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Book Reviews

Messianic High Christology: New Testament Variants of Second Temple Judaism.
By Ruben A. Bühner. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2021. 244 pages.
Hardcover. \$54.99.

It is of course no secret that our knowledge of so-called “Second Temple Judaism” has exploded in the last century. Not only the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls but also increased attention to other contemporary documents has increased our knowledge of Judaism “between the testaments” exponentially. This has necessarily given deeper insights into the messianic expectations of that era. It is also well-known that in the past several decades a number of scholars have pushed back against the critical consensus that the assertion of Christ as divine—so-called “high Christology”—arose late, a product of interaction with the wider Greco-Roman world. Popularizers of higher criticism continue to claim that Jesus “became” God only within the context of Christianity’s spread to the wider Mediterranean world. Ruben Bühner, a postdoctoral researcher for New Testament Studies at the University of Zurich and the University of Tübingen, intends to place these two areas of study in conversation with one another. He contends that the high Christology of the New Testament did not arise in a vacuum, but in interaction with the messianic hopes of Second Temple Judaism. In other words, earlier messianic language and expectations were taken up by the writers of the New Testament and reshaped in various ways as they expressed their high christological content. In this way, the New Testament authors participated in contemporary Jewish discussions and debates. The New Testament’s contentions about Christ, as dramatic as they may be, are still “in reach” (Bühner’s phrase) of Jewish messianic discourse.

To illustrate these contentions, Bühner sets side-by-side significant christological texts from the New Testament with significant messianic texts from Second Temple Judaism. The choice of these texts is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but representative of each genre. He thus deals with a Pauline text (Phil 2:6–11), two Synoptic texts (Mark 14:61–65; Luke 1:26–38), Revelation 4–5, and John’s prologue. Joined to these are texts from Qumran, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, the Psalter, and Isaiah (particularly the reception history of these biblical documents in the Second Temple era). Bühner’s careful exegesis provides important insights for any who would study these central New Testament texts, as well as for those who study the extrabiblical texts, yet it is focused on his primary argument.

It is important to understand what Bühner is *not* arguing. Bühner does not posit a “history of religion” connection between the various texts that he sets next to one another. The question of the extent to which the authors of the New Testament knew

the various documents of Second Temple Judaism he keeps open. Absent a direct quotation or clear allusion, he cannot be certain which of these documents were known by Mark or Paul, for example. Bühner's proposal is much more modest: the New Testament's articulation of "high" Christology—that is, the contention that Jesus of Nazareth is divine, included within the reality of the one God of Israel—took place within the wider context of messianic expectations in Second Temple Judaism. Bühner is also not contending that New Testament Christology is simply to be identified with Second Temple Jewish messianic expectations. He argues that it is a false alternative to force a choice between the "Jewishness" or the distinctiveness of New Testament Christology. Instead, he argues that New Testament Christology arose in dialogue with contemporary messianic discourse, yet there is something new here. The New Testament applied many of the motifs found around them but in a quantity never before seen, and connected them all with Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, the notion of incarnation along with suffering and death were elements that made New Testament Christology very distinct and radically new. There is a tendency in Christian circles, particularly in preaching, to assume that *all* the Jews contemporary with Jesus were looking *only* for a temporal, militaristic messiah. Bühner's evidence demonstrates that this was by no means the case, and that our understanding of contemporary messianic expectations is in need of adjustment. Yet, New Testament Christology is not simply the climax of all previous messianic expectations, but combines certain ones together to speak of Christ. One path that Bühner does not believe the New Testament authors took was an explicitly "angelic" or "angelomorphic" Christology. Indeed, he asserts that Hebrews 1:4 was written against such notions, found within the wider messianic discourse of Second Temple Judaism. In this discussion, he mentions the significant texts in Revelation where Jesus *is* portrayed as an angel, but he does not treat them in detail. Superhuman figures (such as the Old Testament's "Angel of the Lord") do not, in his opinion, form a significant part of the New Testament's christological assertions, nor does theophanic language from the Old Testament.

Bühner challenges a number of scholarly assumptions with his work. First and most fundamentally, he challenges those in contemporary scholarship who assume that the divinity of Jesus was the parting of the ways between Second Temple Judaism and Christianity. He finds this assumption even among proponents of early high Christology, and it goes back even to Justin Martyr. Many scholars contend that Christians said of Jesus what no Jews were willing to say about their messianic hopes, in other words, that he is a *divine* messiah. Bühner argues that this eventually became the case, but only after the New Testament documents were composed. Within Second Temple Judaism, it was an open and hotly debated question whether the messiah was to be considered in some sense as divine. The "parting of the ways"

only took place later, as a Jewish reaction to the claims of Christianity. He also cautions scholars of early high Christology to avoid putting all the emphasis on one way of understanding Jewish monotheism in the first century. There are a variety of different ways to express the divinity of the one God of Israel, and a number of them are interacted with in the New Testament. When considering how divinity is expressed, each text should be dealt with on its own terms. Finally, he challenges the contention of many that high Christology could only have developed late. His collected body of Second Temple evidence demonstrates that a messiah who was divine in some way was expected by many in that era. Much of the theological material needed to formulate high Christology was already present in contemporary messianic discourse, and Bühner asserts that the New Testament's Christology can be understood best within that context. Moreover, his (albeit selective) examination of the New Testament evidence supports the contention that high Christology arose quite early. On what basis can scholars say that Jesus' place at the right hand of God in Mark 14:62 is somehow "lower" than his status as uncreated in John's prologue? As noted above, there are a variety of ways to express divinity, and each text should be taken on its own terms. Bühner thus argues against any kind of "divine pyramid" view of New Testament Christology.

Bühner's study will no doubt be of significant interest to those who are following the current discussion concerning the nature of New Testament Christology. Those who have followed these debates in the English-speaking world will find Bühner conversant with that literature, but also able to provide a window into the discussions happening in German-language publications through his extensive footnotes. Those who have an interest in the literature of Second Temple Judaism will find his application of the texts of that era to New Testament Christology to be both helpful and fascinating. Confessional Lutherans will notice that Bühner operates within the terms of the contemporary scholarly discussion, sharing many of its assumptions, even as he challenges aspects of that discussion. The actual christological assertions of the "historical Jesus" are left an open question, although he asserts that it is historically conceivable that a man could have claimed to be divine in his own lifetime, and was placed in the middle of inter-Jewish debates over the nature of the messiah, with a bloody end as the result. His is a historical investigation, done within the scholarly world, with the advantages and disadvantages found therein. The value of Bühner's work lies primarily in demonstrating, against much scholarly opinion, that the high Christology of the New Testament is a high Christology with its roots primarily in Jewish messianic expectations based on the Old Testament and expressed in Second Temple literature, not in the religious proclivities of the wider Greco-Roman world. Understanding the context of the New Testament, particularly the kinds of inter-

Jewish debates that were occurring while Jesus walked this earth, enriches our appreciation of the major texts of New Testament Christology. That Christ is divine is clearly attested by these texts, in many and various way. That no Jew expected the messiah to be divine is, according to Bühner's work, a false assumption. That Jesus of Nazareth is that messiah, that Christ who is divine, that is the claim that led to the death of Jesus and the "parting of the ways" between Jews and Christians, changing an inter-Jewish debate into a fracture that could not be healed.

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***Reading German for Theological Studies: A Grammar and Reader.* By Carolyn Roberts Thompson. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. xiv + 286 pages. Hardcover. \$45.00.**

This is a textbook that leads the student who already knows a language like Greek to reading twentieth-century academic German theology. The author is an adjunct professor at Abilene Christian University (Abilene, Texas). The preface and "How to Get the Most from This Book" make clear what students should expect: learning German takes a long time (vii, ix).

The book starts with an introduction filled with grammatical concepts. The lessons, then, are based on real theological readings (the Bible or other literature). This makes it necessary in lesson 1 already to deal with the subjunctive mood (19). This might frustrate some students, since a fuller discussion of the subjunctive is reserved for later. Rather than giving comprehensive coverage of topics one after another, she spreads out her teaching from lesson to lesson. This can be good for many students. One learns the main aspects of a concept and then refines his knowledge later. I like her explanation of commonly mistranslated phrases and constructions, like "indem," "es sei denn," and "erst." It is especially welcome how frequently she emphasizes the importance of having a complete understanding of the forms of words and of how each word functions within a sentence. Of course, a textbook of this kind cannot possibly be comprehensive, and the author does not claim to be absolutely complete. Students will have to use real dictionaries to supplement the textbook.

The texts chosen begin with the Bible. The Bible is a great place to start, since this is foundational for all real theology. One could wish, however, that the author had chosen to feature the 1912 and 1984 *Lutherbibel* rather than the 1942 and 2017 *Zürcher Bibel*. All the selected texts with one exception are from the twentieth century. By lesson 31, one is reading Karl Barth. Several of the readings feature theological encyclopedias and dictionaries. This is an excellent choice for graduate students and all future researchers, since there are so many excellent German

reference works, and they are often complicated and highly abbreviated. The author helps unravel such mysteries for her students. The answers to the exercises at the back of the book facilitate self-study. The grammar at the back of the book may be useful but it likely will not answer all of a student's grammatical questions. If it does not, there are free public domain grammars readily available, such as Carl Eduard Aue, *Elementary German Grammar* (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1897), at www.archive.org.

Being an editor and researcher of early modern Lutheran theology, I could wish that some time had been spent on German from before the twentieth century. The text does not even really introduce students to *Fraktur* and other common German typefaces. (What is introduced in lesson 45 as *Fraktur* is really an early twentieth-century kind of *Rundgotisch*—beautiful, but quite modern.) The author claims the book can be used as a self-teaching tool (x). For graduate students learning German for reading purposes, if they have already learned an inflected language like Greek or Latin, I would agree—this book can work. But in general, my advice is that you should always take a class with a real teacher for the first semester of a foreign language. You need a professor to answer the questions that your textbook does not answer.

Some students and teachers like to learn a language using real foreign texts from the very beginning. Others will find this procedure to be frustrating, since they have not learned enough grammar to make sense of it, even if glosses are given for every single word. The fact is, inductive language acquisition works well for small children since that is the only way they can learn their first language, and they spend hours every day absorbing the sounds of their mother tongue. Inductive language acquisition can take a long time, however. School children who move to a foreign country require a year before being able to communicate, even spending hours a day with the new language all around them. I think a deductive approach works best for adults, though I admit this may vary according to the individual. In my opinion, it is preferable to teach one concept at a time, with repetitive exercises that practice just the new and previously learned concepts and vocabulary. Then, after sufficient grammar has been learned, the student should be challenged with foreign language texts from the real world, which he must translate using the best grammars and dictionaries available. Yet I do not teach German as my profession, and people learn in various ways. Perhaps Thompson's approach will suit many students well. Considering the vast wealth of German theology that will never be translated, it is worth every effort to learn the language.

Benjamin T. G. Mayes

***A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Midrash. Vol. 3.* By Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck. Edited by Jacob N. Cerone, with an introduction by David Instone Brewer. Translated by Joseph Longarino. Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2021. 1056 pages. Hardcover. \$64.99.**

This commentary is the third installment in the translation project of the monumental *Kommentar* of Strack-Billerbeck, edited by Jacob Cerone. The original project, developed by German scholars Hermann Strack and Rev. Paul Billerbeck, was published almost a century ago (1922–1928). Hermann Strack (1848–1922) was a scholar of Jewish antiquity, and Paul Billerbeck (1853–1932) was a Lutheran pastor. Both men were advanced in years by the time the project got underway, and Billerbeck had to see it to conclusion after the death of Strack on October 5, 1922.¹ Nevertheless, they shared an interest in the literature of Judaism, as well as an interest in Jewish mission, and stood as public opponents to the rising anti-Semitism of the period.

To what extent each contributed to the overall project is difficult to ascertain.² Though both were studied, it seems that Strack played a large role in the preparation of the earlier volumes; however, Billerbeck wrote much of the commentary connected with it. This work was not a commentary in the sense that it was the expression of a scholar’s interpretation of a given biblical text. Instead, it was a collation of Jewish sources which, in the eyes of Strack and Billerbeck, may be brought to bear on the words, phrases, and concepts found in the New Testament. The intention of this work was to present “the beliefs, ideas, and the life of the Jews in the time of Jesus and earliest Christianity.”³ Consequently, each verse of the New Testament is presented along with as many rabbinical and Midrash references as economically possible (xxvi).

The introductory notes by David Brewer are helpful in situating the work in its historical context and also for understanding the impulses which gave rise to the initial project (xxi–xxxix). After its publication in the 1920s through the early 1960s, this collection played an important role in the study of the New Testament and

¹ Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 4 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922–1928), 2:vi.

² William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2, *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 418–419.

³ Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 1:vi. “Nicht eine eigentliche Auslegung des Neuen Testaments, sondern das zu seinem Verständnis aus Talmud und Midrasch zu gewinnende Material wollten wir darbieten; den Glauben, die Anschauungen und das Leben der Juden in der Zeit Jesu und der ältesten Christenheit wollten wir objektiv darlegen.”

Christian origins and may frequently be found in the reference section of many biblical studies.⁴

Two major stages of criticism have obscured the work, or at least made scholars highly conscious of its deficiencies, and so tended to avoid its use. First, Samuel Sandmel leveled specific criticisms at the project: the citations were removed from their context; the users, unfamiliar with rabbinic contexts, were given and readily made for themselves a distorted picture of Jewish life in the time of Jesus; the quotations are too long; the reality of first-century Judaism was anachronistically obscured; and the authors have a Christian bias (xxvi).⁵ Second, E. P. Sanders's major monograph, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, set off criticisms of the work as being theologically biased (xxvii).⁶

Brewer counters these claims point for point. He argues that one must, of course, pay attention to dating in order to use the text properly; that the citations are appropriate in length by virtue of the project's scope; and that there can be deficiencies in the work which should be taken into account (xxvi). While conceding that the work can be used inappropriately, Brewer also argues that the original compilers did not intend to develop a comprehensive theology of early Judaism, but rather to collect different possible views which may have existed in the time of Christ (xxx). The specialist and the non-specialist alike must beware of the pitfalls of such a resource (xxvi, xxx), but this need not mean we should discard the tool itself, only that we learn to use it with care. Brewer further makes the case that the complexity of dating need not mean that we abandon a resource simply because the dating of its textual sources is difficult (xxxii). This scholarly approach is commendable precisely because it refuses to collapse into false dichotomies, but seeks a mediating

⁴ A few examples will suffice: W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London: SPCK, 1948), viii; Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), xi [initially published in German in 1957]; Archibald M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 7. On the other hand, after sharp criticisms, one may readily note the absence of the Strack-Billerbeck commentary in major publications such as John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), xii–xiii; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), xiii–xiv. There are of course exceptions to this general decline in use. Joachim Jeremias continued to use the collection, possibly due to his connection with Billerbeck and the project overall. See Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), xiii; also James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), vii.

⁵ See also Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 8–11.

⁶ See also E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 42–44. Sanders found Sandmel's arguments persuasive and lambasted anyone who continued to use the famous commentary without independent knowledge of its sources.

approach that seriously attempts to locate the sources in their historical context (xxxiii–xxxvi).

Additionally helpful, if one elects to sift through the sources and employ the Strack-Billerbeck translation, is the editor’s preface by Jacob Cerone. The editor offers a “user’s guide” which helps discern the arrangement of the notes and quotations. The guide is important since the new translation does make certain alterations to the text. For instance, in the English edition, certain material originally in the body text has been moved to the footnotes (xiii). The reader may then use the guide to determine what he is reading as he sifts through the material and accurately determines its source. However, the number of sources and the space present a challenge that the editors do not entirely overcome. Cerone labors to provide internal reference consistency, but this consistency forces the reader frequently to flip to other pages, which becomes cumbersome. In order for the reader to use this commentary properly, due to the internal reference system, it seems necessary to collect all the volumes, rather than add only one to his library; for only with all the volumes in hand can he easily assess a given text.

The most significant and obvious benefit of this project is that the editors have made available a major reference work in English that previously required as a minimum a robust understanding of German to utilize. Whatever pitfalls the readership may fall into, the work itself is accessible to them in a way and with a scope that it previously was not. An additional benefit of the work in general is that cross references to Old Testament passages, phrases, and ideas may be readily found in any given entry, in addition to the post-biblical material drawn from the Talmud and the Mishnah. For example, in the notes on Galatians 3:8B (625) (the divisions of versification are those of the commentary), the authors provide a generous discussion of the Abrahamic blessing to the nations, which includes the original Hebrew text, the LXX translation, and a discussion of subsequent interpretations of the blessing. Set against Paul’s exposition, these can be very illuminating. Likewise, if the reader examines the notes for Romans 14:13, “Not to cause a stumbling or an offense for your brother,” one finds a discussion of a hypothesized underlying passage, Leviticus 19:14 (“You will not lay a stumbling block in front of a blind person”) (360).⁷ This discussion includes reference to the Hebrew and Greek texts, as well as a discussion of subsequent texts that may also have the original (Lev 19:14) in view.

For readers who are unfamiliar with the sources themselves and do not have the time or interest to place them in their historical context, this translation project may not be useful. Preparation for Bible study or sermon work may be impaired, rather

⁷ All Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

than aided, by extensive forays into the dating of rabbinical literature. The attention properly due to those duties ought to prevent many from devoting themselves to endless rabbinical chronologies. This work certainly could be beneficial for those who wish to study rabbinical texts and their potential relations to the New Testament. Brewer and Cerone make clear that if one is willing to work hard, there can be real benefits for New Testament scholarship. The student who wishes to understand the relation between later Judaism and its first-century, Second Temple antecedent will do well to use these volumes to become acquainted with such literature, and move forward from the connections he finds in them to a deeper exploration of the complex history and development of the Jewish people and their literature.

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***How the Church Fathers Read the Bible: A Short Introduction.* By Gerald Bray. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022. 194 pages. Hardcover. \$24.99.**

Gerald Bray, the editor of multiple volumes in the Ancient Christian Commentary Series, is eminently qualified to write an introduction to patristic hermeneutics. Bray's pedigree aside, Lutheran interest in this book is piqued by his observation that we owe the adjective "patristic" and the designation of early Christian writers as "fathers" to two Lutherans: Johann Franz Buddeus and Johannes Gerhard, respectively (1). But *How the Church Fathers Read the Bible* is not just written for Lutherans. It is intended for anyone who values the Christian past and is dissatisfied with the methods and results of higher criticism.

Introducing a topic as vast as patristic biblical interpretation is no easy task. To assist the reader, Bray includes helpful summaries at the end of every chapter. The concluding chapters, containing several "case studies" and theses on how the church fathers read the Bible, are also helpful. However, given the brevity of this introduction, the interested reader will be disappointed to find neither a bibliography nor suggestions for further reading. Moreover, nearly the first third of the text is consumed with discussions of just who counts as a "father," language and translation issues, and other topics that are of interest to the scholar but should have been footnoted in an introductory work.

The book's greatest weakness is that Bray undermines his own chief argument (namely, that modern Christians can recover something of value from patristic exegesis) by taking for granted the interests and assumptions of the almighty "modern reader." For example, we are told that in the debate over Proverbs 8:22 during the Arian controversy, both parties were mistaken to refer the passage to

Christ. “In fact,” Bray writes, “as we now know, the verse is not about the Son at all but about the divine wisdom” (29). Similarly, Bray judges that Augustine was mistaken in his christological reading of the Good Samaritan, Origen was naïve to defend the historicity of Noah’s flood, and Basil of Caesarea was wrong to read the creation account literally. In a revealing paragraph, Bray states that many fathers indulged in a kind of exegesis that “fail[s] to meet the standards of interpretation that we would now expect” (103). Is it really inspiring to read that, despite these great shortcomings, patristic exegesis usually contains a “kernel of truth” worth recovering?

Bray also shows a deep personal distaste for allegory, advancing the contrived distinction between “allegory” and “typology” and lamenting that “even the greatest patristic interpreters” (by which he means the ones most akin to modern exegetical sensibilities) “could not resist finding parallels between the Old and New Testaments . . . whether those parallels made sense or not” (116). What is sorely missing here is a positive account of why such parallels did in fact make sense to the fathers, or why it was unthinkable for Athanasius that “the divine wisdom” might be something other than the eternal Son. There is useful information here for a novice in the field, but more compelling and inspiring introductions are readily available.

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