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BOOK REVIEW

Nijay K. Gupta. *Prepare, Succeed, Advance: A Guidebook for Getting a PhD in Biblical Studies and Beyond*. 2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019. vii + 171 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5326-6830-2. \$23.00.

There are a number of reasons why people may decide to pursue a doctorate in biblical studies or theology. Regrettably, however, despite the stimulating nature of such a noble endeavor, the numerous and complex challenges that are often involved can make the process, as a whole, seem dauntingly overwhelming for many individuals. Enter Nijay K. Gupta, author of *Prepare, Succeed, Advance: A Guidebook for Getting a PhD in Biblical Studies and Beyond*, now in its second edition. According to Gupta, this book was written to “demystify” both the preparation for and the experience of a PhD (1). Gupta succeeds!

As the book title indicates, *Prepare, Succeed, Advance* is divided into three roughly equal sections. The first part, “Prepare,” covers the work involved in selecting and successfully gaining admission to a doctoral program. The second part, “Succeed,” focuses squarely on the experiences within the program such as choosing a research topic and methodology, preparing for doctoral exams, etc. but is mostly geared towards writing a cogent and defensible dissertation. The third and final section handles sundry matters that involve effectively crossing the bridge from a PhD program to employment and beyond, i.e., conference participation and leadership, gaining teaching experience, successful job hunting and interviewing, and, of course, publishing the dissertation. A brief conclusion and bibliography round out the volume. There are no indices.

Before offering a critique of the volume, it is prudent to offer a few comments concerning the not-insignificant changes that

were made in this edition as compared to the first. Aside from a more concerted delineation of plagiarism (including some discussion of the lack of proper citation that has emerged with regard to several academic commentaries), there are at least four major updates: (1) two new ‘nuts and bolts’ sections now appear on doctoral examinations and on diverse matters concerning standardized test scores, such as the GRE; (2) new material has been added concerning the need to judiciously check your ‘online presence’ throughout the PhD application process (and beyond) as well as some astute reflections about online and distance PhD programs in biblical/theological studies; (3) more extensive advice is offered concerning pedagogy including guidance on developing a teaching philosophy and cultivating practices that support a good teaching philosophy; and, lastly (4) an entirely new chapter has been added that pertains to striving towards a more inclusive and diverse biblical studies guild. According to Gupta, this chapter was necessary “due to the pressing need for the biblical studies academy to address more directly and thoroughly the problem of discrimination, marginalization, and unfair bias” (154).

To be clear, Gupta addresses several points that pertain especially to ethnic minorities and women in the academy (concerning the latter, Gupta draws heavily on the personal accounts offered by Helen Bond and Lynn Cohick). Some collective advice to these groups of persons includes “don’t give up,” “be yourself,” “fight—but also forgive,” “find a safe community,” and “become a mentor.” Near its conclusion, the author offers some advice to his “white and/or male colleagues,” including: “Seek Understanding,” “Make a Friend,” and “Advocate for Others.” On this last point, Gupta explicitly states:

If you know your privilege (whether you are white, male, wealthy, etc.) I encourage you to look around and see how others might be experiencing marginalization or neglect. Most people are not looking for a handout, but rather respect and the opportunity to prove themselves . . . I encourage you to be an advocate. This is not about reverse discrimination, unfair special treatment, or sacrificing quality . . . (r)ather, it is about recognizing the often-invisible imbalances that exist in the academy and striving to be part of the solution; it is about

paying sideways and forward the benefits we have, and patiently drawing attention to blind spots in our guild (163).

While certain readers may be somewhat skeptical of the need for this kind of conversation, Gupta is to be commended for the immense fortitude that was clearly undertaken to effectively bring these controversial and sensitive matters to the attention of the academy at large, particularly with such diplomacy. Notably, Gupta confesses that he once thought “*It can’t be that bad*” but is now “keenly aware” of how “desperate” things are (154–55, italics original).

By way of critique, I must be clear that I have very few quibbles with this volume. The prose is lucid and ‘to the point’ and the author’s relaying of some of his journey makes for an easy and enjoyable read. Inconvertibly, of course, the specific information that is provided throughout the volume is immensely helpful for all serious students.

Some notable ‘tidbits’ include the maxims: “the only way to get noticed is to be *noticeable*” (43, italics original), “the magic is [often] in the method” (52), and “[c]ommentaries can be very stimulating . . . not so much for what they *say*, but what is left *unsaid*” (65–66, italics original). Gupta also astutely maintains that the “[t]wo clear marks of a good scholar or doctoral student are published pieces of research (articles, essays, reviews, etc.) and active participation in academic conferences,” such as presenter, chair, respondent, etc. (107). Some summative counsel also includes “think big picture,” “have a support system,” “be patient, creative, and focused,” “take risks,” “be eclectic,” “set a benchmark,” and “count your blessings” (164–66).

Despite these commendations, there are a few minor areas of criticism. To begin, some individuals will likely nitpick the ranking of various journals and/or degree-granting programs (world-class, excellent, very good, notable, etc.). Alongside this, although Gupta is cognizant of certain Canadian institutions, programs, and societies, none make his list(s).

In addition, it is quite likely that several readers will think of a number of places where the author could have bolstered his engagement with the literature at large covering one or two specific

areas throughout the volume, depending on their expertise. For example, in the section on “History of Interpretation” neither the four-volume work of the same name by Henning Graf Reventlow (Society of Biblical Literature, 2009–2010) nor the two-volume set entitled *Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (Wipf and Stock, 2016), appear. Lastly, one should also note that a few minor editing errors have slipped into the volume. For example, several times the book states “see x-ref” rather than citing the actual, specific page numbers.

That being said, however, *Prepare, Succeed, Advance: A Guidebook for Getting a PhD in Biblical Studies and Beyond* delivers on the author’s promise. For anyone considering doctoral work and what follows, Nijay K. Gupta’s book is indeed a “must-read” that is “even better the second time ‘round’” in this new, second edition (see back cover). Its primary readers are advanced students of Scripture/theology and, one hopes, all advisors who are committed to the success of their students. Highly recommended!

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