

# Matthew Novenson

## *Paul, Then and Now*

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), xvi + 248 pp.

**KATIE BROWN**

brownk@texas.edu

University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712

Matthew Novenson's new collection *Paul, Then and Now* contains twelve essays, eleven of which have been published elsewhere. Having established himself as one of the leading advocates for the ongoing relevance of the historical-critical approach to Paul, this collection demonstrates his aptitude in challenging many of the received assumptions underpinning Pauline scholarship. He seeks to make sense of Paul as a historical figure and as the noted subject of a long reception history. His methodology is refined, and he approaches both the Pauline Epistles as well as historical and modern interpretations of Paul with great clarity. As such, this collection orients the reader to some of the most important intellectual and ethical questions facing scholars today and offers excellent insight into the current state of the field.

The essays of this collection may be divided into three thematic sections. In chapters 1-2 he establishes his methodological approach; in chapters 3-9 he confronts various issues in Paul's letters; and in chapters 10-12 he engages with significant recent scholarship, outlining the present concerns of the field. While the entire collection makes significant contributions as a whole, chapters 1, 3-6, and 12 in particular are worth special consideration by those interested in questions of Paul's Jewishness, situating Paul within Judaism, and anti-Judaism or philo-Judaism in Pauline scholarship.

Novenson frames his approach forthrightly in his introductory chapter and asserts the significance and continued pertinency of his historical-critical focus. From this first chapter it is evident that the question tying together these essays is that of "hermeneutical ventriloquism," a term borrowed from Robert B. Brandom, whereby interpreters may be seen to repurpose Paul's words to make their own theological points or to accommodate their own thinking. As Novenson highlights, we "have made Paul's words our own so many times over, in so many contexts, that we have come to view him simply as one of us" (6). He is, of course, not one of us, and so it is the intention of this collection to re-situate Paul in his first-century context and accept that he is "weird" (6). In doing so Novenson encourages us to recognize the importance of understanding Paul's historical situatedness—the

“then” of the title—in order to enrich our use of Paul “now.” There is a general and sustained effort across the collection to remind readers to take caution when reading Paul in light of his complex reception history.

In chapter 3, Novenson tackles the issue of how we might think about Paul taxonomically. In categorizing or classifying Paul as an *Ioudaios*, a Pharisee, or a Zealot, he asks us to consider how we might better understand him in his unique context and what Paul’s own use of such categories entail. Novenson emphasizes the Jewishness of Paul and reminds us of the complexity of such terms as Pharisee and Zealot, particularly in Paul’s use of them and our own potential misreadings or mistranslations.

In chapter 4, entitled “Did Paul Abandon Either Judaism or Monotheism?” Novenson contemplates this question, arguing that while Paul never renounces Judaism or monotheism in his letters, many subsequent interpreters have said he did. He ultimately concludes that Paul did not abandon his ancestral traditions but that “over the course of late antiquity, Christianity abandoned Judaism, and it did so using Paul’s words” (66).

This is followed, in chapter 5, by an analysis of Romans and Galatians from this perspective. Novenson demonstrates the merits of his historical critical approach in this chapter by clearly illustrating how we might seek to disentangle these letters and their subject matter from their very lengthy reception histories. We are reminded here of his intention in putting together this volume: “to read a biblical text in its original historical context [so as] to discover a strange, new world of signification” (89).

Novenson continues with an examination of Romans in chapter 6, entitled “The Self-Styled Jew of Romans 2 and the Actual Jews of Romans 9–11.” He interprets Rom 2 as an indictment of Gentile Judaizing and Rom 9–11 not as a reproach of Israel based on transgression of the law but as a reproach based on Israel’s disbelief, rejection, or disobedience of the gospel. Novenson deftly concludes that in Romans “there are ‘Jews,’ and there are Jews, and the former are not the latter” (117). Recognizing the differences in the way that the “self-styled Jew” is presented in Rom 2 as opposed to the Jews of Rom 9–11, Novenson’s suggestion that we ought to lay to rest doubts about whether Rom 2 and 9–11 fit under the rubric of “Paul’s critique of Judaism” is well argued and worth further consideration.

Chapter 12 finally brings together a number of the themes already raised in the collection. Among the issues confronted in this chapter is the continued (perhaps anti-Jewish) hesitancy among Pauline scholars to read Paul as Jewish. Despite the many transformations that have taken place in the field, Novenson asserts that there is a continued tendency to look for Paulinism where he supposedly departs from Judaism. Even among those who accept Paul’s Judaism, this can be qualified with claims that “he is an anomalous Jew, a radical Jew, a transformed Jew, a redefined Jew” (193). Ultimately Novenson succeeds in circling back to the essential question raised in the introductory chapter regarding interpretations of Paul that center the voice or thoughts of the interpreter. This is, Novenson notes, pertinent when considering Paul’s views “on anything, but on Judaism above all” (195) as a basis

for modern views. We are left with the resounding question of what lies next. Can Christian theology, particularly Protestant theology, accept the first-century Jewish context of Paul and proceed beyond the anti-Judaism of the tradition? We should, he reiterates, “let Paul be Paul” (194).

*Paul, Then and Now* covers a wide range of issues and offers compelling insights into the most challenging questions facing Pauline scholars as well as those concerned with Jewish-Christian relations and reception history. This collection is both a helpful entry point for anyone interested in scholarship on Paul or in the historical-critical approach to the New Testament. It also offers an essential overview of major critical issues that will benefit specialists. It follows and contributes to many ongoing conversations, challenging assumed notions and approximating the path that lies ahead for the field.