

making in the various themes from the Ten Commandments with reflections on theological aspects, such as selfishness, human sexuality, grace, and reconciliation. Every description seems to defy categorization and reductionism that compels me to want to view the depictions.

The stimulating breadth of disciplines makes this an engaging read. The multidisciplinary collaboration takes one beyond the boundaries of standardized disciplines and provokes new perspectives. Combined with thorough research and supported by extensive citation and several illustrations, the book leaves the reader engrossed with the multi-faceted cultural influence of the Decalogue.

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MATTHEW NOVENSON

Grammar of Messianism

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Matthew Novenson's book *Grammar of Messianism* is a follow-up from his dissertation, *Christ Among the Messiahs*. In his recent book, Novenson tries to argue for two main points. First, that studies of messianism have been done by using a methodology that is flawed. Secondly, that one should regard messianism and messianic language as not definitive, but fluid. Writers use messianic language in a way that suits their purpose for writing. The book contains eight chapters, beginning with the problem of earlier research and ending with a chapter on possible ways forward in the search for a proper interpretation and understanding of messianic language in relation to Jewish and Christian writings.

The first chapter sets the tone of the book by aiming critique against earlier studies of messianism. Novenson's main purpose is to rid scholarship of the methodological trope of using fixed idea of messianism in order to test texts and examine if they are "truly messianic." Rather, Novenson views messianic language as a language game.

If messianism is a language game, then what I am calling the "grammar of messianism" is the rules of the game: the way messiah language for the ancient au-

thors who chose to use it, the discursive possibilities it opened up, as well as the discursive constraints it entailed. (14)

Therefore, Novenson does not begin with providing a definition of what a “messiah” is, but rather examines texts that use messiah language.

Chapter two deals with earlier scholarship on messianism in the Hebrew Bible. Novenson questions scholarship from the nineteenth century and forward, which concluded that an eschatological messianic idea is a later product, not actually present in the Hebrew Bible. The first half of the chapter is devoted to discussing earlier scholars and their works, and the second half is a development of the discussion, where Novenson shows that some texts contain the idea of an eschatological messiah in the Hebrew Bible. Novenson concludes that in some writings of the Second Temple Period, authors might appear to be interpreting and further developing ideas, but they are in fact merely reproducing an idea already existing in the Hebrew Bible. Ideas regarding the messiah are concerned with kingship, but also with the end of days. As in chapter one, Novenson shows that a too narrow definition of “messiah” might be one of the larger issues with earlier scholarship.

The third chapter discusses whether a messiah must be of Davidic ancestry. Again, Novenson discusses with earlier scholarship and shows that a narrow definition of messiah has been a problem. The consensus seemed to be that a messiah must be of the tribe of David, which is why Judah Maccabee is never called “messiah.” However, says Novenson, Shimon bar Kosiba is called “messiah,” even though he was not a Davidide. How can this be? Novenson answers the question that some are made “messiah” by other features than heritage, and some messiahs are born as messiahs. Just as David himself was made a messiah when he was anointed, others can be made a messiah. It was his character and the deeds he performed which qualified him; so also with Shimon bar Kosiba and Herod the Great. Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand, was born from the tribe of David and was therefore born as a messiah.

In the fourth chapter, Novenson discusses what is called “the vacuum hypothesis,” that is, the idea that during the Second Temple period,

messianism did not exist. Novenson examines Philo of Alexandria, Josephus, and the Mishnah, which all seem to lack a messianic language, and tries to determine if this is actually the case. Novenson concludes that for all three of these texts, the authors seem to be dealing with different issues that do not require a messiah. His conclusion is therefore that when examining Jewish texts, one should not expect messianism, since the authors might have had different issues at hand.

The fifth chapter discusses the “Quest of the First Messiah.” Novenson accounts for the origins of the quest and discusses some who have tried to find and identify a “first messiah.” He mainly discusses the works of Michael Wise and Israel Knohl. The latter’s works are treated in two parts, with the second part being a discussion of the limestone writing *Hazon Gabriel*. Novenson concludes that this quest has been “misguided,” and that finding an “original messiah” would not solve any problems. Rather, Novenson proposes, one should regard messianic writings as being retrospective writings which try to explain the events surrounding a person—“There are the scriptural oracles, and there are ancient Jewish and Christian interpreters, but there is no such thing as the first messiah” (186).

The sixth chapter is a discussion of the dichotomy of a Jewish idea and a Christian idea of the messiah. The purpose of this chapter is to close the gap, and show how stereotypical views of Jewish and Christian messianism create more problems than they solve. Novenson does this by showing that both side’s view of the messiah can contain several different ideas, and concludes that the distinction is created by research, not by ancient authors. “In fact, the Jewish messiah–Christian messiah distinction does not recognize a difference; it creates one” (216).

Chapter seven is a discussion of whether early Christian writers continued to use messiah language, or if they stopped using it in order to give way for other themes. In a very intriguing way, Novenson shows that messiah language continued to be present in different ways, for example in translations to Coptic and Syriac. He also shows that several writers from this period explains the word messiah’s etymology and its

meaning and how messianic language is used in polemical writings against both Jews and “heretics” from this time period. Novenson’s conclusion is that messiah language in fact remained and was present for longer than has been recognized in earlier scholarship.

The eighth and final chapter is an attempt to summarize and give some suggestions to where scholars can continue to fruitfully contribute to the research of messianism. Novenson compares the use of oil for sanctification in the Hebrew Bible with Roman fasces. The fasces functions not only as a means to punish and execute people, but primarily as a symbol of power. In this way, oil and anointing, and therefore also a messiah, is a symbol of power. However, messianism is still not a fixed idea, and Novenson warns against using fixed ideas as analytical tools. Finally, Novenson concludes that for further studies on messianism, it is important to refrain from assuming that a single “messianic idea” exists. Rather, we should treat messianic language as “a regional–ethnic subset of ancient Mediterranean political discourse” (272).

In my opinion this book is a gem for anyone looking to dive into messianism in ancient literature. Novenson, in an exemplary way, shows how earlier research has been too eager to categorize. By approaching texts containing messianic language, as Novenson suggests, with an idea that is broad and nuanced, one could in fact grasp some of the rules, the grammar, of that particular messianic text. This book provides the means to continue the research of messianism, especially to nuance the picture of Jesus as Messiah within the New Testament. From all the primary texts extant, the New Testament corpus is by far the largest collection of messianic texts. I believe Novenson deliberately treats Jesus of Nazareth as little as he can, since by not treating the New Testament texts, they can instead be thoroughly examined in the light of Novenson’s work. Hopefully, if Novenson or somebody else studies the New Testament texts, they will have to keep this book close and not fall into the pitfalls that Novenson warns about. If they succeed, the results may be as illuminating as this book has been.

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