

BOOK REVIEW

Morgan, Teresa, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). xi + 626 pp. Hbk. \$53.00.

‘This study arises from a simple question: why is faith so important to Christians?’ (p. 1).

Thus begins Theresa Morgan’s tome *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*. Morgan, recently appointed to the McDonald Agape Professorship in New Testament and Early Christianity at Yale Divinity School, undertakes a scholarly and thorough examination of the concept of ‘faith’ (or, ‘trust’) to understand the mechanics and nature of the earliest Christian communities. (The differences between the Greek and Latin terms *pistis* and *fides* are negligible, she explains, and so they are similar enough to be used as a pair.) After a chapter on method, she studies the terms and concepts in the world of the Roman empire, the Septuagint, early Christian preaching (i.e. 1 Thessalonians and 1–2 Corinthians), Paul’s second wave of ‘undisputed’ letters (Galatians, Romans, Philemon and Philippians), non-Pauline letters, synoptic Gospels and Acts, and finally, the Johannine corpus. The book then concludes with two chapters on ‘Relationality and Interiority in *Pistis* and *Fides*’ and the ‘Structure of Divine–Human Communities’.

Morgan begins the study by attempting to convince her audience that the book is not one giant etymological fallacy. Along these lines, she interacts briefly with Richard B. Hays, who has argued that words simply do not have meaning outside their literary context. Morgan’s response is to call such a claim an ‘oversimplification’:

Words carry semantic weight in the individual and collective consciousness of users; if that were not the case, communication would be impossible ... as every ‘deconstructionist’ knows—‘context’ in this connection is not limited to the passage, the work, even the author in which a particular term occurs. It includes all the ways in which the

term is already understood by the communities to which the writer and his audience(s) belong (p. 33).

What, then, do the concepts generally mean in the first-century milieu of the New Testament? For this study, Morgan is content to use 'trust' as a short rendering. And after the first chapter on the early principate, the various uses of the terms rapidly expand:

We have seen that *pistis/fides* is treated regularly as a good thing, even as a philosophical virtue, while at the same time it is always vulnerable to fear, doubt, and skepticism. In a few areas, notably in relation to oneself and one's senses, close family members, and slaves, *pistis/fides* is, if not wholly unproblematic, at least relatively so. In other areas, notably in relationships between friends, it is, however desirable, intensely difficult (p. 74).

And in many 'stories of relationships', 'one of the most significant aspects of *pistis/fides* in this period is as a virtue of crisis and moments of decision' (p. 75). Such 'trust' has essentially all of the nuances of the English usage and embodiments of contemporary life.

When compared to other religious practices, the distinctiveness of Christian usage does emerge. In her construction, the relationship of trust-faith to virtue is reversed and is thus given more prominence: '... while *pistis/fides* is part of virtue for Greeks and Romans, virtue is part of *pistis/fides* for Christians. In the New Testament, *pistis* dominates worshippers' understanding of God, humanity, their relationship, and the universe they share in a way which is significantly different from anything we have encountered so far' (p. 174).

How did this emerge? She follows the 'unanimous scholarly view that *pistis* language is not the domain concept in Jewish thinking that it already is when we first encounter Christian thought', and '[t]he caveat ... that no one would start studying Greek or Roman religiosity by looking at *pistis/fides*, applies to the Septuagint too' (p. 177). She also suggests that '[o]vertones of both hope and obedience are common in Septuagintal *pistis*' (p. 211). Other than these general connections, things develop more substantially with the Apostle Paul.

For Paul, 'God is *pistos*, and Paul portrays God as reaching out through his apostle to evoke *pistis* in those whom he calls' (p. 258). This theology flows into his first writings. 'The primacy of *pistis* among ways in which human beings relate to God is evident in the fact that followers of Christ already,

before 1 Thessalonians is written, call themselves *pistoi* and *hoi pisteuontes* and others *apistoi*' (p. 258). Indeed, '[t]he relationship of *pistis* between worshippers and God dominates Paul's letters (and, as we will see, the whole of the New Testament) to the near-exclusion of intra-human *pistis*, in a way which marks a radical departure from both Jewish and Graeco-Roman tradition' (p. 259). According to Morgan, this 'intensity of Paul's focus on *pistis* towards God has much to do with the imminence of the end time' (p. 259).

But one should not interpret this as irrational belief: '*Pistis* is nowhere fideistic in these letters, in the sense that followers of Christ are called to put their trust in God in a leap of deliberately non-rational assent. On the contrary: to confirm the trustworthiness of what he preaches, Paul appeals to his own and others' personal experience of the resurrection, to experiences of the faithfulness of God, the power of the spirit, signs and wonders, and to scripture' (p. 260). This trust is interconnected with 'heart, mind, and action' (p. 261), and should never be rendered as 'the faith', in the modern religious sense of the term, as some translations do. This is anachronistic and 'methodologically ... unacceptable' (p. 264).

Morgan also traces some development within Paul's thought on this subject. For example, Christ is integrated 'into the *pistis* relationship between God and humanity in Galatians, Romans, and Philippians as he is not in 1 Thessalonians and 1 and 2 Corinthians' (p. 305). When it comes to the Gospels and Acts, much of the understanding is the same, although broader than Paul. '*Pistis* in the synoptic evangelists thus captures not so much Christ's unique and distinctive location in the divine-human relationship as the complexity and, in his lifetime, the mystery of his identity' (p. 393). The opposite is then true of John's writings where an interesting tension is found between traditional Jewish ideas and a new extension of those ideas. John's writings stress faith that focuses 'strongly on God's commitment to his chosen people', which is a traditional Jewish idea, and on the idea that 'people are called to trust/believe in Jesus as they do in God', which is not traditionally Jewish (p. 436). The last chapters on interiority and relationality explore the psychological functions of faith, though without much by way of conclusions since it was not of much interest in a first-century context. These chapters also briefly summarize how the concept in the second-century church became more deeply focused on 'propositional' belief (p. 514).

Roman Faith and Christian Faith is the most exhaustive study of the subject of Christian faith—in the *pistis* sense, not modern—within a Graeco-Roman context. Morgan's conclusions are moderate and well supported, though

I confess, not always terribly interesting. No one, of course, can control the results of one's research, and with a topic as broad as 'faith' and 'trust', it is not surprising that the project yielded few controversial conclusions and a number of relatively anodyne observations. Even in discussing faith versus 'the law' in Galatians, 'the meaning of *pistis* ... falls well within common usage' (p. 290). Furthermore, the book did not fully answer its original question, as acknowledged by Morgan:

The ultimate origins of Christian *pistis*, like so many questions about the life of Jesus and the immediate aftermath of his death, remain mysterious. We canvassed the possibility that, in some form (a Hebrew or Aramaic equivalent of) *pistis* language goes back to the teaching of Jesus himself, or that it was first used in disputes (in Jesus' lifetime or soon after) between followers of Christ and other Jewish groups. Such possibilities remain hypothetical. What we can say with confidence is that for the Greek-speaking communities within which and for which the texts of the New Testament were written, the idea of *pistis* proved to be so rich, and so adaptable to developing understandings of the relationship between God, Christ, and humanity, together with understandings of human life and activity within that relationship, that *pistis* is everywhere involved with the early evolution of those understandings (p. 503).

Her analysis naturally lacks various biblical-theological dimensions, which she was aware of in her intentional delimitation. Being more of a classicist than a New Testament scholar, she nevertheless handled the complex faith–law–righteousness debates of contemporary Pauline studies well.

A more significant level of interaction with detractors on other issues would have been helpful. As noted above, Morgan rightly distinguishes modern concepts of religion and 'the faith' from early Christian concepts of *pistis*. But it is possible that she overstates her argument. James Dunn, for example, argues that '[w]hat cannot be disputed, however, is that *pistis* in the sense of a "faith to be believed, a body of belief/teaching" is well established in the Pastoral Epistles' (J.D.G. Dunn, 'Faith, Faithfulness', in Katharine Doob Sakenfeld [ed.], *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. II. D–H [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007], pp. 407–23 [419]). Dunn's position stands in contrast to Morgan's thesis, which always comes back to a 'relational' view that may have been 'the (new) covenant' in 'the earliest' sense of that

type of usage (pp. 291-92). Probably because of her focus, debates like these could not be dealt with on a deeper level.

These are, however, minor quibbles. And despite limited import on a topic that is really too broad to be helpfully explored in a single volume, both classicists and New Testament scholars will appreciate what findings *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* does competently offer.

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