Paul and Judaism at the End of History

01/03/2026 | Jacob Noblett

Matthew V. Novenson:Paul and Judaism at the End of History2024: Cambridge University Press324 Pages; $39.99

PAUL AND JUDAISM AT THE END OF HISTORY

Matthew V. Novenson

Paul and Judaism at the End of History is a well-constructed historical study of the message of Paul the Apostle by Matthew V. Novenson. Rather than constructing a simple hagiography or using a theology-laden interpretive lens, Novenson scrutinizes the linguistic choices of Paul to better understand him as a learned Jewish rhetorician against the backdrop of Second Temple apocalypticism. Furthermore, Novenson, who uses a vast array of scholarly sources to justify his arguments, also diligently maps out his biblical sources for Paul; he specifies seven of the "Pauline" epistles that he uses as "first-order evidence," a key metric that helps readers negotiate the weight Novenson places on the historicity of other ancient sources, at least as they concern Paul's personal beliefs, without extensive authorship or custodial debates (21-23).

Novenson comments on an array of Paul's biases and perspectives, but he predominantly focuses on the relationship Paul has with Gentiles and their place among the early Christians. Beginning in the second chapter, he examines the term *Ioudaismos* ("Judaism" to the naked eye) to assist in establishing Paul's viewpoints on the nature of Gentile believers as compared to their Jewish compatriots (29, 36). Establishing that Paul himself is a Christ-believing Jew, Novenson explains that Paul's use of *Ioudaismos* in Galatians 1 is a reference to "Judaizing," or the attempt of Gentiles to behave as if they were Jewish. This fundamental perspective cannot be overstated, as it serves as a cornerstone for much of Novenson's later arguments concerning the practices, such as proselyte circumcision, that have often been ascribed to solely Jewish actors rather than Gentile believers (105).

Despite being a consistent theme throughout the book, Novenson offers most of his analysis of Paul's interactions with Gentile believers in chapters 3-7. Some of the material concerns legalistic themes, including an in-depth examination of Paul's controversial viewpoints on being "justified from works of the law" that so often enter theological and scholarly debate (71). In fact, Novenson directly interacts with modern research to deliver his conclusions, citing Paula Fredriksen, Albert Schweitzer, and others in a way that engages readers in a conversational, discussion-oriented model (71-75). However, Novenson also attempts to understand Paul's message at a more personal level, emphasizing identity as a central element to Paul's ministry. Paul, Novenson argues, is not a "founder" of the "universal," but rather someone that sees distinct differences in people at the fundamental level, specifically, those who are Jewish and those who are not (137, 143). This understanding of Paul is consistent throughout the book, and it helps Novenson shape his analysis of Paul's eschatological understanding of the world in the final two chapters.

Did Paul believe in the resurrection of a physical body? What about a corporeal, yet spherical form? Considering the main themes of the preceding sections, the questions may initially seem a bit out of scope, but they represent the capstone that consolidates Novenson's analysis. To assess Paul's metaphysical understanding of the world, Novenson uses 3rd century Gentile interpretations of Paul's works alongside a wide range of rabbinic scholarship. For example, Novenson cites another famous early Christian, Origen, who participates in this discussion by claiming his contemporary theological scholars have "proved that their bodies are spherical" in reference to Paul's mention of "knees" in Philemon 2:10 (234). The collective "their" in this instance arguably refers to celestial bodies, not resurrected Christ-believers, but Novenson uses this striking statement to establish not only a foundation for Origen's insistence that the soul "requires a body," but for how it relates to Paul's usage of physical, corporeal properties to describe seemingly intangible, or at least inhuman objects (235). Lay readers may find this section a bit difficult, as it relies on numerous extrabiblical Jewish and Roman sources, but it is ultimately necessary to adequately define Paul's complex perspective on the nature of the current world and the world to come.

Novenson's intensive study of Paul and his relation to what we call "Judaism" is essential for any scholar or reader interested in not only the Christian New Testament, but also the history of interpretation that followed. Those unfamiliar with biblical Greek would benefit from having a Bible on hand, since many of the quoted verses appear only in Greek. While this choice is consistent

with Novenson's extensive focus on translational exactitude and linguistic context, it may prevent unspecialized readers from fully appreciating his arguments. However, Novenson thankfully includes summarizing conclusions at the end of each of his chapters to provide an additional level of clarity, and with his expansive bibliography of helpful secondary sources, readers of all backgrounds can thoroughly enjoy his research into the famous apostle Paul.

Jacob Noblett is an independent scholar of religion.

Source: Reading Religion, January 30, 2026.

