only aspect of true faith, as Tyndale correctly notices.²³ Faith offers to the believer the certainty of evidence in matters pertaining to the spiritual realm, such as the earthly existence of Christ, although it cannot explore its truth. True faith necessarily involves human reason, because Christ lived in the natural world, which is accessible to human reason. However, the truth of Christ's earthly existence cannot be explored by human reason, and cannot be endorsed by the certainty of evidence; by reason, the truth of Christ's earthly existence can only be admitted.

The Certainty of Adherence

Hooker then introduces the second aspect of his doctrine of faith, by explaining the certainty of adherence. Faith does not consist only in the certainty of evidence, which is linked to human mind or human reason, but also in the certainty of adherence, which directly affects human heart. In fact, this is in line with Tyndale, who writes that the new heart comes from

¹⁸ Hooker, *Certaintie* (Works V, 70.6-19).

¹⁹ Allison, *The Rise of Moralism*, 3; Booty, "The Spirituality of Participation in Richard Hooker", *Sewanee Theological Review* 38/1 (1994), 11.

²⁰ Hooker, *Certaintie* (Works V, 71.28).

²¹ Cranmer, *Annotations on the King's Book*, 12.

²² Nothing is necessary for justification except for a true and lively faith. Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal*, 41.

²³ Tyndale, *Exposition of First John*, 121.

faith, which comes from the Spirit.²⁴ Hooker seems to be persuaded that in some instances the proofs of the spiritual realm are not so evident, but there is something in true faith that makes the believer wholeheartedly adhere to spiritual things, in spite of the lack of evident tokens. Thus, for Hooker, faith is not a mere intellectual assent of spiritual things by means of human reason, but also a firm trust in spiritual things²⁵ – as in Cranmer²⁶ – although the evident proofs are lacking.

The other which wee call the certaintie of adherence is when the hart doth cleave and stick unto that which it doth believe. This certaintie is greater in us then the other. The reason is this: the fayth of a Christian man doth apprehend the wordes of the law, the promises of god, not only as true but also as good, and therefore even then when the evidence which he hath of the trueth is so small that it greaveth him to feele his weaknes in assenting thereunto, yeat is there in him such a sure adharence unto that which he doth but faintly and fearfully believe that his spirit *having once truly tasted the heavenly sweetnes* thereof all the world is not able quite and cleane to remove him from it but he striveth with him selfe to hope even against hope to believe even against all reason of believing, being settled with Job upon this unmoveable resolution, *thought God shall kill me I will not geve over trusting in him.* For why? This lesson remayneth for ever imprinted in his hart, *it is good for me to cleave unto god.*²⁷

This passage is of particular importance because, by means of the certainty of adherence, Hooker attaches to faith a moral dimension.²⁸ He also explains the content of faith. Thus, faith appropriates to the believer not only the truth, but also the goodness of the promises of God,²⁹ and of the words of the law because, as Tyndale rightly notices, we believe the promises of God by faith.³⁰ Hooker clearly makes a direct reference to the law of God, which is closely linked to the promises of God. Both the law and the promises of God are spiritual things, which cannot be grasped by human reason.³¹ The lack of sensible evidence is so frustrating concerning the law and the promises of God, that human reason cannot be persuaded by them. However, following Cranmer,³² Hooker writes that faith is not only the intellectual assent of spiritual things but also the heartfelt trust in spiritual things,³³ which involve the law and the promises of God, as underlined by Tyndale.³⁴

²⁴ Tyndale, *Prologue to Romans*, 123; Gane, “The Exegetical Methods of Some Sixteenth Century Anglican Preachers: Latimer, Jewel, Hooker, and Andrews”, 35.

²⁵ Griffith Thomas (ed.), *The Principles of Theology*, 191; Sedgwick, “The New Shape of Anglican Identity”, *Anglican Theological Review* LXXVII/2 (1995), 189.

²⁶ Cranmer, *The 1538 Articles*, 4.

²⁷ Hooker, *Certaintie* (*Works* V, 70.31-71.15).

²⁸ See also Sedgwick, “Revisioning Anglican Moral Theology”, *Anglican Theological Review* LXIII/1 (1981), 10.

²⁹ Malone, “The Doctrine of Predestination in the Thought of William Perkins and Richard Hooker”, 107; Kirby, *Richard Hooker’s Doctrine of Royal Supremacy*, 46.

³⁰ Tyndale, *Prologue to Romans*, 124.

³¹ See also Hillerdal, *Reason and Revelation in Richard Hooker*, 75.

³² Cranmer, *The 1538 Articles*, 4.

³³ Hooker, *Certaintie* (*Works* V, 71.1); Sedgwick, “The New Shape of Anglican Identity”, *Anglican Theological Review* LXXVII/2 (1995), 189.

³⁴ Tyndale, *Exposition of First John*, 121.

Although he does not confer any other content to the law and promises of God, Hooker will later talk about Christ.³⁵ Thus, the law and the promises of God are closely related to Christ. As in the case of the certainty of evidence, the certainty of adherence must be approached and understood christologically. In this respect, Hooker is clear that faith is trust in Christ,³⁶ which is identical to Cranmer's definition.³⁷ The content of faith is Christ himself. Although faith has a twofold constitution, as it is formed both by the certainty of evidence and the certainty of adherence, Hooker writes that the certainty of adherence must prevail and be stronger. By the certainty of evidence and so by reason, faith can only assent to the truth of God's law and promises, revealed in the person of Christ.³⁸ Such a faith is not complete. It is only by the certainty of adherence that faith goes beyond its intellectual dimension and becomes complete by trust.³⁹ Thus, by trust, faith not only acknowledges, but also actually fathoms the truth of God's law and promises revealed in Christ.⁴⁰ In spite of the lack of sensible proofs, which offer the certainty of evidence, true faith totally and wholeheartedly attaches itself to and scrutinizes the truth of spiritual things by the certainty of adherence. Actually, nothing should destroy the certainty of adherence, because by trust it is the only way to understand the law and the promises of God in Christ.⁴¹ The logical reality is that there are no natural proofs that might contradict spiritual things, because there is both an ontological and an epistemological gap between the natural and the spiritual realm. In a final analysis, Hooker's twofold epistemology is closely linked to his dual doctrine of faith, which consists of the certainty of evidence and the certainty of adherence. Thus, the first component of faith is the intellectual assent to the earthly existence of Christ given by the certainty of evidence, but the most important aspect of faith is the firm trust in the law and promises of God revealed in Christ, given by the certainty of adherence.

Conclusion

This article deals with the epistemology of faith, which is primarily disclosed in Hooker's *Learned and Comfortable Sermon of the Certaintie and Perpetuitie of Faith in the Elect*. One of Hooker's main concerns in connection to the epistemology of faith is the relationship between faith and knowledge. Thus, Hooker explains that one of the most important aspects of human existence is spirituality, so he dedicates a significant amount of time to the definition of spiritual men. Then he explains the concept of science, which is foundational to human knowledge but not necessarily to the knowledge of God, and then the dual concept of certainty: of evidence and adherence. It is important, however, to notice that Hooker's analysis of the concept of certainty, of evidence and of adherence, is carefully done within the larger context of faith. Thus, even if the concept of certainty may somehow be rational, it must be approached through the perspective of faith. The next step for Hooker is to

³⁵ Hooker, *Certaintie* (*Works* V, 71.28).

³⁶ Griffith Thomas (ed.), *The Principles of Theology*, 191; Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal*, 41; Sedgwick, "The New Shape of Anglican Identity", *Anglican Theological Review* LXXVII/2 (1995), 189.

³⁷ Cranmer, *The 1538 Articles*, 4.

³⁸ Kaye, "Authority and the Interpretation of Scripture in Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*", *The Journal of Religious History* 21/1 (1997), 97.

³⁹ Griffith Thomas (ed.), *The Principles of Theology*, 191.

⁴⁰ For the importance of God's revelation in Christ according to Hooker, see Booty, "Hooker and Anglicanism: Into the Future", *Sewanee Theological Review* 36/2 (1993), 220.

⁴¹ Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal*, 41.

define the certainty of evidence and the certainty of adherence. The certainty of evidence is obviously connected to human reason but man's use of reason in view of discovering the spiritual things of God is limited. Reason can only assent to the truth of spiritual things, which are disclosed through God's revelation, while only faith can investigate them adequately. The certainty of adherence is also connected to faith but it does not primarily appeal to human reason but to the human heart. Within this particular context, Hooker mentions the reality of the new heart which is the result of faith but faith is also worked out by the Holy Spirit. In close connection to the certainty of adherence, the idea of faith is not only an intellectual assent but also a firm trust in spiritual things which are disclosed to men and women only by means of faith and the work of the Holy Spirit.