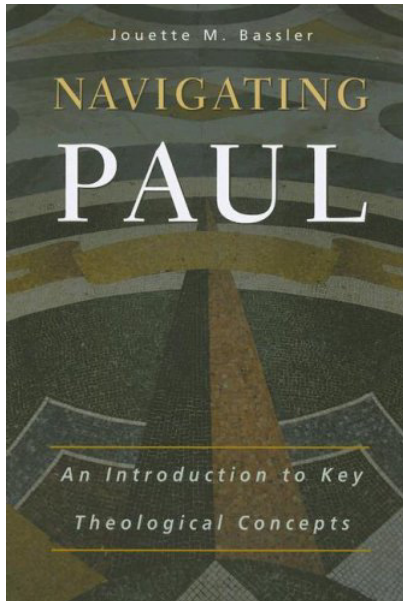


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**Bassler, Jouette M.**

***Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts***

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Jouette Bassler presents in this slim volume a collection of essays on key aspects of Paul's thought. Her purpose is not to provide a complete roadmap of Paul's letters and theology but rather to "provide navigational guides to the more difficult currents of his thought" (x). With characteristic brevity and clarity, Bassler addresses seven central elements of Paul's understanding of the gospel: grace, law, faith, life in Christ, righteousness, Israel, and resurrection. In each case she seeks to unravel the complexity of the apostle's thought on these issues and the current controversies surrounding them. The result is a concise yet thorough orientation to the challenging terrain of Paul's Christian faith and the demarcation of critical contours in Pauline scholarship today.

The first chapter is entitled, "Grace: Probing Its Limits." In this slightly revised version of an article published in *Interpretation* (57.1 [2003]: 24–32), Bassler shows the importance of grace to Paul's view of God and God's purposes even as she delineates the interpretive differences that stand at the core of today's debate and offers a challenge for moving forward. Certainly, Paul's understanding of grace is rooted in his Jewish heritage, but Paul's perspective of grace is also influenced by his relation with Jesus, his participation in the life of the church, and his ongoing theological reflection, all of which affect his views of sin, suffering, and the law. Regarding the law and grace, Paul "demolished the law as a

barrier that denies Gentiles access to grace *as Gentiles*, then sets up a Christological barrier that denies Jews access to grace *as Jews*” (8). This dynamic position is rooted in Paul’s encounter with the risen crucified Christ. Through the cross Paul experiences the “power of forgiving grace” and its “radical inclusiveness.” The challenge for interpreters today, then, is “either to take [Paul’s] insights as a normative expression of grace, or to follow his lead in probing further its limits” (9).

In chapter 2 Bassler addresses more thoroughly “Paul and the Jewish Law,” perhaps the most controversial topic in Pauline studies. By probing the competing interpretations of Paul’s view of the law, particularly as it pertains to Paul’s discussions of circumcision, “works of the law,” and the law’s nature and function, she shows how scholars have come to an apparent stalemate. Taking into account, however, both the mission focus of Paul’s letters as well as Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ, Bassler observes how “works of the law” distinguish Jews and exclude Gentiles from salvation as Gentiles even as such works are “contravened by grace” (cf. Gal 2:11–21; Rom 3:20–31 with Gal 3:21; Rom 4:2–5) and their purpose achieved through the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:2–4). This does not mean that Paul condoned lawlessness. Rather, for Paul, the Spirit “was a reliable guide to God’s righteous will and a powerful enabler of obedience to it” (21).

The topic of the third chapter is faith. Here Bassler examines first the meaning of the Greek word *pistis* and shows that it incorporates both the content of what is believed and the acts that follow. “Trust” and “faithfulness,” then, are the closest approximations in English. For Paul, then, *pistis* is both trust in the gospel and ethical responsiveness to it. But whereas trust in God and obedience to God’s law were deemed inseparable in early Judaism, Paul views them in Christ antithetically. Consequently, the boundary between them cannot be an issue of “works-righteousness” over against “faith,” because both are acts. Paul’s differentiation becomes more apparent, however, by taking into account the hotly contested translation of *pistis Christou* (the subjective genitive “faith of Christ” versus the objective genitive “faith in Christ”). Bassler’s analysis of the positions shows that each is to be preferred in certain circumstances, but the subjective genitive texts yield some striking consequences for understanding Paul’s faith-law dichotomy. It highlights the humanness of Christ and the potential of human faithfulness, makes it easier to reconcile differences between Paul’s letters and the Gospels, and brings together the juridical aspect of justification by faith and the participatory life in Christ. For Paul, faith is “God-directed and Christ-defined.” Like grace, it is open to all.

The title of chapter 4 is “In Christ: Mystical Reality or Mere Metaphor?” Tracing this controversy from Schweitzer and Deissmann to Käsemann and Sanders, Bassler establishes that “life in Christ” for Paul refers to a real union with Christ, which Paul describes in mystical terms. This may be difficult for modern readers, however, who do

not have a similar experience. Nevertheless, Bassler holds that Paul's descriptions of this mystical union with God through Christ should be taken seriously. It propels Paul not into isolation from the world but drives him out into it to love and serve others.

Chapter 5 addresses "The Righteousness of God," a topic whose importance is inversely proportional to Paul's singular use of the term outside of Romans (2 Cor 5:21). The facts that Paul uses the term only nine times and utilizes ambiguity leave many questions unanswered and fuel numerous debates. Bassler approaches the topic by delving into the term's usage in the Hebrew Bible and reviewing key interpretations of the phrase. She then traces Paul's view of *dikaiosynē theou* in Romans and exposes a problem with the current consensus that God's covenant faithfulness is toward Israel: "God's righteousness" also refers to the Creator's faithfulness to all creation. Bassler adds that "Paul vigorously affirms God's covenant faithfulness to Israel, but he uses the concept of God's righteousness to challenge constrictive definitions of the beneficiaries of that faithfulness" (65). The chapter closes with a brief excursus on justification and its relation to righteousness.

The sixth chapter turns to Paul's view of God's covenant people and is entitled "The Future of 'Israel': Who Is Israel?" The theme, however, is equally complex and challenging to interpreters. An examination of relevant passages reveals that Paul's understanding of Israel is multifaceted (i.e., 1 Thess 2:14–16; Phil 3:2–3; 1 Cor 10, 2 Cor 3; Gal 4:21–31; 6:16; Rom 9–11). "Israel" may refer to the elect of Israel, the spiritual Israel—Jew and Gentile, or even all of Israel (81–84). Similarly, Paul's view of the future of Israel resists a single definitive view, although it is clear that God's covenant promises still include the Jews, even as they incorporate the Gentiles through Christ. Moreover, the future of Israel is integral to the future of all.

The seventh and final chapter is called, "Then Comes the End...': The Parousia and the Resurrection of the Dead." Along with the apocalyptic Judaism of his day, Paul holds a rich and complex assortment of ideas about the end of the present age. These views are affected further by his encounter with the crucified and risen Christ along with the challenges facing the church. Exactly how God will bring about the end is a mystery to Paul. He is certain, though, that "God will be faithful to the faithful," because he is confident that God raised Jesus from the dead, which is for all believers a sign of God's promise of new life to come (96).

The remainder of the book includes extensive endnotes (97–119), a bibliography (121–27), and indexes of ancient sources (129–33), modern authors (135–36), and subjects (137–39).

In a word, Jouette Bassler offers in this volume a reliable guide to key flash points in Pauline scholarship today. Especially appropriate for students and teachers of Paul's letters and thought, this volume is suitable for use at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It may be small, but—following Paul's own example—it is nonetheless “weighty and strong.” These essays do not simplify Paul's theological insight. Rather, they deftly expose much of the rich ambiguity, breadth, and depth of Paul's perspectives. They also demonstrate that there is navigable terrain and purposive direction to Paul's thought. The essays follow a logical progression and reveal a Paul who sought to be faithfully responsive to God's ongoing work in the world through Christ.

Readers who are familiar with Paul will find here a welcome companion for their ongoing study of Paul's theology. Uninitiated readers will find a concise, straightforward introduction to important elements of Paul's faith and the debates surrounding them. This book is not a comprehensive guide to Paul and his letters and theology, however. For instance, one will not find here a focused treatment of Paul's view of the Holy Spirit, although some discussion of the Spirit's work is present in nearly every chapter. Neither will one find here essays on Paul's ethics, Paul's views of women in the church, or on matters pertaining to Paul's communication skills or the situations of his churches. No attempt is made to discern the historical Paul or to distinguish between undisputed and disputed sources. Instead, Bassler remains true to her purpose to provide navigational guides to the more difficult currents of Paul's theology. Even more, she charts for us all a constructive route for considering the strengths and weaknesses of apparently opposing views and moving ahead.