

BOOK REVIEW

Novenson, Matthew V., *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). xvi + 384 pp. Hbk. \$82.00.

Matthew V. Novenson's *The Grammar of Messianism* offers a thorough-going critique of the Messianic-idea approach to the study of Messianism in Judaism and Christianity. This approach often first defines 'messiah' and then seeks to trace its development as an idea across the ancient sources. In contrast, Novenson draws on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein to conceptualize Messianism as a language game. He argues that the use of this ancient Jewish political idiom in Jewish and Christian texts from the sixth century BCE to the sixth century CE participates in a game whose rules reveal a 'grammar of Messianism' with a common set of possibilities, rules and constraints. This approach corrects several long-standing distortions of Messianism generated by the Messianic-idea approach. After introducing his methodology in the opening chapter, each of the remaining chapters tackle a major issue in the study of Messianism with this new methodology.

The work begins by discussing the well-worn divide between the Messiah of the Hebrew Bible and its use beyond the Hebrew Bible in ancient Judaism and Christianity. Taking Mowinckel's work as a paradigmatic example, he shows how Hebrew Bible scholarship has insisted that the 'Messiah' does not appear in the Hebrew Bible but, when the term is used for persons like Cyrus in Isa. 45.1, it simply describes an 'anointed person'. He challenges the distinction between the technical term 'messiah' and the non-technical translation 'anointed person', arguing that the language game demonstrates that there is no decisive switch between the Hebrew Bible's 'anointed person' and a later eschatological Messiah.

The second dichotomy Novenson tackles is the contrast between messiahs defined by ancestry and messiahs defined by merit. Citing examples that include Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, Herod the Great and Jesus, he shows how messianic discourse was not restricted to either category. Rather, both had

their roots in the example of David and Solomon, which gave precedent to both models for ancient interpreters to use in their discussion of messianic figures. As he explains, ‘not all Jewish leaders are messiahs, not all messiahs are royal, not all royal messiahs are Davidic, and not all Davidic messiahs are sons of David’ (p. 111).

The third issue Novenson addresses is the so-called ‘Messianic vacuum’, a phrase that describes the lack of references to any messianic figures between 500–200 BCE. Novenson demonstrates that the lack of references to a Messiah in several authors and texts (e.g. Josephus, Philo and the Mishnah) could be the result of any number of theological, political, literary or social causes such that the idea of a vacuum is meaningless. He argues that it is a mistake of the Messianic-idea paradigm to insist that Messianism was widespread and important to every ancient Jew or Christian. Rather, ‘talk about an anointed ruler was important for people for whom it was important, and that is enough’ (p. 159).

The next chapter describes Michael Wise’s and Israel Knohl’s attempts to identify the roots of a ‘suffering Messiah’ in Qumran texts as the ‘first Messiah’. While Novenson agrees with other scholars’ devastating critiques of these two authors’ exegesis, he furthers the critique by challenging Wise’s and Knohl’s methodology. To insist on a ‘first Messiah’ is to work with the Idealist model where ‘Messiah’ is independent of specific texts and the definition is already pre-determined. Rather, he contends that one needs to see how Qumran and the New Testament are both part of a wider language game around Messianism.

The fifth issue is the perennial divide between a Jewish and Christian Messiah, a dichotomy that often disguises religious value judgements. Novenson illustrates how this divide distorts the evidence on both sides. New Testament writers continue to use the language of a triumphant, militaristic Messiah, and Jewish writers can still discuss individuals as a Messiah when they fail (e.g. Bar-Kokhba). The Jewish–Christian Messiah dichotomy creates a difference rather than recognizing a difference that is inherent to the grammar of Messianism. Similarly, he also addresses the issue of the fate of Messiah Christology in early Christianity. While he notes that Christological speculation takes a clear turn in the Patristic period beyond the Messiah category, he notes how Messianic language repeatedly shows up in appeals to anointing, especially in translation and in the *contra Iudaeos* literature (e.g. Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*; Hippolytus, *Treatise Against the Jews*; Tertullian, *Against the Jews*).

The work concludes by comparing the usage of the term 'messiah' in ancient Judaism and Christianity to the development of another symbol in ancient Mediterranean political discourse: the *fasces*. In a way analogous to Messianism, this symbol was a language game complete with rules that located the term in a vast interpretive project. Messianism is simply another example of a political idiom in ancient Mediterranean discourse.

The Grammar of Messianism is a superb work that exposes the significant faults of the lingering Idealist approach to the question of what 'messiah' means. The work is far-ranging in its study of primary sources and shows Novenson's skills as a historian and exegete. The author's language-game approach to Messianism is historically more rigorous and methodologically more robust as Messianism is properly located in the 'vast interpretive project of ancient Judaism' (p. 264). The book inaugurates a larger research program that understands the use of 'messiah' in specific texts as one language game in the broader interpretive project of ancient Judaism and Christianity.

The major limit of the work, however, is its need for significant ground-clearing before presenting new argumentation. As a presentation of current scholarship on Messianism and of the significant methodological difficulties posed by the older approaches, Novenson's work is excellent. Although Novenson asserts the superiority of his study of Messianism as a 'language game' with a controlling grammar, this method does not take center stage in the body of the work. Rather, most chapters tend to point out the pitfalls, limits and methodological shortcomings of past research on Messianism. While he often appeals to the grammar of Messianism in passing, the tone of the work is more deconstructive of past research rather than a fully articulated alternative. He is aware of this shortcoming, as he concludes by noting that his approach to Messianism 'amounts to a research program' that could 'give a new, positive account of what it is that the primary texts do, on their own terms' (pp. 275-76). Novenson has explored some of these possibilities in his earlier work on the Messiah in Paul (*Christ Among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012]). Perhaps the work, therefore, should not be faulted for a lack of constructiveness, as it is part of a wider research program. Yet the title of the work and opening presentation of methodology at least warrants critical inspection to see if it does provide a better alternative. It is the constructive edge of the work that left this reader desiring more substance and is the basis for the following questions and critiques.

The opening chapter and title create the expectation that Novenson will articulate some of the grammar or rules of Messianism as a language game played in the ancient texts. While he occasionally points to possibilities (e.g. the logic and use of merit and ancestry to define the Messiah), the grammar is never made explicit. The reader is given less constructive, exegetical work on the primary sources themselves and is forced to infer many of the rules of the grammar of Messianism from his critiques. Yet making such inferences raises several important questions.

For example, Novenson limits his research to ‘only those texts that use the pertinent words’ for ‘messiah’ and their wider literary contexts (p. 30). And yet, among the cited examples of Messianic figures, he includes a discussion of Zerubbabel, a figure he notes is not called a Messiah in the biblical sources but instead is considered with the high priest Joshua to be ‘sons of oil’ (Zech. 4.14). While Novenson is right to discuss Zerubbabel in a book on Messianism (as both ancient interpreters and previous scholars have done), it seems significant that the figure is not actually called a Messiah. While there are significant textual signals to locate him in the discourse on Messianism (oil, the royal branch, etc.), does the use of the explicit term ‘messiah’ matter, as Novenson seems to suggest in the opening? Or are we not thrust back into discussing ‘messiah’ in a way that is removed from the specific terminology, perhaps by appeal to some pre-established definition, grammatical rule or biblical intertextual allusions? Is he willing to acknowledge that perhaps the language game of Messianism allows for a discussion of a Messiah without the use of the term?

This raises the wider methodological question of whether Novenson’s approach is defined and defended sufficiently to provide a helpful way forward. For Wittgenstein, language games are a way to discuss how speech is meaningful in specific groups. The grammar is the rules of the game for that group. While this is theoretically clear, when it comes to specific texts, larger questions remain unanswered. For instance, which groups are in view for the specific language game of Messianism? Is it the group that wrote and read a specific text (e.g. the Gospel of Mark), is it the wider religious community (early Christianity) or is it some sort of maximalist group that includes the diversity of ancient Judaism and Christianity? He seems to contend that Messianism is a shared language game by Jews and Christians in the roughly thousand-year period discussed. If so, one needs to demonstrate significant continuity and unity across time. Again, Novenson could have done more to support this claim through exegetical engagement with a wider range of ancient sources.

But one should also ask about differences that arise over time and scrutinize the limits of a single language game across such an extended time period and diverse sources. At what point are there enough changes or manipulations of a grammar that it is no longer the same language game? For instance, the earliest Christians who understand Jesus as the Messiah surely have introduced a new element into *their* grammar of Messianism that sets them apart from others in at least some ways. While Novenson can claim this is as a well-documented example of how Jewish Messianism is always ‘the interplay of biblical tradition and empirical circumstance’ (p. 196), at what point do the significant differences in grammar eventually result in separate language games? Are we to assume, for instance, that Isaiah and Augustine are speaking the same language game?

One can critically assess the question of difference through analogy to the development of languages more broadly. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a modern English speaker to pick up Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in Middle English. The roughly six-hundred-year gap has resulted in enough significant changes to the language game that, although there is continuity in some words, it is hardly appropriate to see Chaucer and the contemporary reader as participating in a shared language game. What makes them distinct and uninterpretable from one another? What are significant differences that set the language games apart? And to what extent could (or should) one speak of multiple language games, perhaps with distinct grammars of Messianism, in the period Novenson explores?

Overall, Matthew V. Novenson’s *The Grammar of Messianism* is a superb work of research that challenges approaches that distort the question of Messianism with insightful criticism, exposing the limits of previous research with a clear style and perceptive grasp of the primary and secondary scholarship. His overall method holds promise for further work, and it is the hope of this reader that Novenson will continue his research program with further constructive publications that contain the same rigor and intellect displayed in this work.

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