

Review Article:
**Matthew V. Novenson. *The Grammar of Messianism:
An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users.*
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The present volume calls for a fresh start in the study of early Jewish and Christian messianism. In the opening salvo (chapter 1: “After the Messianic Idea,” 1–33), Novenson laments the lack of theoretical rigor characterizing most (but not all) prior scholarship (4). Too often, scholars start with some definition — an abstraction — that then guides the texts to be studied, often too narrowly. In earlier stages of scholarship (from Heinrich Graetz in the 19th century through Joseph Klausner and Gershom Scholem in the 20th), the messianic idea was largely singular and special. This changes somewhat after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, when scholars like Morton Smith and others increasingly recognized and emphasized the variety of messianic ideas and figures that appear, especially in the late second temple period. Another development occurred later, with scholars like Richard Horsley, John Hanson, and John Gager, and their efforts to discern how messianic ideas would be experienced by the common folk — those unlikely to have read the texts we modern scholars have the benefit of studying. Novenson accepts the need to move beyond the established timelines and taxonomies (11), but at the same time he admits the difficulty of discerning the thoughts of those low-status non-literates who left us little or no evidence to go by (19–20). Taking his cue from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language games by way of Niels Dahl (who applied Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophy to the study of Christology), Novenson proposes that we treat messianism as a “grammar,” one whose rules we wish to know. To do so, he advises that we “eschew all definitions of *messiah*, return to the pertinent ancient texts, and follow the way the words run” (33). Working toward that end, the bulk of the book addresses and rethinks classic problems in the study of early Jewish and Christian messianism.

Chapter 2 (“Oil and Power in Ancient Israel,” 34–64) demonstrates the problems that arise when messianism is studied (à la Sigmund Mowinckel) with overly determined (and, often, clearly Christian) definitions. The argument hinges on the irony that almost nothing in the Hebrew Bible can be understood as anything but a mere preliminary to the later, eschatologically oriented messianic idea. But how can all this important Israelite evidence regarding kings, priests, oil, and power be excluded from the discussion? For this reason, “the supposed late, technical sense of messiah is an entirely artificial construct” (62), establishing false divides among biblical references to anointed rulers past, present, and future that could better be understood in relation to one another. Toward his own conclusion, Novenson favorably cites Morton Smith’s earlier classic statement: “just as there are messiahs without Ends, so there are Ends without Messiahs” (62).¹

Chapter 3 (“Messiahs Born and Made,” 65–113) rethinks the seemingly fundamental notion of Davidic descent. Without gainsaying the importance of Davidic descent for royal/messianic claims made for Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, Jesus, and the rabbinic Patriarchs, Novenson also points to the significant counter-evidence: anointed leaders and restorers for whom no such Davidic claims are made (including the Hasmoneans, Herod, and even Bar Kochba/Kosiba). Here too, Novenson points back to received wisdom: as George Foot Moore stated, “There were times when the deliverance was of greater moment than the lineage of the deliverer” (69).²

Chapter 4 (“Messiahs Present and Absent,” 114–160) takes on what Novenson refers to as the “vacuum hypothesis” — the problematic arguments from silence regarding the ostensible lack of messianism in Philo, Josephus, and the Mishnah. Once again, Novenson points out that too much rests on narrow definitions: there is, of course, plenty regarding anointed priests and kings in Philo, Josephus, and the Mishnah. When we expand the scope to include this important and relevant evidence, we find that there is “no deafening silence to be explained” (160).

Chapter 5 (“The Quest for the First Messiah,” 161–186) presents a devastating — and, perhaps final — critique of the works of Michael Wise and Israel Knohl, both of whom problematically found the “first messiah” at

¹ Morton Smith, “What Is Implied by the Variety of Messianic Figures?” *JBL* 78 (1959): 66–72 (68).

² George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927–1930), quote from 2.327.

Qumran.³ While prior reviewers have consistently pointed out the creativity and subjectivity involved in Knohl's and Wise's constructions, Novenson goes a step further by demonstrating the ironic flaw inherent in the quest. Even if successful, finding a Jesus-like suffering messiah before the first century CE would not actually offer any meaningful explanation of origin; this would just push the timing of this curious idea back a generation or so earlier. "Christian uniqueness is once again underscored, just at one remove" (185). Pulling the carpet of excitement out from under such reconstructions, Novenson reminds his readers that Christian messiah texts are really like all others: they "reinterpret scripture in the light of their own historical circumstances" (185).

Chapter 6 ("The Jewish Messiah — Christian Messiah Distinction," 187–216) breaks down another trope, this one more common: the assertion that Jewish messianic thought was more strictly biblical, while Christian messianic thought was shaped by particular circumstances of Jesus's life and death. Novenson carefully deconstructs this model, working from both ends. Even when aspects of Jesus's life and death prove exceptional, the dominant Christian understanding of the eventual end result — the "second coming" or *parousia* as understood by Paul or Revelation — often strictly adheres to what prior Jewish scriptures would lead us (or them) to expect. On the other hand, Jewish messianic thought was just as often shaped by given needs in unexpected ways, from Cyrus and Zerubbabel, to Sabbatai Zevi and Menahem Mendel Schneerson (206). Once again, Novenson quotes Morton Smith at a key moment (207): as new messianic figures arose, they would meet prior expectations in some respects and not others; "the meaning of the term 'messiah' was changed to accommodate these new phenomena."⁴ Messianic ideas about Jesus may be innovative. But even in this respect, they find their place within prior patterns.

Chapter 7 ("The Fate of Messiah Christology in Early Christianity," 217–262) hones in on one last misconception, this one pertaining to Christianity in particular. It has been said (by scholars both Jewish and Christian) that Christian messiah Christology eventually gives way to higher Christologies. Over and against these views — and in keeping with his overall argument —

³ The works in question are Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, David Maisel, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Knohl, *Messiahs and Resurrection in 'The Gabriel Revelation'* (London: Continuum, 2009), and Michael O. Wise, *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior Before Christ* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

⁴ Smith, "Messiahs: Robbers, Jurists, Prophets, and Magicians," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 44 (177): 185–195 (189).

Novenson points out that this distinction too rests on overly narrow, predetermined definitions. When we allow for the fluidity of the terms and concepts — and attend to all the voices to be heard — we can more easily see that Jewish messianic ideas never quite passed from Christian discourse.

Chapter 8 (“The Grammar of Messianism,” 263–276) recapitulates the key arguments: Jewish and Christian messiah texts are really not much different from early Jewish and Christian discourses in general. “They invoke the biblical past by way of justifying their real presents and their ideal futures” (265). “Exegesis... is the stuff messiah texts are made of” (274). The end matter includes an extensive bibliography (277–326), as well as indices of subjects (327–335), ancient sources (337–349), and modern authors (351–361). Happily, Oxford has produced this volume with footnotes at the bottom of the page, right where they belong: this greatly enhances the readability of this book, which in truth is just as much about “secondary” sources as “primary” ones.

Novenson’s book is thoughtful, learned, and provocative. Readers are not likely to disagree with its major suggestions and conclusions: messianic texts (Jewish and Christian) display stunning diversity, though patterns emerge. Similarly creative exegetical impulses are employed across the board, working with shared textual resources, responding to new situations as they arise. Readers will also agree with Novenson’s own warning that his achievement is preliminary: his title — *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* — is admittedly a “thesis statement with a suppressed verb” (21). Here I confess that Novenson’s fluid prose left me scratching my head. First I tried to guess what verb may have been suppressed and where (“misuse” in the subtitle perhaps?). But then I realized that Novenson’s decision to withhold this information indicates something important about the unstated rules of his own game.

There is, in fact, a great deal more suppressed in this book than a verb. Both at the beginning and the end, Novenson highlights the danger and futility of “pedantic quarrels” over definitions (276; cf. 26–33). Novenson is no doubt correct that too many definitions of “messianism” are Christian in some respects and overly exclusive in others (especially when definitions are used to exclude, say, Mishnaic references to priestly and royal anointing from the discussion). Novenson is correct to include within his scope any references to anointing, even while he also discusses instances of redemption without anointing. While I laud Novenson’s inclusive approach, I still question his aversion to definition. Without any definition at all, how are readers to know what texts Novenson has included or why — or which he has excluded and why? What are the criteria for establishing the body of “messianic texts” to be considered?

For all its impressive breadth and depth — reaching from the Hebrew Bible to the middle ages, sources Jewish and Christian, in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and more — there are some curious absences. One major lacuna to my mind concerns traditional Jewish liturgy: many traditional Jewish prayers concern redemption in general, and a number pertain to the messiah in particular (daily blessings; traditional blessings following the chanting of prophetic readings; Passover seder). This is a curious absence, for references to Jewish liturgy — discussed, even if not quoted, in the Mishnah — would shore up Novenson’s argument regarding the supposed “silence” of the Mishnah regarding messianic hopes (e.g., *m. Ber.* 1:5; *m. Pes.* 10:6). In any event, my own pre-conceived understanding of the conceptual and chronological contours of Novenson’s topics leaves me feeling that something rather important has been left out. If I knew what the criteria of inclusion were, maybe I would understand better why this material did not merit inclusion.

Another curious absence concerns the theories of one scholar who otherwise looms large behind a number of Novenson’s conclusions: Morton Smith. Smith’s essays are cited favorably a number of times, for he early on correctly understood the importance of appreciating the variety of Jewish messianic figures as well as the dangers of imposing any Christian definitions on the material at hand. All the more am I left wondering why Novenson chose not to consider any question pertaining to the possibilities of messianic antinomianism. Sabbatai Zevi — safely out of Novenson’s chronological bounds — is mentioned once (206), but Smith’s reconstruction of Jesus’s antinomianism (à la *Clement to Theodore*, with Scholem’s treatment of Zevi lurking in the background) earns nary a mention. Is Novenson among the doubters? Correctly (in my view), Novenson repeatedly questions the authenticity of *Hazon Gabriel* (176–182). But irrespective of any evaluation of the Mar Saba letter, the possibility of messianic or eschatological antinomianism would be a question worthy of inclusion in any event. Can messianism’s ancient Jewish semantic field include the kind of antinomianism that will appear in early modern Jewish messianic movements, and that Smith provocatively attributed to Jesus?

There are, no doubt, many good reasons why Novenson chose not to look at certain texts or other related phenomena. My own interest in definition notwithstanding, Novenson has raised sufficient concerns to elicit sympathy for his reluctance to put forward precise or even loose meanings for “messiah” or “messianism.” But doing so just shifts the burden, requiring a fuller discussion of the author’s data-gathering process, explaining which texts and topics were included, and based on what criteria. Make no mistake: *The Grammar of Messianism* is an important book. It will no doubt remain essential reading for

the study of Jewish and Christian messianism for some time to come. Yet Novenson's achievement is weakened slightly, and perhaps unnecessarily, by this ironic reluctance to reveal the rules of its own game.