

# Episode 151 Christ among the Messiahs

## **Matthew Novenson**

My name is Matthew Novenson. I'm Professor of Biblical Criticism and Biblical Antiquities at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Matthew Novenson, Matt, good to see you. Welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

## **Matthew Novenson**

Thanks. I'm very happy to be here.

## **David Capes**

First of all, congratulations on your recent promotion.

## **Matthew Novenson**

Thanks very much.

## **David Capes**

That's exciting for a guy from Tennessee. It's a world class, wonderful university. And students are clamoring to get here. You've got great people following what you're doing. But for those who don't know who Matthew Novenson is, who is he?

## **Matthew Novenson**

Well, I teach Biblical Studies at the University of Edinburgh. But as you said, I'm from Chattanooga, Tennessee. And by way of St. Louis, Missouri, Princeton, New Jersey, and Raleigh, North Carolina. I ended up in Edinburgh, back in 2011, I moved here. So, my family and I live in Edinburgh. And we've got kids who are now entering university age who might be leaving Edinburgh going elsewhere.

## **David Capes**

Oh, really! You can't persuade them to stick around?

## **Matthew Novenson**

We'll we will see!

## **David Capes**

You've written a terrific book that was published back in 2012 by Oxford University Press, entitled *Christ Among the Messiahs, Christ Language in Paul, and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism*. It's done very well. Congratulations, first of all on that book. I know it's been a while. But I find it very valuable for scholars to take a look back over the last decade and learn from a book and what's developed from then. When a book is published, there's a lot of excitement about it, and a lot of

movement about it. And a lot of reviews that come out, but then after about a decade, it may be time to reassess. It's a terrific book. You can find it by the way, at your friendly Lanier Theological Library, probably multiple copies of it. But for those who aren't familiar with the book, what's the big idea of your book? I tell students that every good book, every important book has a big idea? What's the big idea?

### **Matthew Novenson**

The big idea of the book is that the word Christ or in Greek *Christos*, in the letters of Paul, means Messiah. All of that needs a little explaining. But it's that simple. It's about one word in one small corpus, namely the letters of Paul, arguing that we should understand it broadly as meaning this particular thing.

### **David Capes**

So, for some scholars, they've made the case that Christ is just another name for Jesus. That when Paul uses it, he uses it as a name, just like he calls him Jesus. At other times he calls him Christ. And it doesn't mean any more than that. Why do you think they concluded that?

### **Matthew Novenson**

That's the big question, and that was the background to my writing of this book. There were rumblings of it when I was writing this book, and even now you will hear relatively often from scholars working in biblical or ancient Jewish and early Christian studies that the word *Christos* means Messiah, even in Paul's letters or other early Christian texts. I was working on this, and working on the manuscript, first as a PhD student back in the 00's. If you read commentaries or theologies of Paul from the 1990s or earlier, you will usually read in a section on Christology and Paul, something like this. By the time Paul uses the word, *Christos*, it functions like a proper name, just like Jesus. And it's not a title, like 'Lord' is a title or 'King' is a title. And so, they're saying there's nothing to see here. The question you ask rightly is, why did people think that?

But the good reason they had for thinking it was certain patterns in the way Paul writes the word *Christos*, that are different from the way it's written in the Gospels and Acts. And some of these scholars were observing the difference and saying, Ah, Paul writes it differently, because it's a name. But the other really important reason behind that tradition of scholarship was there's a grand story about the place of Paul in early Christianity that was told throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. And scholars that said that Paul successfully could have Hellenized Christianity. He took what was originally a Jewish sect and Hellenized it. That is he turned it to Greek, or parts of it so that it could be successful as a world religion. It could spread among Gentiles, people who worshiped other gods and didn't know, the God of Abraham. For that to happen, so this argument went, someone had to Hellenize the religion. And Paul was given credit for doing that. Because he does, of course, call himself and seems to have acted in his role as Apostle to the Gentiles. So, there was a whole package of scholarly ideas that said, in order for him to be an Apostle of the Gentiles, he had to deconstruct and reconstruct the message about Jesus. He had to make it no longer a culturally Jewish thing but make it something different. And one key plank in that whole idea was that he had to make Jesus no longer a messiah, which is a Jewish category, but something else, like a 'Lord'.

### **David Capes**

He had to leave the Jewishness behind.

**Matthew Novenson**

That's right. So, there's usually some kind of theory along those lines about Paul leaving behind aspects of Judaism in his preaching of Christ. Those that go with these summary statements in scholarship say Christ is just a proper name for Paul, not a meaningful title.

**David Capes**

I remember reading that back in the 70s. And I thought, that didn't seem right. You know, it just didn't strike me as right. Of course, I've not done the extensive work that you've done in it. But it never struck me as right. And it seemed to me to be an avoidance of something. Of course, I always thought the Jewishness of Jesus was more important even in Paul, than subsequent scholars. Let's talk about the language, the word *Christos*, because that comes across in our Bible translations as Christ. So, we've just simply transliterated it, right?

**Matthew Novenson**

Basically, yes. But there's an interesting twist. So yes, we say Christ in English, for what in the Greek Bible is *Christos*. So that's a transliteration, not a translation. As you said, it's taking the word from the one language and just putting it into the letters of our language, basically. Except there is an interesting twist. The word *Christos*, etymologically, means anointed one, or in a Hebrew context, you'd say Messiah. So, in a lot of the English Bibles (and it differs by translation) that we would know and would be in a library or a church pew, when the word *Christos* appears in Greek in the gospels, then an English Bible will translate it as Messiah. But when the same word *Christos* appears in the Greek Bible in Paul's letters, they transliterated Christ so that the translators make a decision to do two different things in the two different texts.

**David Capes**

That's why you need to learn to read Greek! That's one of the many reasons.

**Matthew Novenson**

Well, exactly! If you only had an English Bible, you wouldn't know that it's the same word. And that a translator has decided that it's doing two different things. And the reason they make that translation decision is because they're believing the story in the Pauline theologies that say it's just a proper name. And so you can just transliterate it 'Christ', right. But they have made that decision for you. And that's why it's useful to go back and look.

**David Capes**

I've known some scholars of late, who in doing their own Bible translations, will say something like Jesus Christas which means Jesus, the Messiah. So, they try to reinvest it with messianic languages, too.

**Matthew Novenson**

Yes. Again, there's more of that now certainly, than there was in the past.

**David Capes**

And you've had some influence, there.

**Matthew Novenson**

Well, I have influenced some of it. Other people have come to it independently. It's related to a whole reconsideration in the last 10 to 20 years in New Testament studies about anti-Judaism in the history of New Testament scholarship. A serious soul searching began after the Holocaust in the mid 20th century, in biblical scholarship, as in theology and in other fields. But in my academic lifetime, so to speak, basically the last 10 to 20 years when I was a graduate student, and then a working scholar, this has been a main concern in a lot of professional Biblical Studies circles. It is reassessing a lot of habits we have that have to do with the kind of troubled relation between Christians and Jews and Christianity and Judaism. And I think that's why it's in the Pauline letters in scholarship. My book is part of that story and has maybe influenced a few other people but others have been coming at it from different angles too.

**David Capes**

A lot of that biblical criticism, biblical theology scholarship, came out of Germany. It came out of Europe, and other places as well, like East Coast schools in North America, where there was still anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism. So, part of your book deals with Messiah language. In ancient Judaism, there are some who make the claim that, Messiah was not really a broad category. There's not much Messiah talk in ancient Judaism. Did you come to that or did you come to a different perspective?

**Matthew Novenson**

I use the phrase in the book and in the subtitle of the book, and as you have just been saying 'Messiah language'. Which might strike some people's ears as kind of funny. It's not the usual way it's talked about. Because we usually talk about, and even scholarship conventionally talked about, messianic hopes or messianic expectations. And so, messiahs or messianism were usually discussed in terms of expectations, or psychological states, you might say. Though, for a historian, and what I was more interested in is that it's more challenging to make claims about ancient psychological states.

**David Capes**

You can't psychoanalyze somebody who lived that long ago.

**Matthew Novenson**

That's right. But we can we have much more direct access to texts, and to language. And I was interested in this question. Where does the word Messiah actually appear in ancient sources from around the period that we're talking about here? The Hellenistic in the early Roman period at the time of, you could say the first century CE, is at the middle of this. I was looking out a couple of centuries in either direction. And the answer is, it's not everywhere in Jewish sources, but it's relatively frequent in certain ones. It appears not at all, in any non-Jewish or non-Christian source until the Roman writers start to talk about the Christians. That's a point, that the word Christ or Messiah or anointed, is a specifically Jewish idiom. If it weren't for the Hebrew Bible, and the language of God's Anointed One, the word wouldn't exist in the discourse in the ancient world. The reason it exists is because of this idiom from the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. After which it appears in a number of Jewish sources,

like the Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance. And that occurs, exactly contemporary with the Dead Sea Scrolls. And in this period, at the beginning of the Roman Empire, in the letters of Paul, and then after Paul, in the Gospels and Acts.

### **David Capes**

Because in terms of historical development, Paul's writings come before the writing of the Gospels.

### **Matthew Novenson**

Yes. Paul's letters are the earliest written of the texts that are in the New Testament. It's a famous puzzle that you will know well. Anyone who's taught the New Testament to students has to think about this. It makes sense to teach Jesus first because events of Jesus life are earlier than the events of Paul's apostleship. But the texts are the other way around. Paul's letters are written earlier than the Gospels are written, not much earlier, but a bit.

### **David Capes**

But they come from the same worldview or world perspective.

### **Matthew Novenson**

Yes. And also, they all use the word *Christos*, Messiah, and they all use it only of Jesus. And this was one argument in my book, that we shouldn't artificially separate Jewish texts so that over here it mean one thing by the word *Christos* or *Meshiach* (Hebrew for Messiah). While Christian texts mean an entirely different thing by the word. I think that assumption, while it's often made, is not true. If you think about Paul, writing in the middle of the first century CE, he didn't know that his letters would be part of the Christian Bible. And that they would be the material out of which whole Christian systematic theologies would be made. He didn't know all that. He was a Jewish apostle, or messenger, talking about a figure who he called Messiah or anointed, which is a biblical word straight out of the Greek Old Testament, or the Greek Jewish Bible. And so historically, it makes perfect sense to read him alongside other people from his time and his same religious identity. Like the Dead Sea Scrolls. Those authors are not writing in Greek, but they're using the Hebrew or Aramaic equivalencies for the words. We should see how his letters make sense alongside other Jewish writers from exactly the same time using the same words. So that's what I was after with the 'Messiah language'.

### **David Capes**

And there are other kinds of words and phrases that come along too other than the word Messiah. But we'll have to leave that for another time. Before we close, one of the things that you helped me understand and for a lot of people, is you use the language of honorific to refer to a word like *Christos*. Now we're not totally knowledgeable about what that word means. Educate us a little bit about that word. What does honorific mean exactly?

### **Matthew Novenson**

We're using honorific here as a noun, where Paul writes the word *Christos* or Christ, as an honorific. So that's a term that I took from. There's a whole sub discussion in classics, and the study of ancient Greek and Roman worlds, about names onomastics. So naming, the actual way you give people names in ancient Greek and Latin literature and documentary sources. And the interesting thing is in

English, we have this debate. For instance, if you read the old commentaries on Paul, they'll say Christ, is it a name or a title? As if there are two options, name and title, and it has to be one or the other. But there was a lot of research coming out when I was working on this book manuscript from people studying inscriptions and papyrus and ancient documentary sources. And just looking at people's names, and what forms they took. For instance, I have three names. A lot of people who are American born, have three names, but not everybody. Some people will have two names and not a middle name. In the UK, it's very common for people to have four names, two middle ones, so to speak. And again, as soon as you move to another country or another language context that can change.

You assume that other people in other cultures and times did what we do unless you stop and think about it. And this is the point, it turns out. Ancient Greeks and Romans had much more than two names, usually. There are lots of relevant categories. And honorific was one of these. Most normal people on the street didn't have an honorific but public figures often did. The most famous example, is the word Augustus. It's the most famous honorific probably in the ancient world.

The person we call Augustus, who was the first Roman emperor, his name was Octavian. His title was Emperor. But he went by Augustus. And this I argue in the book, the way it's written, is the same kind of way Paul writes, the word *Christos*, or Christ, in combination with Jesus, his name, and *kyrios*, or Lord, his title. He also has an honorific and that's *Christos* or Christ. And what I did not know, I was surprised to find out. If you look at the sources writing honorifics, like Augustus, his name is written Caesar Augustus or Augustus Caesar in either direction, the same way Paul can write Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus, or call him just Jesus or just Christ. The point is, this is how honorifics are written. There's something different from either name or title, but they're often written in combination with names in either order, or as stand ins for names. And all of this is, without exception how Paul writes the word *Christos*, or Christ. And so one of the big points in the argument of the book is, it was always a mistake to insist that it had to be either a name or a title

### **David Capes**

So, this third way, this third category of honorific might actually fit better Paul's own usage.

### **Matthew Novenson**

Yes, that's right. And that anticipating becomes the conclusion of the book.

### **David Capes**

Since this book has come out, it's been reviewed favorably, I would imagine, but also unfavorably by some. Have you learned anything from those unfavorable reviews?

### **Matthew Novenson**

Yes, I try always to learn from unfavorable reviews. I like to think yes, I have done.

### **David Capes**

Have you changed your mind about anything?

### **Matthew Novenson**

Not on anything significant. I always learn from the unfavorable reviews, but I stand by the argument of that book, more or less. So you know, there are points where I'd say, oh, yes, maybe I got this or that detail a bit wrong. I should have said this differently. But I still think that the argument there is pretty much right. But someone may come along and convince me otherwise.

### **David Capes**

But so far, they haven't. And do you think now most scholars would agree, those who study these things? That Christ in Paul is not just a second name. But that it does have some messianic content to it.

### **Matthew Novenson**

I think many more scholars think that now than thought that 20 years ago. Some of those in the last 10 years were persuaded by me. Some of them have thought their way to this issue through other avenues, which is great. But there are still some who don't. I think as you will understand and some of your listeners will understand, you know scholarship. Like a lot of you know human endeavors. It's social and it's provincial. And so there are arguments that will become persuasive in one country, but not in another. Or something like that. There's going to be different local, and good orthodoxies. So, an argument that might work well in the US might not be as well received in Germany, or in the UK in relation to Israel. So that's to say, there's some corners of the world that are still not entirely convinced of my thesis. But I think if you look at the broad sweep of biblical scholarship, there's a lot more willingness now on this particular issue. Willingness to read Messianic Christology, so to speak, and Paul and to reconsider the bigger questions about the relation Paul and the other apostles and other New Testament writers stand in relation to Judaism in first century.

### **David Capes**

Dr. Matthew Novenson thanks for being with us today on the stone chapel.

### **Matthew Novenson**

Thanks very much.

### **A Nugget of Wisdom from Dr. Matthew Novenson**

Because I'm talking with David capes, when I think about nuggets of wisdom, I think about our common friend Larry Hurtado of blessed memory. And Larry illustrated for me the value of keeping the main thing the main thing. Despite an illustrious career, he focused on his friends and family and the people around him. And in academia focused on his first love, talking about the ideas and the texts and the things that were the reason we got into this business in the first place, and I try to keep that goal always before my eyes