

# H-Net Reviews

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**Matthew V. Novenson.** *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 256 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-984457-9.

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## Paul's Jewish Messiah

Rarely can the thesis of a monograph be stated in a mere five words. Yet Matthew V. Novenson does not oversimplify by distilling his argument down to the bald claim that “*Christos* in Paul means ‘messiah’” (p. 3). This simple thesis is nevertheless bold and controversial because it challenges the commonly held view that Paul uses *Christos* as a (meaningless) name, not as a (meaningful) title. According to Novenson, Paul does not use *Christos* as a name or as a title but as a Hellenistic honorific, comparable to Augustus, Epiphanes, Soter, or Maccabee. As such, *Christos* means “messiah.”

But what did “messiah” mean in an ancient Jewish context and what might Paul have meant by ascribing this honorific to Jesus? Was he adopting a standard messianic concept? Or, was he constructing an alternative to it? Here, Novenson embraces the *communis opinio* that “messiah” in ancient Judaism was basically an empty signifier, a term whose meaning varied from text to text. Paul, like other authors of ancient Jewish messiah texts (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls, 2 Baruch, *m. Sotah*, 1 Enoch, and 4 Ezra), drew from an established pool of scriptural passages with messiah terminology when constructing his uniquely crafted messianic idea. As such, Novenson’s derivative thesis is that Paul’s letters should be viewed as an *example* of messiah language in ancient Judaism rather than an alternative to it.

This revision of a thesis submitted to Princeton Theological Seminary still reads a bit like a dissertation. The notes are numerous and dense, points are capitulated fre-

quently, and surveys of scholarship are aplenty. Not surprisingly, then, the book opens with a standard history of scholarship on the meaning of *Christos* in Paul from the Tübingen School to the present, concluding with the handful of recent interpreters—most notably, N. T. Wright—who have broken with tradition by suggesting that *Christos* in Paul means “messiah.” Though seasoned scholars may find the discussion tedious, those new to the question will find a clear, fair, reasonably concise introduction. The second chapter follows with another survey of scholarship, this time on the messianic idea in Jewish studies. Here, Novenson exposes the recent skepticism over the meaning of “messiah” in ancient Jewish texts. Whereas the messianic idea once shone as a reified concept in Jewish studies, scholarship over the last five decades has emphasized the great diversity in ancient messiah texts. Drawing on the work of John Collins, Loren Stuckenbruck, and especially Gerbern Oegema, Novenson claims that ancient Jewish writers drew from a similar pool of scriptural texts when conceptualizing the messiah, but they all crafted a messiah who corresponded to their peculiar theological, social, and/or political interests. Jewish messiah texts are thus dubbed “creatively biblical” linguistic acts.

The book comes into its own in the third and fourth chapters, which make the compelling case for construing *Christos* as an honorific. While Novenson is not the first to claim as much—a fact he readily acknowledges—his case is more thorough and convincing than those of his predecessors. In many ways, it is a case of diagnosis

by elimination. By examining the onomastic possibilities available to Paul (chapter 3) as well as Paul's syntactical deployment of *Christos*, Novenson reveals that, for Paul, *Christos* is "not quite a title and not a quite name," nor is it a nickname or a part of a double name (p. 134). It is rather an honorific and "it works according to the syntactical rules that govern that onomastic category" (p. 97).

Then, at last, Novenson considers what *Christos* as an honorific might mean by examining the "creatively biblical" contours of nine important *Christos* passages in Paul's undisputed epistles. Paul's messiah, on this reckoning, heavily emphasizes the house of David (over a priestly Aaronic messiah), and in particular the notion of a Davidic king who rules over the Gentiles—to wit, a messiah in line with Paul's peculiar social and theological concerns. This chapter shows how Paul's Christology—or perhaps we should say, Paul's *Christos* language—represents an example of, rather than a contrast to, typical messiah language in ancient Judaism, but it by no means offers a full-fledged exploration of Pauline Christology.

Accordingly, I hoped there might be another chapter in which Novenson developed Paul's Christology a bit further, either in light of the many other themes Paul addresses (e.g., God, Torah, Israel, and history) or in light of messiah language from other authors who wrote during the same period. The first direction might admittedly constitute another book rather than another chapter, and Novenson may have been prudent to avoid overreaching. But the second direction would have been manageable, and I think salutary, given Novenson's insistence that Pauline Christology be contextualized within ancient Jewish messiah discourse. Novenson fears that such

comparison might turn his study into the standard (and often ideologically motivated) Paul-versus-Judaism fare, but I wonder if this concern leads him to overestimate the independence of ancient texts and authors. Previous scholarship was indeed at fault for essentializing the messianic idea by suggesting that messianic language meant one and the same thing in every text, but perhaps it is equally problematic to propose, as Novenson does, that "absent a 'messianic idea' to invest the [messianic] words with meaning, the words themselves cease to mean anything at all" (p. 41). As he puts it elsewhere, "messiahship in ancient Judaism did not entail anything, strictly speaking" (p. 178). Even if ancient writers did construct their messiahs ad hoc from the established array of scriptural passages, they might well have been aware of other ad hoc messianic ideas in circulation and borrowed from or repudiated those ideas accordingly. By way of analogy, every baker ultimately makes his cake from the same generic set of ingredients; nevertheless, most bakers are familiar with different cake recipes and consider them when developing their own. Thus, considering the points of contact between Paul's *Christos* language and that of his Jewish contemporaries might enable an even better understanding of his meaning and objectives.

Even without such a chapter, however, *Christ among the Messiahs* is a successful project that hopefully will spur many scholars to reconsider the possibility that *Christos* in Paul is a meaningful term. If they do, and I think they should, then we are likely to see a spate of new investigations into Paul's messiah Christology and, more broadly, into the complexity of messianic language in ancient Judaism. Should that development bear fruit, we will have Novenson, among others, to thank for it.

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