

[MJTM 21 (2019–2020)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Nijay K. Gupta. *Paul and the Language of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020. xiii + 225 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8028-7343-9. \$34.99.

Within the last several years, there has been a burgeoning scholarly interest in faith-language and the nuanced ways it should be understood, with Teresa Morgan's recent volume (*Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) being one example. Gupta's contribution to this discussion comes in a more succinct and focused form, in a systematic treatment of *pistis* in the context of Paul's writing and thought. As Gupta repeatedly shows, the necessity of the book comes from the fact that *pistis* had a flexibility and depth of meaning for New Testament authors and their audiences that the word and concept of faith in our modern context does not typically convey. As a result, faith-language is often used wrongly, overused, or otherwise does not express the fullness and richness of its meaning in Paul's era. It is for this reason that Gupta calls for "a patient (re)-reading of Paul . . . to understand best how and why he employed *pistis* terminology" (3). Gupta's rightly held assumption, therefore, is that a failure to contextualize Paul's terminology is to misread Paul.

Chapter 1 functions as an introduction to the complexity of the issue, with Gupta presenting an overview of the polysemous nature of *pistis*, noting various insufficient conceptualizations of it. In his view, faith is not opinion without reason, it is not simply equivalent to doctrine, nor should it be conceived of as passive or otherwise nonactive. Gupta affirms that *pistis* can mean intellectual "belief" (9) in the sense of a divinely-enabled cognitive apprehension or perception (what he calls a "second way"

[10] of seeing and knowing), but the word can also mean “faithfulness” (10) as related to the divine-human relationship (which he associates with covenant). The cognitively active sense he calls “believing faith” and the relationally active sense he calls “obeying faith” (13). The difficulty of *pistis*, however, is that these meanings are “related, and sometimes, perhaps often, blended or indistinguishable in usage” (12). He thus argues that such ambiguity necessitates a third meaning, namely “trusting faith” (12), which is volitionally active and involves aspects of the other two meanings.

Chapter 2 offers a sweeping historical survey of the ways in which faith-language has been utilized in Christian literature from the apostolic fathers, through the reformers, and to the present time. While such a broad treatment limits the detail that Gupta can provide, the overview is quite helpful for illustrating nuances in views of *pistis* and how these have shifted throughout the centuries. His treatment of particularities in the interpretations of recent scholarship from Bultmann to Morgan functions as a sort of *status quaestionis*, serving to inform the rest of the book. In chapter 3, he further contextualizes Paul’s faith-language in light of pagan and Jewish texts of antiquity from the Septuagint and Josephus to Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom, noting that “the vast majority” of such language involves “relational fidelity” (39).

Although the second half of the book is devoted to Paul’s writings, chapter 4 addresses faith-language within the Gospels. Gupta includes the chapter because of his assumption that while Paul’s writings presumably antedate the earliest Gospel, Paul would have been aware of the tradition underlying the evangelists’ work. While the most space is devoted to the Matthean use of *pistis*, Gupta generally contends that the evangelists see faith as far more than simply believing. For them, faith involves a wholehearted immersion, or a whole-being relational trust.

Chapters 5–9 examine six of Paul’s letters, beginning with 1 Thessalonians and Philippians (both on which Gupta has recently authored commentaries). He argues that in these letters, *pistis* primarily means “loyalty” and “faithfulness,” and that this usage is intentional due to the adversity being faced in each community

and the need for them to remain committed to the gospel. In 1 Corinthians, Gupta makes an interesting case that much of the letter's faith-language should be understood in relation to knowledge and wisdom, principally that faith is a "way of seeing" (116) which contrasts with the wisdom of the world referenced in 1 Cor 2:5. Similarly, the faith-language of 2 Corinthians involves a "framework of how a believer ought to view reality, especially in light of how one knows and relates to Christ" (116).

Gupta's discussion of *pistis* in Galatians centers on Paul's understanding of the relationship between faith and law. As a result, it is one of the most complex sections of the book, because Gupta incorporates particularities of the debates over both divine and human agency and the New Perspective on Paul. Gupta proposes his own third way within such debates, referred to as "covenantal *pistism*" (143), which emphasizes the "core relational dynamic of the covenant," or what he frequently terms the "Christ-relation" (143). Gupta strongly repudiates the idea of faith as opposite to works, noting that Paul's idea of faith does not have the passivity assumed by such a dichotomy. Rather, to Gupta, Paul's way of understanding *pistis* in relation to law and covenant has Jesus, and not the Torah, as the primary focus. In this view, the Torah is not abrogated or pitted against faith, but it is reoriented around the "Christ-relation" (the bond encapsulated by the word *pistis*) as the way one is made right with God.

In the final chapters, Gupta completes his analysis with an examination of Romans. He focuses specifically Paul's citation of Hab 2:4, taking the view (contrary to some scholars) that *pistis* there refers to human trust rather than to the faith of the Messiah, and again militates against the idea of a faith/works dichotomy within the letter. Gupta then includes a discussion of the *pistis christou* debate, noting the importance of the phrase and its possible meanings. He adheres to the view that it should be an objective genitive (meaning "faith in Christ") rather than a subjective genitive (meaning "Christ's faithfulness"). Even so, he appeals strongly to an emphasis on Christ's agency as primary in understanding the human act of faith in such instances. This then leads into the final chapter, in which he reaffirms that his goal was to dismantle the idea that Paul saw faith and works as

alternatives. Rather, to Paul, works are not bad in themselves, but cannot subsume faith as the core, relational, whole-life orientation of the believer.

Given this overview, there is much to commend in the book. As a prolific and expressive writer, Gupta's prose is readable and interesting, despite the sometimes intricate complexities of the subject matter. Gupta also has a gentleness to his presentation, in that he takes a side on issues of scholarly debate, but he presents his perspective with an openness that respects dissenting viewpoints and recognizes the limitations in our exegetical methodology. While he labors to cite and support his own conclusions, such a stance presents the evidence in a way that allows the readers to evaluate the evidence for themselves and reach a conclusion. In my view, his discussion of Galatians and the issue of a perceived faith/works dichotomy is where Gupta's exegetical skill and pastoral balance shone through most clearly.

Another strength of the book is its thorough and detailed examination of the Paul's background and historical context. Gupta widely employs Jewish and Greco-Roman sources, and has a keen ability to show reasonably how these necessarily form a backdrop for how Paul used certain language. Gupta's tone in the book was also helpful, in that he continuously points the reader back to why this issue matters in the first place. The meaning of the word "faith" is indeed no minor concern, as seminal theological concepts rise or fall depending its precise meaning. Given that his goal in writing was to prove the polyvalence of *pistis* and to ground Paul's theology in light of its differing uses, the book accomplishes its purpose.

In its accomplishments, the work was not without its setbacks, the first being that it was somewhat repetitive. This is understandable, given that it is a more than two-hundred-page discussion of only one (albeit complex) concept. Since Gupta chooses to organize the bulk of the book with each chapter (usually) examining one epistle, his conclusions in some areas are the same as in other areas. While his purpose in this is to unify his assertions, this can produce a feeling of redundancy.

The second and more significant issue is in the absence of any reference to the "disputed" Pauline letters. While in his other

writings Gupta seems favorable to viewing several (if not all) of these as authentically Pauline, here he does not even mention them. While one might assume that he is trying to make as airtight of a case as possible for the Pauline view of faith by only appealing to the letters deemed unquestionable, it is difficult to understand why he would not have simply allotted an additional chapter for such a discussion. The confusion caused by this is only amplified by the fact that he includes a chapter on *pistis* in the Gospels, and in one place even discusses its use within Revelation. One is thus left to question how a discussion of faith-language within John's gospel, for example, is helpful in illuminating Paul's faith-language, but a discussion of such language in Colossians or 2 Thessalonians is not. Even if one denies the authenticity of such letters, robust arguments have been made by more critical scholars that they were written by individuals significantly influenced by Paul or intending to write (honorifically) in his stead. Whether authentic or not, few claim that these documents do not represent Pauline thought or teaching in any way, and so the lack of attention to them seems strange. Given the purpose of the book, a discussion of the faith-language in these contexts would have been a helpful addition, even if qualified with a caveat of uncertainty.

Even in acknowledging these areas of improvement, the book is a supremely helpful contribution of manageable length. While geared to a knowledgeable audience (instances of Greek are not transliterated, for example), it is not so scholarly to preclude its general use and reference by a wider audience. Readers of Paul and scholars of Paul alike will find it to be an aid in understanding what the apostle and his contemporaries meant by what we translate as "faith," and how this knowledge informs our understanding of the harmony of the entire narrative of Scripture. In turn, this knowledge will better inform us as modern readers in how we understand what we mean by "faith" today.

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