

Messianic Grammar?

A response to Matthew V Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism:*

An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users (OUP, 2017)

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Introduction

Part of the cultural sea-change that has been happening in the western world in recent decades is that we are waking up to the dangers of large Idealist constructs and doing our best to replace them with smaller-scale explorations from the ground up. The larger constructs and their attendant narratives have been unmasked as power-plays, and the solution is to tell the smaller stories in their own ways and let them speak for themselves in whatever discordant voices they choose. This is of course the story of postmodernity in general, visible in everything from literary criticism to Brexit-related politics (where the smaller regional stories confront the Behemoth of European modernism). And this is I think the larger map upon which we can place Matthew Novenson's remarkable new book *The Grammar of Messianism*, to which I am honoured today to be able to respond.¹

I'm not sure whether Novenson would agree, but my provisional judgment is that the book represents two different and perhaps sometimes conflicting reactions to Idealism. On the one hand there is the linguistic turn which he explicitly invokes by citing Wittgenstein and by making the metaphor of 'Grammar' central to the title and to his exposition.² On the other hand there is the turn from Idealism to Realism, to the actual historical study of particular movements, people and texts, signalled here by the adjective 'political' in the subtitle.³ I welcome both and would love to explore things more at this meta-level, but that may be for another occasion. I haven't had much time yet to ponder the book at leisure; but I have much enjoyed my first two readings of it,

¹ Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and its Users* (Oxford: OUP, 2017). References below are to this book unless otherwise noted.

² Novenson is aware of the difference between his reception and appropriation of those terms and Wittgenstein's own contexts and concerns; see his comments (11f.) on Dahl's use of Wittgenstein.

³ On these shifts, see my remarks in *The New Testament and the People of God* (= *NTPG*) (vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*) (London: SPCK, 1992), 96. The shift to the political has been marked in recent NT studies, e.g. in Paul, on which see my *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (= *PFG*) (vol 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*), ch. 12.

and I look forward to allowing its probing, wide-ranging arguments to influence the way I approach many related topics in the future.

The Project and its Virtues

Novenson aligns himself with, though I think goes significantly beyond, a group of recent scholars who have protested against the large-scale history-of-ideas construct of ‘messianism’ that used to rule the field, from Scholem and Klausner to Mowinckel and beyond.⁴ Such writers – often cited by Christian scholars, myself included, on the assumption that since several of them were Jewish one would not be accused of the back-projection of Christian ideas – tended to treat ‘messianism’ as a single category of which there were ‘true’ or ‘pure’ examples to be played off against something which might use the same language but which wasn’t really the proper thing, producing the peculiarity where each specialisation, Hebrew Bible, second-temple, New Testament, and Patristics, assumed that the real thing was somewhere else, leaving only the Rabbis to talk unimpeded about the Messiah. The recent writers Novenson cites positively include particularly John Collins, Loren Stuckenbruck, Peter Schäfer, Gergern Oegma, and – though with more caveats – William Horbury. But his wide-ranging study, both of the contexts and grammar of ancient messianism and of the arguments and prejudgments of scholarly discussions in the last 200 years, goes beyond much of this work and includes detailed and welcome critique of some particular trends in the discipline.

I particularly enjoyed the wide range, from Hebrew Bible and ancient ideas of ‘anointing’ through to the later Rabbis; the attention given to Zerubbabel and Herod; and particularly the focus on Bar Kochba and the subsequent puzzled reflections on his putative messianic status. Then there is an important discussion (245–250) of Justin Martyr and the *Dialogue with Trypho*; and Novenson takes the argument forward into an area most New Testament scholars leave to one side, namely the use of messianic language in the world of non-orthodox Christianity of the second and third centuries. The book flows well as a whole, though there were moments when it felt like a collection of detached studies that might have been smoothed out just a little more into a single narrative. But among these semi-detached studies are several gems. I think particularly of the pair of chapters dealing trenchantly and wisely with two

⁴ See e.g. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971); J. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah* (New York: Macmillan, 1955); S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005 [1956]).

important issues, one of recent origin and the other a perennial. The first (chapter 5) is the question of a 'First Messiah' in Qumran, paving the way as it were for Jesus. The second (chapter 6) is the distinction which people have often made, and still make in many quarters, between a supposed 'Jewish Messiah' and a supposed 'Christian Messiah'.

With the first of these I think Novenson has made an unanswerable case. The idea of a Qumran 'first Messiah' is a modern myth. It appears to serve, from a different angle, the same agenda as the relativisations of Burton Mack and J. Z. Smith (about whom more presently), that is, the attempt to show that early Christian beliefs were neither more nor less than a particular instance of a much wider general religious phenomenon. But its textual basis, as Novenson has shown, will not support this.

With the second question (the distinction of a putative 'Jewish Messiah' and 'Christian Messiah') I fully agree, but I would like to see some more nuancing. In particular, I wonder if Novenson has considered the ways in which the nineteenth and twentieth century, retrieving a much older 'Jewish Messiah'/'Christian Messiah' distinction, newly framed this either/or within the eighteenth-century Deist controversies which thought in terms of 'natural' and 'supernatural', with the 'Jewish Messiah' being seen as 'natural' and the 'Christian Messiah' as 'supernatural'. In both cases, this might then be evaluated very differently according to the standpoint. European Christians in the Enlightenment period, especially in nineteenth-century Germany with its mixture of Lutheran 'two kingdoms' theology and Hegelian Idealism, would have been eager to make such a distinction, celebrating the supposedly 'spiritual' Christian picture in contrast with the this-worldly and political Jewish one. Many Jews, long used to a similar contrast, would naturally reverse the evaluation: if these Christians think that salvation is something which does not involve the good creation of the One God, they are simply opting for some kind of Platonism.

It is noticeable at this point that the subtitle of Novenson's book nails a particular flag to the mast: this is an ancient Jewish *political* idiom. I don't think he means this in a narrow sense, and he certainly is not intending to buy into the modernist either/or I have just sketched. He would (I think) be the first to insist that for ancient and not so ancient Jews the political idiom was heavily freighted with theology: in a line going back to clear biblical statements such as Psalm 72 or Isaiah 11, the restorative justice exercised by the coming King will be the means by which the whole world will be filled with the divine glory. But of course for most western Christians since the Enlightenment, and specially for

those in the dominant (German) traditions of biblical exegesis, any mention of ‘religion’ would *ipso facto* exclude the ‘political’. The debates about the meaning of messianism are thus one particular battle-ground where larger issues of Jewish and Christian identities have been, and still are, thought through and sometimes, alas, fought out. The horrible catastrophe of the twentieth century was, in one sense, simply the culmination of many centuries of polemic and persecution.

In addition to these two sets of questions (the ‘first Messiah’ and the ‘Jewish or Christian Messiah’), there is a third element to the whole picture which must be taken into consideration in current debate. This is the secularist agenda which wants all religious claims, especially claims to ‘uniqueness’, reduced to sociological function on the one hand (Burton Mack, Jonathan Z. Smith) or covert and non-theological political aims on the other (Richard Horsely and others).⁵ Simply to raise the historical question of messianic ideas and hopes is thus to plunge into a turbulent and many-sided set of debates.

The central argument of Novenson’s book is that in all cases, from the fourth century BC to the early Middle Ages, and specially in the two centuries either side of the time of Jesus, the ‘grammar of messianism’ is bound up with two things: scriptural retrieval on the one hand and political navigation on the other. The varied messianic movements, in other words, were always aware of the need for scriptural support in whatever fashion; but this was always tempered by the actual circumstances of the movements and particularly the personalities involved. There was easily enough flexibility in the way relevant texts were being read to accommodate many different possibilities from Herodians at one end of a scale to brigand leaders at the other.⁶ There was (in other words) no ‘one-size-must-fit-all’ set of messianic texts. Even the texts that were cited quite frequently could be taken in different ways according to the needs, including perceived propaganda needs, of the particular moment. Novenson’s central thesis at this point looks back to, but to my mind is much more satisfying than, Neusner’s earlier protest about ‘Judaisms’, plural, and ‘their Messiahs’. As has often been pointed out, for something to have a plural there must be a singular, a larger family likeness within which the plurality can be given the attention it deserves.

⁵ See e.g. B. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988; J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1994); R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁶ On brigand leaders see e.g. 135–48. One of the fascinating things highlighted by Novenson is the messianic ambition of Herod, reflected in later traditions (77–82).

A Question of Method and Absent Friends

At this point I found myself wanting to raise a question of method. Novenson is determined to allow the word *Christos* and its cognates to set the agenda and lead the way, in contrast to the older, perhaps Continental and/or Idealist, notion of ‘real messianism’ which would include some uses and relegate others to ‘spurious’ status. I am not sure that he avoids the opposite trap, which is that one might apparently shrink the subject to explicit uses of the term *Christos*, thereby screening out those passages where – and one has to be careful how this is said – the *idea* occurs, or might be thought to occur, even though the word may not. Of course (hence the need for care) that could be a way of simply smuggling in the old Idealist construct by the back door. But it needn’t be. I have in mind four or even five themes (depending how we count them) which I might have expected to see in a book on Jewish messianism (and on Christian messianism seen, rightly, as one branch of that), but which play little or no role in this present work.

The first is the Temple. David plans it, Solomon builds it, the two greatest pre-exilic kings (Hezekiah and Josiah) reform and restore it, Zerubbabel is supposed to build the glorious new Temple, Judas Maccabeus cleanses it, the Herod family rebuild and adorn it, the would-be messiahs of the First Revolt focus on it, and notoriously Bar-Kochba has a picture of the Temple on one of his coins as a statement of intent.⁷ In the middle of that historical sequence, Jesus of Nazareth acts out a Jeremiah-like warning in the Temple; and the subsequent exchanges, up to and including the hearing before Caiaphas, have to do precisely with the combination of Temple and messiahship. The question ‘what are you saying about the Temple?’ is the other side of the coin of ‘are you the Messiah?’ The mocking on the cross indicates the same combination of themes: So, you are the one who was going to destroy the Temple and build it again in three days? We could look at Stephen’s speech to similar effect, and indeed the rest of Acts, particularly Paul’s various hearings where the question of Jesus’ messiahship and the question of the Temple are intertwined. So: is the Temple, and the question of its destruction and rebuilding, not a central part of the grammar of messianism? Might it not be ironic that Novenson, in resisting the standard nineteenth-century stereotypes, has followed them in implicitly (through his choice of method) regarding the Temple as irrelevant? Is this not an echo, on the one hand, of a supposedly ‘Christian’ but in fact liberal

⁷ For the Bar Kochba material see e.g. L. Mildenberg, ‘Bar Kochba Coins and Documents’ in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 84 (1980), 311–35, esp. (325) emphasizing the way in which the rebels superimposed symbols of their own hopes over the normal Roman imagery.

Protestant account in which the Messiah would be far too spiritual to bother with the Temple, and, on the other hand, of a supposedly 'Jewish' but in fact later Rabbinic account in which the close earlier link between King and Temple had long been downplayed? What is more, might a reminder about the Temple also highlight the role of an anointed priest along with an anointed king? What difference might it make if we were to factor all that into the argument?

The second point follows closely from this. The rebuilding of the Temple after the exile was designed, according to Ezekiel, Zechariah and Malachi, so that Israel's God might return at last in power and glory. The nexus between speaking of a Messiah and speaking of Israel's God fulfilling his long-awaited promises, not least the promise of glorious return (with the obvious corollary of victory over pagan oppressors and the establishment of God's people in safety and joy) is (it seems to me) both obvious and difficult. From at least the Psalms forward, with Isaiah 9, 11, 40–55 and 61, 63 as a special focus, the texts which speak of a coming king of deliverer also speak of the return of YHWH to Zion. How do these relate? How does the royal throne of David function along with the ultimate royal throne of YHWH? According to later tradition, Akiba expounded the 'thrones' of Daniel 7.9 as 'one for God, one for David', leading to obvious controversy, not least because he had a metaphorical 'David' in mind.⁸ Clearly there was no room in Novenson's book to bring in Daniel as well as everything else! But will we ever get the full grammar of second-temple messianism without it? What difference might it have made if we were to include it – and, with it, the obviously messianic and Daniel-related vision of the eagle and the lion in *4 Ezra* 11 and 12?

The third point is perhaps less obvious but I think just as important. In the Psalms and Isaiah the anointed one, however else described, is to be the true ruler of the whole world, not just Israel. Psalm 2 – and we hardly know what messianism might mean unless Psalm 2 is central to it – appears to universalise the Abrahamic promises, to envisage an 'inheritance' which will now not be one strip of land but the entire world. We should here, echoing a point made earlier, include also Psalm 72, which seems to envisage this whole world, now under the wise and just rule of the true king, as a great Temple: the Psalm closes with the prayer that the divine glory will fill the whole world, doing for the cosmos what the divine glory did in the Tabernacle in Exodus 40. How does this worldwide messianic rule fit the 'grammar' which Novenson is sketching?

⁸ The classic discussion of this is still A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). For Akiba's hailing of Bar Kochba see e.g. y Ta'an 68d.

And, in particular, does this ‘grammar’ change over time, with the collapse of the two revolts and the rise of Rabbinism?

I have in mind here two points which Novenson hints at but doesn’t develop. The first is in Philo, who sees the present Jewish Diaspora as a sign and foretaste of God’s rule over the whole world.⁹ The second is in Josephus: Novenson cites the passage in *Jewish War* Book VI where Josephus says that what drove the people into the First Revolt was ‘an oracle in their scriptures’ which said that ‘at that time a world ruler would arise from Judaea’.¹⁰ I was sorry that this was left hanging in the air; I wanted to know which scriptural passage Novenson thought Josephus was referring to, and if (as I and others have argued) it was Daniel, and particularly chapters 2, 7 and 9 (and granted that Josephus’s own interpretation in terms of Vespasian is obviously self-serving), how all that in turn affected the grammar of messianism at this crucial moment. I am particularly struck by the way in which Josephus, expounding Daniel as the great prophet who told you not only what was going to happen but when – which must be a reference to the 490 years of chapter 9 – carefully downplays the denouement of chapter 2, and then equally carefully omits chapter 7 altogether. Novenson points out the danger of the Sherlock Holmes argument about the dog that didn’t bark in the night, but here I think the non-barking is deafening. Josephus, as Novenson points out (140–48), is careful not to call the various warlords ‘messiahs’, lest his Roman readers suppose that the Revolt arose from central Jewish beliefs (which I think it obviously did and I think Josephus knows it obviously did). The grammar of Josephus’s silent messianism is, I think, very important.

The fourth point I would have liked to see factored in – and I know how frustrating it is, on finishing a substantial book, to be told about all the things you missed out – is the social, political and economic teaching of Jesus and his first followers. Here I think Novenson missed a trick in the chapter on the ‘Jewish Messiah’/‘Christian Messiah’ non-distinction. He rightly points out (207–13) that in the early Christian teaching on the Parousia many things come back in which Jewish critics have said were central to Jewish messianism but which they found missing in Christianity. But those things are also there in the teaching of Jesus, in the Nazareth Manifesto in Luke 4, in the Sermons on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) or the Plain (Luke 6), in the insistence on forgiveness of debts and the implied Jubilee theme of ‘seventy times seven’ in Matthew 18. These same features re-emerge in the early church as it experiments with different ways of sharing property and with the financial imperatives and

⁹ See e.g. Philo *Flacc* 45f.; *Leg.* 281–4; *Praem.* 94–7, discussed at *PFG* 120f.

¹⁰ Josephus, *War* 6.312–15; discussed at e.g. *NTPG* 312–14, *PFG* 116f., 130, 293.

responsibilities of, for instance, looking after widows (both in Acts 6 and in 1 Timothy 5). The injunction to ‘remember the poor’ in Galatians 2.10 looks much more like what Jews have seen as messianism than what they have seen as Christianity.

But at this point I was surprised, in the substantial chapter 7 on the fate of Messiah-christology in the early church, not to find the discussion which it seems to me the book invites: of the ways in which the second and subsequent centuries retained some aspects of early Christian messianism and rejected others. To put it in an aphorism: the problem with the Constantinian settlement was that it retained the idea of the worldwide messianic rule but forgot the way in which Jesus had redefined the idea of power and rule itself. Hence the great divide – to borrow an aphorism from Henry Chadwick’s famous book *The Early Church* – between empire and monasticism, between those who would rule the world and those who would renounce it. And hence the different though related divide between the political ‘Jewish Messiah’ and the non-political, non-earthly supposedly ‘Christian’ one. For Jesus and the first Christians, the kingdom was coming on earth as in heaven. By the third century, however, many had forgotten the early Jewish meaning of that, with (I think) long-lasting and devastating effects. In particular, it led quite quickly to the point at which Novenson glances but which I think needs much more developing: where the Jewish meaning of *Christos* was forgotten and where it could be assumed that the word meant, fairly straightforwardly, ‘the second person of the Trinity’.

I suppose this leads to a fifth point: what about the messianic battle? Here again there is perhaps the unconscious influence of earlier constructs, ‘Christian’ constructs that saw military violence as part of the Jewish messianism which was to be rejected, ‘Jewish’ constructs which didn’t want to play into that Christian stereotype. But there it is: David defeated Goliath; Hezekiah sees off Sennacherib; Josiah dies in battle; Judas Maccabeus defeats Antiochus; Herod defeats the Parthians. This is what kings do. For bar-Kochba, defeating the Romans and rebuilding the temple were, almost literally, two sides of the same coin. In the middle of that picture Paul (Colossians 2.14–15) and John (12.30–33) both describe Jesus’ death as a messianic victory, though a victory not over Rome but over the dark power that stands behind Rome and uses it for its purposes. And with this I come to the obvious lacunae: what happened to the Titulus on the cross, emphasized by all four evangelists? What happened to 1 Corinthians 15.20–28? They are all about the strange messianic victory, redefined indeed but still very much part of first-century messianic grammar, retrieving and remoulding, exactly as Novenson argues all through, some of the central scriptural texts and themes. It seems to me that those passages, and the

others to which they relate, are a central part of this broad sweep of messianic grammar. Might they affect the overall picture, and if so how? In other words, if the metaphor of ‘grammar’ leads us to see how a word is regularly used, and what it means in relation to those wider contexts, ought not Temple and Battle to be central to this project?

One footnote to this before some broader concluding remarks. Novenson offers a fascinating discussion of the way in which the word *Chrēstos*, with a long ‘e’, might have been mistaken for *Christos* or vice versa, whether accidentally in the Suetonius report of riots in Rome or deliberately in some later Christian apologetic or exhortation. It occurs to me – and a brief check of commentaries indicates that this is not normally explored – that the eleventh chapter of Matthew’s gospel might offer an early hint in the same direction. Matthew 11.2–15 consists of (a) John the Baptist’s question as to whether Jesus is the one to come, then (b) Jesus’ answer quoting Isaiah 35 and elsewhere (as in a messianic text from Qumran¹¹), and (c) the saying about John being Elijah (Matthew 11.14). One might suppose that there was then a change of topic, as Jesus denounces the crowds that failed to pay attention and the cities that failed to repent. That polemic then gives way to the ‘bolt from the Johannine blue’ in 11.25–30. But right at the end we may, perhaps, discern a further answer to the question of John the Baptist. Take my yoke upon you, says Matthew’s Jesus, because I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find the rest you deeply need. Then the final explanation: *ho gar zygos mou chrēstos kai to phortion mou elaphron estin*. ‘My yoke is ‘easy’ or ‘kind’; an odd phrase, with only distant echoes. Perhaps it also indicates, for those with ears to hear, that Jesus is offering the Messianic yoke, the Messianic Torah? Is this, despite the distance of over twenty verses, a coded answer to the question from John the Baptist?

Conclusion

This new book by Matthew Novenson is one of those works of which reviewers will rightly say, ‘All future studies of this subject will have to do business with this work’. For that reason it is worth while raising two wider questions. First, in thoroughly approving the turn away from the grand abstract formulations of an earlier generation and towards grammar on the one hand and history on the other, I wonder if Novenson has given thought to the ways in which, once one has renounced the pretensions of modernist Idealism, one may and must nevertheless offer an account, perhaps a series of overlapping accounts, of the

¹¹ 4Q521 (Frag. 2) 2.1, 7f., 11–13; see the discussion in my *Jesus and the Victory of God* (= *JVG*) (vol 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*) (London: SPCK, 1996), 531f.

larger worldview of the societies and groups where messianism can be seen. Such a worldview would have to include not only the symbols, and the symbolic praxis, of temple and battle, but also the narrative within which it made sense to think that history might reach a climax, whether catastrophic or otherwise, and that this (to put it no more strongly) might involve an ‘anointed’ figure. In other words, just because we reject Idealism, that does not commit us to a fragmented atomism. Most human beings, especially those who involve themselves in public life and aspiration, inhabit an implicit narrative. Some ancient Jews, and more or less all the early Christians, made this narrative explicit. Grammar involves sentences, and sentences regularly tell stories. Nothing in the linguistic turn forbids investigating stories; everything in the historical turn encourages it. Back to Josephus: what was the unnamed but provocative oracle, and how were they reading it?

This leads in turn to the anxieties of people like Burton Mack and Jonathan Z. Smith, anxieties in particular about Christian claims to ‘uniqueness’. They are reacting, of course, to easy-going twentieth-century assumptions of cultural and political (as well as religious or spiritual) superiority. But once we take that point then we must also, as historians, insist that our modernist perspectives tend to lead us astray in relation to first-century grammar and history. It is part of the grammar of messianism, I think, that a messiah is not simply like a prophet, one among a sequence who might anyway be wrong. To say ‘so-and-so is Messiah’ – as Akiba did with bar Kochba – is not simply an interesting interpretation of an exciting movement. It is a claim that Israel’s God is at last doing, *here* and *now*, what Israel (or some within it) had long hoped he would do, even if it didn’t look like many had thought (e.g. because bar Kochba wasn’t from the house of David). It certainly wasn’t a ‘religious’ claim in the modern sense, i.e. that bar Kochba was founding a new or better ‘religion’ to be compared with other ‘religions’. That, of course, is how the question is regularly put in our own day: for Christians to say ‘Jesus of Nazareth was and is Messiah’ is heard and felt to be a claim that Christians possess a ‘superior religion’. But in the first century such a claim was not about ‘comparative religion’. It was a claim about *messianic eschatology*. It was a claim about Israel’s God, of course; it was also a claim about a renewed or reorganised *polis*, a state of social and political affairs. To turn this kind of proposal into a proposal about comparative religion (whether then to embrace a superiority agenda or to deconstruct it) might just be the last refuge of the kind of reading that Novenson, in this book, is rejecting from start to finish. What matters, as his subtitle indicates, is the political idiom. Something is happening; something *has happened*; something – that is – in the reality of actual community and in

the 'grammar' of its speech; something as a result of which neither community nor speech will ever be the same again.