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The Spirituality of Faith in the Gospel of Matthew (Chapter in Matthew and Mark Across Perspectives)

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THE SPIRITUALITY OF FAITH IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Nijay Gupta

I. Introduction

In 1991, Dr. Stephen C. Barton was invited to deliver four lectures on the Gospels at St. Anne's College, Oxford. Barton deeply desired to wrestle with the true meaning and substance of the Gospels, especially as they were written 'from faith for faith'. These lectures eventually became the book *The Spirituality of the Gospels*.¹ Little did Barton know that he was at the very forefront of a movement that would blossom in the early twenty-first century called by some 'theological interpretation of Scripture', sharing a similar interest, intent, and goal, namely, reading Scripture to know God.

In the early 1990s, though, it would seem Barton's work was done, not as a contribution to a field of study (e.g. 'Christian spirituality'), but out of a personal desire to relate academic biblical studies to a life of worship, and particularly in a context of work and ministry where Barton was responsible for training ordinands at Salisbury and Wells Theological College in Salisbury before he moved on to teach at the University of Durham.²

According to Barton, 'spirituality' in the context of his study on the Gospels implied attentiveness to 'life under God or life lived in response to the sense of the divine presence of God – specifically, the presence of God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit'.³ Again, it could be described as '*the sense of the divine presence and living in the light of that presence*'.⁴ For Barton, spirituality involves both how God relates to humans as well as how humans relate to God. What Barton describes in

1. Stephen C. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992).

2. For a helpful discussion of how a discipline of 'spirituality' has developed in religious scholarship over the last twenty-five years, see Bonnie Thurston, 'The New Testament in Christian Spirituality', in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (ed. A. Holder; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 55–70.

3. Barton, *Spirituality of the Gospels*, p. ix.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

this book rather closely aligns with the sentiment of those who today practice theological interpretation of Scripture, insofar as they recognize that the Scriptures were given to the people of God as texts that undergird and strengthen faith.⁵ While a variety of academic tools are necessary for deep and responsible study of Scripture, its *goal* is formation. As Barton explains:

I too am concerned to engage in an interpretation of the meaning of the gospel texts in their historical context, to describe with as much historical sensitivity as I can how the four evangelists envisaged life under God in the light of the coming of Christ. Furthermore, within the historical paradigm, the findings of redaction criticism – the investigation of the meaning of the gospel texts in their final form as compositions of the respective evangelists – are crucial for the present study.

Nevertheless, historical investigation does not take us far enough. In particular, it tends to pay insufficient heed to the fact that the gospels are documents of the canon of Christian scripture held as sacred within the communities of Christian faith which scripture sustains and nourishes. Typically, historical method works by creating a critical distance between reader and text, whereas the expectation and hope of the believer is for inspiration and illumination in the life of faith, gained through a sympathetic proximity between reader and text.⁶

In this essay, I wish to pay respect to Dr. Barton's important contribution to the theological study of the Gospels by looking at the Gospel of Matthew with a similar interest in the First Gospel's spirituality. In his chapter on Matthew, Barton rightly notes Matthew's interest in discipleship, righteousness, purity/integrity, and radical love. To this we will add Matthew's interest in πίστις, 'faith'. In the study of the Synoptic Gospels in particular, despite the ubiquity of the language of faith, there has been little study of this subject. When it comes to the spirituality of the Gospels, though, there can hardly be a more important concept related to the human response to God than faith.

5. See *ibid.*, p. 3.

6. *Ibid.* This seems to relate closely to Richard Hays' approach in his essay 'Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully', *Christian Century* (2–9 February 1994), pp. 104–8. Also, notice the conceptual similarities between Barton's statement and that of Kevin Vanhoozer as editor of the *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*: 'Theological interpretation of the Bible, we suggest, is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God... Knowing God is more than a merely academic exercise. On the contrary, knowing God, like theological interpretation of the Bible itself, is at once an intellectual, imaginative, and spiritual exercise. To know God is to love and obey him, for the knowledge of God is both restorative and transformative.' See the Introduction to *Dictionary of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. K. J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), p. 24.

II. The Language of 'Faith' in the Time of Jesus

There is a presumption today that one identifies with Jesus by adhering to a particular set of 'beliefs', ideas, and doctrines that determine one's religious outlook. We must be careful not to impose this understanding of 'faith' on the language used by Jesus and the earliest Christians. As Luke Timothy Johnson points out, 'belief' is not the sum total of what the Gospels refer to if by this terminology we mean 'the cognitive dimension of faith'. As we will see, there is something critically connected to cognition and epistemology in Jesus' call for faith in Matthew, but his language of faith is much larger than this.⁷

In the First Gospel, Matthew's key terms for faith are πίστις and πιστεύω, along with several cognates: ἀλιγόπιστος, ἀπιστία, ἄπιστος, and πιστός. Our focus in this essay will primarily be on πίστις since it is the most important word in Matthew's 'faith' vocabulary.⁸

While it is easily recognized that the canonical Gospels present a Jesus who called for faith (πίστις), this is in striking contrast to the fact that in the Hebrew Jewish Scriptures, this was not common parlance for Israel's response to God.⁹ A.-J. Levine underscores this point in a discussion of modern Jewish-Christian dialogue. Often, in such a setting, Christians may speak of 'interfaith dialogue'. Levine points out that using the word 'faith' already sets the discussion in distinctly *Christian* terms. She writes: 'For many Jews involved in such dialogue, the issue is not a "faith" matter. To talk of "faith" or "faith communities" already skews the conversation toward Christian terms.'¹⁰

7. See L. T. Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 44.

8. See R. T. France, 'Faith', *DJG*, pp. 223–6.

9. See G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; repr.; OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001; first ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1962–65), p. 378; also G. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), vol. 2, p. 160: 'The discourse in the Old Testament about faith in YHWH as an attitude of a person toward and before God occurs more seldomly than might be expected by a reader of the Old Testament who is conditioned by the New Testament's and perhaps also Paul's understanding of faith'. Preuss (and von Rad) are quick to note, though, that while the narrow terminology of 'faith' is not commonly used in the Old Testament, the concepts of trust, fidelity, and commitment are foundational to covenantal life as they understood it (see Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 165–7).

10. A.-J. Levine, 'Jesus in Jewish-Christian Dialogue', in *Soundings in the Religion of Jesus* (ed. B. Chilton, A. Le Donne, and J. Neusner; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), pp. 175–88 (185).

In a sense, then, the Jesus tradition itself bears witness to the move towards a focused set of language to describe spirituality. But, of course, Jesus' language of faith did not appear out of thin air. Undoubtedly it developed through the burgeoning use of πίστις in Hellenistic Jewish literature. In the Septuagint, πίστις appears over sixty times, representative of Hebrew terms such as אמוּנָה, אמוּנָה and אמת.¹¹ The Septuagint translators often found πίστις to be a suitable noun to represent these Hebrew terms, bringing them together under a broadly common meaning of loyalty or faithfulness (cf. Deut. 32.20; 1 Sam. 26.23; Ps. 33.4 [LXX 32.4]; Hos. 2.22; Jer. 5.1, 3). This reflects the common employment of πίστις in Hellenistic usage, though it could be used in relation to intellectual beliefs as well.¹²

Philo bears witness to a wide range of uses for πίστις, including logical 'proofs' (*Opif.* 93), loyalty (*Plant.* 82), and beliefs (*Mut.* 201).¹³ The tendency of Josephus is to focus more strictly on the social meaning of πίστις as *loyalty*.¹⁴ In fact, it appears that Josephus tended to use the term πίστις ('loyalty') instead of διαθήκη in his *Antiquities* – what this implies is that, in this period of time we see an interest amongst Jews in using the language of faith (πίστις) to represent, as a circumlocution or perhaps an approximation, Jewish covenantal relationships.¹⁵

11. See R. Bultmann, 'πιστεύω', *TDNT*, vol. 6, pp. 197–203.

12. See L. H. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 57–62 (on πίστις in particular, see p. 60).

13. On Philo's use of πίστις, see D. A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 178–80.

14. See Campbell, *Quest*, pp. 181–2; also D. R. Lindsay, *Josephus and Faith: Πίστις and Πιστεύειν as Faith Terminology in the Writings of Flavius Josephus and in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

15. Christopher T. Begg has written extensively on this subject; see his *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*. Vol. 4, *Judean Antiquities 5–7* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), passim. In relation to the question of why Josephus preferred πίστις, Begg speculates; firstly, διαθήκη had a different meaning ('testament') in secular Greek. Second, Josephus may have had 'concern not to arouse Roman suspicions by using the term à la LXX with political overtones'. Thirdly, perhaps the preference of πίστις offered an 'indirect polemic against a nascent Christianity with its emphasis on the "new covenant" (recall that in post-LXX Jewish OT translations διαθήκη is replaced by a variety of other renditions, e.g., συνθήκη)'. See Begg, *Josephus' Account of the Early Divided Monarchy (AJ8.212–240)* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993), pp. 100–101 n. 609. Cf. see E. Riggenbach, 'Der Begriff der *diateke* im Hebräerbrief', in *Theologische Studien Theodor Zahn zum 10. Oktobert 1908 dargebracht* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1908), pp. 291–316 (295–7); Also A. Jaubert, *La notion d'alliance dans le Judaïsme aux abords de l'ère chrétienne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1963), pp. 339–49.

Before turning to the Gospels, we can briefly summarize the state of the use of *πίστις* in the time of Jesus by observing that (a) it was a polyvalent term that could cover a number of meanings and nuances, and (b) it was increasing in popularity particularly as a term used for distinctly *Jewish* covenantal commitment.

We should be reminded, though, that *πίστις* has an unusual kind of elasticity because of its range of meaning demonstrated in the notably different cognates *πιστός* ('faithfulness') and *πιστεύω* ('I believe'). Therefore, when the Evangelists were writing their Gospels, *πίστις* was a noun that could play many semantic roles; one might even think of it as a term that could *modulate* across a continuum from cognitive-belief on one end (aligning with *πιστεύω*) to social fidelity and loyalty on the other (aligning with *πιστός*). If nothing else we can say that *πίστις* is a noun that deserves care in translation and it is perhaps hasty to allow it to be only understood and translated into English as a single word ('faith').¹⁶

III. Repent and Believe: The Message of the Prophet Jesus (Mark 1.14-15)

Before turning to Matthew's *πίστις*-spirituality, it behooves us to consider the ministry-launching message of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark (presupposing Mark's influence upon Matthew). After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee and proclaimed the good news of God: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the gospel'. This is the summons of a prophet, urging Israel to turn from sin and return to God.¹⁷ Jesus was carrying forward John the Baptist's message in his absence.¹⁸ He was

16. For an incisive criticism of how the Common English Bible handles the translation and interpretation of *πίστις* in Romans, see R. B. Hays, 'Lost in Translation: A Reflection on Romans in the Common English Bible', in *The Unrelenting God: Essays on God's Action in Scripture in Honor of Beverly R. Gaventa* (ed. D. Downs and M. Skinner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 83–101.

17. See C. A. Evans, 'Prophet, Sage, Healer, Messiah: Types and Identities of Jesus', in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (ed. T. Holmén and S. E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 1219–22; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 93. On the subject of repentance, and how it relates to 'faith', see M. J. Boda, 'Return to Me': *A Biblical Theology of Repentance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), pp. 163–4, 184 (more generally pp. 145–61 on the theology of repentance in Scripture).

18. See W. D. Davies and D. Allison, *Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1.72.

calling Israel to ‘abandon a whole way of life, and to trust him for a different one’.¹⁹ A new era had dawned, the rule of God was imminent – participants were inspired to repent, not necessarily because their sins compelled them to, but because God was fulfilling the promise of his reign on earth.²⁰ John, though, while he did preach ‘repentance’, did not call for *belief*.

In the Old Testament, when repentance was called for, the counterpart for turning away from sin would naturally be to commit to God and to do what is right (Jer. 34.15; Ezek. 18.21). Jesus does not say ‘Repent and obey God’, but rather ‘Repent and *believe* the good news’. That Israel had to *believe* this seems to imply that it was not a matter of accepting a plain ‘fact’. It would take *belief*, a leap of faith, as it were, to live into a reality that Jesus was ‘the one who discloses God’s sovereignty’ and that one must respond to him with trust and obedience to the expectations of the kingdom he was inaugurating.²¹ As Frank Matera explains, there is a critical *epistemological* quality to the way Mark expresses the nature of faith:

Faith, in Mark’s Gospel, is not merely one virtue among others. In the Markan narrative, it is the all-embracing term that describes the moral and ethical life of those who embrace the kingdom of God. Faith is perceiving and understanding, whereas the lack of faith is blindness and incomprehension. Those who believe, perceive, and understand what Jesus says and does can see the presence of God’s kingdom in his ministry even though the manifestation of the kingdom is presently hidden and seemingly insignificant. Convinced that the kingdom of God is present, although not yet in power, such people live lives of discipleship in a community of disciples gathered around Jesus. Within Mark’s Gospel, people believe in order to see.²²

19. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 258; Wright makes a good case for this nationalistic reading of Jesus’ repentance-call, but he is less convincing in his more specific argument that the problem was ‘nationalistic violence’ (p. 253).

20. See G. D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke–Acts* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 132.

21. See C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark’s Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; first ed. 1989), p. 54; more broadly pp. 44–56; also Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 263; Frank Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p. 22.

22. Frank Matera, *New Testament Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p. 23.

For Mark, though, πιστεύω means more than simply *believing* in the good news of the kingdom of God; it also implies immersing oneself wholeheartedly into this good news, tethering oneself to it.²³ As Jack Dean Kingsbury aptly puts it, for Mark ‘faith connotes radical confidence, an unconditional turning towards the gospel in complete trust’.²⁴

IV. The Spirituality of Faith in Matthew

b. Introduction

Matthew, as noted above, shares Mark’s interest in faith language.²⁵ Several episodes and teachings of Jesus are parallel, such as the link between healing and faith in particular miracle stories (cf. Mt. 9.2-8//Mk 2.1-12; Mt. 9.18-26//Mk 5.21-43; Mt. 15.21-28//Mk 7.24-30). He also includes the statement about faith in relation to the cursing of the fig tree (Mt. 21.18-22//Mk 11.20-26). Matthew, though, inserts faith-miracle episodes not included in Mark (e.g. Mt. 9.27-31). Matthew offers a similar storm-stilling episode as Mark, but famously Jesus questions his disciples’ meager faith in Matthew (ὀλιγόπιστος, Mt. 8.26), whereas Mark’s Jesus accuses them of having *no* faith (οὐπω ἔχετε πίστιν, Mk 4.40).

In our discussion of Matthew, we will presuppose as true what we identified in Mark – despite more specific nuances to faith language in the Gospel, there is a kind of comprehensive connection made between the good news of Jesus Christ and faith (e.g. Mk 1.14-15). This seems to be implied in Mt. 27.42 where the mockers in the crowd jeer at Jesus saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will *believe* in him (πιστεύσομεν ἐπ’ αὐτόν).’ This may be what the crowd said, or perhaps it was something similar and Matthew has reframed it in terms of Christian confessional language.²⁶ Such brief glimpses of belief-in-Jesus (cf. Mt. 18.6) language offers an important reminder that Matthew

23. See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2007), p. 94.

24. J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 73.

25. Mary Ann Beavis’ excellent short essay on ‘faith’ in Mark’s Gospel underscores this point cogently, although she goes too far in assuming that Matthew and Luke contribute little to the notion of faith in the Synoptics; see ‘Mark’s Teaching on Faith’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 16.4 (1986), pp. 139–42.

26. See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 620; they note similar language in Acts 11.17; 16.31; 1 Tim. 1.16.

saw, as the ultimate expression of Christian spirituality, faith in Jesus which was evident in wholehearted discipleship.²⁷

Below we will explore Matthew's spirituality of 'faith' in three categories: *seeking faith*, *trusting faith*, and *loyal faith*. It is probable that Matthew himself did not distinguish these kinds of categories, but it would seem that he did use faith language in a variety of ways, such that this artificial taxonomy may be helpful if only for heuristic purposes.

b. Seeking Faith

Of the seven key episodes where Matthew focuses his faith language, five of them involve the faith of those who seek out Jesus and desire healing/help from him for someone (8.5-13; 9.2-8, 18-26, 27-31; 15.21-28). As often noted, this faith is not the fully-formed faith of a disciple of Jesus. Rather, these are people who seek out Jesus as someone who has the power of God at his disposal.²⁸

The very first occurrence of πίστις in Matthew is in the story of the healing of the centurion's servant. When Jesus agrees to come and heal this paralyzed man, the centurion stops him: 'Lord, I am unworthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; And I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it' (Mt. 8.8). Jesus was amazed and said, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith (πίστις)'. Why does Jesus compare this man's faith to Israel? Matthew is interested in pointing out the slowness of Israel to believe, and also sensitivity of certain Gentiles to respond to Jesus.²⁹ Jews ought to have been the first sort of people to seek Jesus out and place their trust in him – here a pagan, without hesitation, confidently appeals to the authority of Jesus. Jesus appears to be referring to a phenomenon that is alien, unprecedented, operating outside the normal realm of human knowledge and decision-making. To borrow language from Paul, *a faith has been revealed apart from the law* (cf. Rom. 3.21). Those like the centurion who pursue Jesus, without *normal* reasons, demonstrate a unique kind of faith, one might even call

27. France, *Matthew*, p. 681, points to the clear, but unusually rare, Johannine-quality of belief focused on Jesus in Mt. 18.6 – the only time this specific phrasing occurs in the Synoptic Gospels.

28. See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 501.

29. D. Hagner, *Matthew* (2 vols.; WBC 33A-B; Dallas, TX: Word, 1993–95), vol. 1. p. 205.

it a kind of sixth sense.³⁰ Somehow, they just *know* this man Jesus is something special. Gerald Hawthorne refers to this kind of faith as ‘spiritual insight’:

I mean by faith that which gives eyes to the soul (cf. Heb. 11), so that the person of faith has the ability to see beyond the limiting barriers of matter and sense, and to penetrate the secret of spiritual reality, to see beyond human predicaments to God, and the goodness and wisdom and power of God, to see beyond the problems to the possibilities that God presents, to see beyond natural limitations to the limitlessness of the omnipotence of God, and to believe God for the solutions to life’s problems, for making the possible a reality, for bursting the boundaries of human constrictions.³¹

Jesus marvels, as it were, at a faith that is ahead of everyone else, a few steps beyond where physical evidence led. With all the privileges that Israel possessed, Jesus implies that they ought to have been the ones to sense first the power of God present in Jesus, but this is simply not the case.³²

Jesus tells the centurion – ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith (*ὡς ἐπίστευσας*)’. Some have tried to downplay the necessity of faith for the healing to take place,³³ but here it should be clear. As Jürgen Moltmann boldly observes,

The divine power of healing does not come from [Jesus’] side alone. Nor is it simply his own ‘ministry’, as and when he wishes to perform it. It is rather something that happens between him and the people who seek this power in him, and importune him. When Jesus and faith meet in this reciprocal activity, healing can happen... The healings are stories about faith just as much as they are stories about Jesus. They are stories about the reciprocal relationship between Jesus and the faith of men and women. Jesus is dependent on this faith, just as the sick are dependent on the power that emanates from Jesus.³⁴

30. Matthew tips us off regarding the origin of this special insight. When Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, Jesus commends him and explains: ‘flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven’ (16.17).

31. G. F. Hawthorne, ‘Faith: The Essential Ingredient of Effective Christian Ministry’, in *Worship, Theology, and Ministry in the Early Church* (ed. M. H. Wilkins and T. Paige; JSNTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), pp. 249–59 (250).

32. See J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 356.

33. See S. Grindheim, ‘“Everything Is Possible for One Who Believes”: Faith and Healing in the New Testament’, *Trinity Journal* 26 (2005), pp. 11–17.

34. J. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 111; see also Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (trans. F. McDonagh; ed. J. Riches; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), p. 140.

In Matthew's story of the healing of the paralytic (9.2-8), Jesus is impressed again with faith, and, again, not with the faith of the person in need, but with the faith of those who brought the paralytic to Jesus (9.2). We are reminded that Jesus responds to those who act boldly in pursuit of him. As is true in Mark's Gospel, Matthew's Jesus 'measures faith not by its orthodoxy but by its determination, courage, and persistence. It is not the "i's" dotted or the "t's" crossed but the obstacles overcome that count.'³⁵

The third episode where Matthew highlights *seeking faith* is that of the bleeding woman. She is desperate (as with the above seekers) to encounter Jesus for help – but this time it is for herself. For some reason she believes that merely touching his garment will suffice (9.21). Despite her efforts to touch his clothes, Matthew notes that Jesus relates her healing to her *faith* (9.22).³⁶ This is the first time in the First Gospel that Jesus himself uses the language of salvation (σώζω) after the prophecy was uttered in 1.21: 'She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will *save* (σώζω) his people from their sins'. Jesus is working out his *saving* ministry, but he connects his healing power to the woman's faith.³⁷

In another healing passage two blind men call upon Jesus (son of David) to have mercy on them (9.27-31). Jesus responds with a question: 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' (9.28). When they reply affirmatively, he touches their eyes and says 'According to your faith let it be done to you' (9.29; cf. 8.13; 15.28). This is the only occasion in Matthew where Jesus inquires about human faith.³⁸

The final episode to consider here is Jesus' discourse with the Canaanite woman (15.21-28). While Jesus was in the region of Tyre and Sidon, this Gentile woman approached him out of concern for her daughter possessed by a demon (15.22). At first, the disciples plead with Jesus to send her away ('she is bothering us', 15.23 NLT) and Jesus proclaims to her, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (15.24). However, she kneels before him and pleads with him. Jesus appears to rebuff her by telling her that the 'children's food' should not

35. Note here A. Culpepper's comments on Mk 2.5; *Mark* (SHBC; Macon, GA: Helwys, 2007), p. 77; see similarly D. Rhoads, *Reading Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 82; also cf. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme*, p. 237, who refers to faith in Mark's Gospel as 'sheer dogged perseverance'.

36. See G. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), pp. 118–19, 337.

37. See Walter T. Wilson, *Healing in the Gospel of Matthew: Reflections on Method and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), pp. 217, 224–5.

38. France, *Matthew*, p. 367.

be given to ‘dogs’. The Canaanite woman plays along and responds, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’ (15.27). Jesus is impressed, answering ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish’ (15.28a). Her daughter was instantly made whole again (*ἰάουμαι*). This story underscores significantly Matthew’s interest in faith, moreover the faith of Gentiles, despite the ‘privileges’ of Israel. Jesus tests the woman’s resilience and she responds with *amazing* faith (*μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις*, Mt. 15.28).³⁹

What do these stories in Matthew teach us about faith? None of these characters were disciples of Jesus, they did not profess faith in him as messiah. Yet, the way Matthew portrays them, they are ‘models of faith’. What were they modeling to the readers of his Gospel? As noted in the quote by Gerald Hawthorne above, the Gospels are trying to demonstrate the *strangeness* of faith in Jesus, the backward-ness of it. Consider the old Irish hymn *Be Thou My Vision* – the version in the hymnal of my youth had a single Scripture verse written at the top: ‘And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only’ (Mt. 17.8, the Transfiguration). Seeing *only* Jesus, forsaking everything else, *this* is the nature of the faith of the centurion, the Canaanite, and the others. There is a *carelessness* to their faith, a *recklessness*, not unlike selling everything to buy a pearl (Mt. 13.46).

The most popular theory about the origins and purpose of Matthew’s Gospel involves a community of Jewish Christians who are struggling with an identity crisis towards the end of the first century. As Donald Hagner explains,

To their Jewish family they have always had to answer charges such as disloyalty to the religion of Israel, disloyalty to the Mosaic law (or at least of association with others who fail to observe it), and affiliation with an alien, if not pagan, religion, the large majority of whose adherents are Gentiles...Matthew’s original readers were in an unenviable position, in a kind of ‘no-man’s-land’ between the Jews and Gentile Christians, needing to reach back for continuity with the old while at the same time reaching forward to the new work that God was doing in the largely Gentile church – simultaneously answerable, so to speak, to both Jews and Gentile Christians.⁴⁰

39. See Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, pp. 134–5. For an insightful reading of the Markan version, see M. L. Skinner, ‘“She Departed to Her House”: Another Dimension of the Syrophoenician Mother’s Faith in Mark 7.24-30’, *Word & World* 26, no. 1 (2006), pp. 14–21, especially pp. 18–19.

40. Hagner, *Matthew*, vol. 1, p. 209; see also D. A. Hagner, ‘Matthew: Christian Judaism or Jewish Christianity?’, in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (ed. S. McKnight and G. Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 263–82.

To survive in the midst of this identity crisis, *faith* was needed, the kind of faith that forsakes all to see only Jesus. Despite the fact that those who pursue healing and help from Jesus are *not* committed disciples, they are held up as role models because of the awkward, unnatural pursuit of Jesus, their shameless faith. The disciples in Matthew's Gospel want to turn these noisy seekers away from Jesus. Jesus calls these seekers forward and commends them for their faith.

c. Trusting Faith

From an examination of the 'faith' of those who seek out Jesus (for healing for themselves or someone else), we turn now to consider the 'faith' of the disciples. Because these are men who have some sense of the messianic identity of Jesus (see Mt. 16.16, 20), we will call the faith that is required of the disciples *trusting faith*. While the Matthean Jesus does use πίστις in regards to the disciples (17.20; 21.21-22), his favorite term for their faith is ὀλιγόπιστος (6.30; 8.26; 14.31; 16.8; 17.20; cf. Lk. 12.28). This word does not occur outside of the Synoptic Gospels, and the way it is used in Matthew (and Luke), it is employed more as a nickname than a description – for example 'Why are you afraid, Little Faith-ers?' (8.26). Again, in Mark, the disciples are accused of having *no* faith, while Matthew allows for a small measure of faith.⁴¹ Ulrich Luz offers an explanation regarding what Matthew might mean by ὀλιγόπιστος: "Little faith" is the faith of those who set out with Jesus only to lose heart. Little faith is faith mingled with fear and doubt. Little faith is the faith of those who would like to believe but cannot.⁴² Similarly, John Meier comments that ὀλιγόπιστος 'designates not unbelievers or apostates, but true disciples who panic in a moment of crisis and act as though they did not believe'.⁴³

We will keep this in mind as we look at the two uses of πίστις vis-à-vis the disciples, both of which occur in the second half of the First Gospel (17.14-21; 21.18-22). Beginning in 16.5, the disciples are given more attention by Matthew (though note Mt. 13.36). As Daniel Harrington notes, the curing of the demon-possessed boy is followed by

41. See P. Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 187.

42. U. Luz, *The Theology of The Gospel of Matthew* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 68.

43. J. P. Meier, *Matthew* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), p. 67; cf. M. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel as Reflected in the Use of the Term Mathētēs* (Boston: Brill, 1988), p. 182. For a classic study of Matthew's use of faith language in regards to the disciples, see G. Barth, 'Glaube und Zweifel in den synoptischen Evangelien', *ZTK* (1975), pp. 269–92.

a passion prediction. This sequence climaxes with the teaching given to the disciples in Matthew 18.⁴⁴

In Mt. 17.14-16, a man approaches Jesus and explains that his son, suffering from seizures, could not be cured by the disciples. Jesus responds, ‘You faithless (ἄπιστος) and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?’ (17.17a-b). Immediately, Jesus rebukes the demon and heals the child (17.18). The disciples inquire as to why *they* could not do this (17.19). Jesus explains, ‘Because of your little faith (ὀλιγοπιστία). For truly I tell you, if you have faith (πίστις) the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there”, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you’ (17.20).⁴⁵

What went wrong? Why were these disciples *not* able to perform the healing? One possibility is that they were treating the power to heal as a kind of ‘magic’, presuming that they could do this on their own.⁴⁶ More likely, though, their faith failed *because* they were not with Jesus, and began to shrink. They were overcome by doubt.⁴⁷ An interesting paradox presents itself, though, in this episode. Jesus’ nickname for the disciples is ‘Little Faith’, a chiding moniker; and yet he commends faith as small as a mustard seed. Apparently there is a good kind of ‘small faith’ and a bad kind of ‘small faith’.⁴⁸ What *is* mustard-seed faith? Looking horizontally to Mark’s account, Jesus explains, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer’ (Mk 9.29). The failure on the disciples’ part is not a matter of training, but one of *trust*; ‘The little faith of the disciples is a faith which *understands* and *assents*, but which does not *trust* totally. A faith which trusts God can be, in the world’s estimation, as small and unimpressive as a mustard seed. Yet such trust can do the impossible.’⁴⁹

The second key episode that concentrates on the faith of the disciples is the cursing of the fig tree (21.18-22). Jesus, feeling hungry, notices this tree by the road. When he approaches it, he sees no figs, only leaves (21.18-19). He condemns the tree, saying, ‘May no fruit ever come from

44. See D. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), p. 259.

45. Note firstly that, while faith language was used earlier in Matthew for those *seeking* healing (for themselves or another), here the emphasis is on the faith of the one performing the healing; see Hagner, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 505.

46. See L. Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 448.

47. See France, *Matthew*, pp. 662–3.

48. This paradox was brought to my attention by F. D. Bruner, *Matthew*. Vol. 2, *The Churchbook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 191.

49. Meier, *Matthew*, p. 194.

you again!’ (21.19b). The fig tree withers. The disciples are amazed and perplexed by its instantaneous desiccation (21.20). Jesus instructs them, ‘Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt [ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν καὶ μὴ διακριθῆτε], not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, “Be lifted up and thrown into the sea”, it will be done. Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith [πιστεύοντες]’ (21.21). Here again Jesus relates faith to the moving of mountains (see Mt. 17.20; cf. Isa. 40.4; 49.11; 54.10). The statement that they can receive whatever they ask harks back to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7: ‘Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened’ (7.7-8). While the focus of the ‘asking’ in the Sermon on the Mount is on God, in the context of the teaching after the cursing of the fig tree, Matthew transitions to the challenging of Jesus’ authority by the chief priests and elders (21.23-27). The disciples are called to have faith in God, but Matthew is clear that the faith must center on Jesus (Mt. 1.23; cf. 18.6; 27.42; 28.18).

What was Matthew trying to teach through these stories about the disciples’ little faith and their need to trust and not doubt? Donald Senior is probably correct that the experiences of Christians as Matthew writes drive the way he shapes the gospel story.

The church believes that its Lord has given it a share in his own power over sin and darkness. But fear and doubt are realities, too, and they seem to smother faith’s vitality. Yet even then prayer is not in vain. Even we ‘in the boat’, we ‘of little faith’ can be lifted from the waves by a merciful Lord.

...He chose them, human beings practically identical with the ‘sick’ he came to save. He endured their dullness. He dealt with them honestly, exactly, but neither his critique nor his commands were ever destructive. The disciples’ record was not good. They complained, they misunderstood, they quarreled, they deserted, they denied. Only one was lost. But the part of the story that becomes ‘gospel’ – ‘good news’ – is that in the face of the master they failed, the disciples detected the infinite compassion of God, and they committed this memory to the church.⁵⁰

d. Loyal Faith

The last occurrence of πίστις we will consider appears in the fourth ‘woe’ of Jesus’ denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees (23.23; see 23.1-36). Jesus condemns them for meticulously tithing on their mint, dill, and cumin, but neglecting the ‘weightier matters of the law’, namely

50. D. Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992), p. 61.

justice, mercy, and faithfulness (τὴν κρίσιν καὶ τὸ ἔλεος καὶ τὴν πίστιν). Translators are divided as to how *πίστις* should be rendered here: some prefer ‘faithfulness’ (NIV; NET; ESV), while others ‘faith’ (RSV/NRSV; NLT; cf. KJV). Those who opt for the English translation ‘faith’ here attempt to draw 23.23 into Matthew’s wider use of faith language in his Gospel. Robert Gundry, for example, notes that Matthew seems to have placed a distinct emphasis on faith (in God) here, given that the parallel statement by Jesus in Luke omits *πίστις* (Lk. 11.42).⁵¹ Others, however, prefer ‘faithfulness’ (probably the majority position amongst commentators now), because it would appear that Matthew is referring to covenantal faithfulness, acting in a manner of loyalty in view of what is called for by the covenant.⁵² France makes the important observation that *πίστις* is used here in an ethical sense, as attested by the fact that Jesus can refer to such things as being ‘done’ – here *πίστις* is a virtue, ‘faithfulness’ (cf. Gal. 5.22-23).

This use of *πίστις* presents itself as a *third* type of ‘faith’ in Matthew’s spirituality – *loyal faith, faith as faithfulness*. This use of *πίστις* would have been commonly found in settings in the Greco-Roman world where friends and allies (even nations) pledged fidelity to one another.⁵³ Is Matthew promoting this kind of *πίστις* within his own Christian readers, or is this condemnation purely a denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees?⁵⁴ Given the significant role that *πίστις* plays in the First Gospel as a whole, Matthew’s underscoring of the centrality of *πίστις*, it would be seem unlikely to me that *this* particular instance would be irrelevant to his readers. Surely if Matthew did *not* want to apply this to his readers, he would have used another word, or simply left *πίστις* out (cf. Lk. 11.42).

51. R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 463–4.

52. See Hagner, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 670. Several scholars consider the possibility that Jesus’ statement echoes Mic. 6.8; see, e.g., Nolland, *Matthew*, pp. 937–8.

53. For the use of the language of faith/loyalty in the patronage system, see Z. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in Religion of the Ancient Mediterranean* (BZBW 130; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 199–250.

54. D. A. Carson, for example, argues that this statement in 23.23 does not address matters pertaining to continuity/discontinuity between the old covenant and the new, but rather only involves ‘the relative importance of material within the OT’. See D. A. Carson, ‘Matthew’, in *Matthew and Mark* (New Expositor’s Bible Commentary; ed. T. Longman III and D. E. Garland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 23–670 (540).

Jesus, undoubtedly, was contrasting the disobedience of the Jewish religious leaders with Jesus' own true loyalty to God and to God's covenant and, as David Bauer observes, 'their unfaithfulness serves as a foil to the faithfulness which is expected of the disciples. Since the disciples are aligned with Jesus, who himself stands over against unrepentant Israel and especially the religious leaders, the disciples are to be like Jesus by being unlike those opponents.'⁵⁵

Matthew's Jesus, thus, was not only calling his disciples to *believe* – seeing the world in a new light⁵⁶ – and not only to *trust*, but also to be *faithful*, the kind of πίστις that is demonstrated in action.

V. Conclusion

In the Gospel of Matthew, πίστις is a central way in which humans ought to respond to Jesus and God. This is obvious to note on the surface of the text, but once one examines more closely what Matthew *means* in his use of faith language, there is a richness that is rarely considered carefully. Matthew places a large emphasis on the faith of those who seek out Jesus – those who know virtually nothing about Jesus except that he is special, and yet they have reached the bottom of their rope and they cling to hope

that Jesus can bring healing and help in their desperate hour of need. We have called this *seeking faith*. Matthew writes primarily to Christians, no doubt – those who have already sought Jesus in some way. But it should be clear enough that these seekers in the First Gospel are held out as models of *great faith*. What these exemplars of faith demonstrate is a peculiar sensitivity to realizing the uniqueness of Jesus. It is all too easy for Christians (then and now) to let that slip away. Once we lose sight of what makes Jesus different, what makes him special, then it affects how we see everything else.⁵⁷ Matthew commends to us a faith never stagnant, always seeking and reaching, ever in pursuit of Jesus and the kingdom of God.

The second kind of faith Matthew highlights is that of those who need to trust God (*trusting faith*). The disciples, despite having a leg up on the blind religious leaders, are stamped with the label of 'little faith'. They

55. D. Bauer, *Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (new ed.; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 106.

56. Stephen Westerholm, *Understanding Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 39, makes an apt analogy using Matthew's lamp lesson (6.22-23): 'To know, trust and love God, Jesus says, is like having one's vision suffused with light. To live without God, by way of contrast, is to walk in the dark'.

57. See France, *Matthew*, p. 224.

have made a beginning with Jesus, but yet do not understand who he is, what he will achieve, and how this will transform all things. Moreover, they do not understand the role they can and should play in this new order. He has called them to do the impossible (17.20), but they can only do this by placing their full trust in God. Given what Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 10, *doing the impossible* in the context of teaching his disciples probably meant both the performing of great works of healing and deliverance (10.1, 8), as well as enduring persecution and rejection in their mission (10.14–39).

We have also made the case that Matthew emphasizes πίστις as *faithfulness* ('loyal faith', 23.23). What the religious leaders lack is a commitment to covenant faithfulness, *doing* what is right vis-à-vis God's expectations for his people. More or less, this is nearly Matthew's way of making reference to obedience. Faith is not private or hidden, though it may be hard to understand. It is public and active, it is doing and working (1 Thess. 1.3). It is tethered together with active mercy and active justice. The danger sometimes with talking about 'spirituality' is that it can carry a sense of *interiority*. The inside matters, of course, no less in Matthew's Gospel. But, though the Gospel's power works 'inside out', it must finally come 'out' to fulfill its purpose of cosmic redemption. Barton addresses this in view of Matthew's emphasis on fruit-bearing and *doing* righteousness.⁵⁸ The Gospel according to Matthew, and the nature of its spirituality, is about becoming something new by God's grace by faith. As Barton writes, 'In short, the church is to become the embodiment and reflection of the coming kingdom of heaven, on earth in the here and now'.⁵⁹ Only God, God with us, can bring this to pass, and only we can participate in this by faith, trust, and loyalty.

58. Righteousness is a *leitmotif* of Matthew's Gospel and we have only been able to touch upon it in this essay; see further B. Pryzbyski, *Righteousness in Matthew and his World of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

59. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels*, p. 28.