

BOOK REVIEW

Smith, Julien, *Christ the Ideal King: Cultural Context, Rhetorical Strategy, and the Power of Divine Monarchy in Ephesians* (WUNT, 2.313; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). v + 316 pp. Pbk. \$152 CAD.

This volume is an attempt to compare Christ as an ideal king in the book of Ephesians with similar concepts found in Greco-Roman and Jewish Second Temple sources. Smith justifies this study by suggesting that Christ is characterized as an ideal king in the book of Ephesians, and such a characterization would have resonated with a ‘constellation’ of cultural expectations held by the letter’s audience (p. 3). Allowing C.H. Talbert to mould his methodology, Smith suggests that the context of the letter’s audience would not only have been the *cause* of the composition, but also the *catalyst* for the selection of the language, style, arguments and *topoi*. Smith goes on to suggest that the letter was most likely written by a disciple of Paul late in the first century, and says that determining the identity of the recipients ‘cannot be achieved with any degree of certainty’ (p. 9). Smith is then faced with the immediate challenge of explaining why Ephesians, having been written so late, would not allude to other Pauline epistles with regard to ideal kingship. The answer, according to Smith, is that the other Pauline epistles do not come close to expressing clear criteria with regards to ideal kingship. In addition to this, Smith discusses the challenge of subjectivity—how are we to know that a first-century (?) audience would have characterized an ideal king in the same way as the authors chosen for comparison? Smith suggests that any theoretical construct is artificial, but the text of Ephesians provides enough evidence to dispel such criticisms.

Smith then proceeds to analyze several texts from Greco-Roman and Jewish literature. These include texts by Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Isocrates and other prominent writers from the Hellenistic period. From the Roman period, Smith cites the *Res gestae divi Augusti* and Virgil as well as several other Roman writers. For each of the eras treated, the

ideal king is defined as one who, like Plato's Philosopher King, is able to promote virtue in his subjects. The king is the 'best man' as well as the benefactor of humankind. He is appointed by the gods, and has a close connection to the divine. He brings peace and harmony (*ὁμόνοια*) to his realm and becomes a living law for humanity by means of his divine *λόγος*. In the case of the Roman emperors, they were themselves divine intermediaries of the gods.

Smith cites the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE as a turning point for how the Jewish people understood both themselves and their expectations of Yahweh. He adopts the term 'messiah' to denote the Jewish expectation that a figure would appear to rule Israel. This figure takes on a number of identities in Jewish literature, ranging from a prophet to a king, and from a priest to an angelic being. Smith's question surrounds the 'kingly' expectation—namely, amongst those Jews who expected a *royal* messianic figure, how was such a king perceived? The Old Testament provides some insight into this: the king was perceived as one who displays ideal piety (Ps. 20.3; 18.21-25); as a priest (Ps. 110.4); Yahweh's adopted son (2 Sam. 7.14; Ps 2.7); and the right hand of Yahweh (Ps. 110.1). Later Palestinian literature, such as the *Psalms of Solomon*, provides the imagery of Yahweh being the supreme King and his human king as one whom he anoints. Literature from Qumran may denote the expectation of either one or two messiahs as described in CD, 1QS and 1QSa. While in some instances the expectation of dual messiahs may be deduced, some evidence suggests that a royal messiah is subordinated to the authority of the priest (p. 113). Other documents, such as the *Letter of Aristeas* and the works of Philo, represent the influence of Hellenism on Jewish thinking with regards to kingship.

When Smith finally arrives at his examination of Ephesians, he attempts to find common ground between Greco-Roman and Jewish concepts of ideal kingship. Central to the discussion is the use of *Χριστός* as either a proper name or a messianic title. Smith concludes that use of the term should not be adduced as evidence for Christ as the ideal king, and that the primary evidence lies in the described actions of Christ—indicated by the preposition *ἐν*. This leads Smith to conclude that the 'sequence of action' in Ephesians demonstrates that God acts through Christ, thus portraying him in the same light as the ideal king in antiquity. This action is concerned with the unity of the church, a unity that represents the mending of a broken cosmos. This is

done in a number of ways: reconciling humanity to God, reconciling humanity to itself, the giving of gifts for the unification of the church, enabling moral transformation, enabling harmony within the household and the promise of victory over those forces that caused the now ‘fixed’ dissension. Thus, Christ fulfills the aforementioned criteria for being considered an ideal king in antiquity.

This book provides an interesting thesis, but I have a number of concerns about its conclusions. One of the more prominent problems for studies such as this concerns the relationship between the text—in this case Ephesians—and the so-called evidence. In this case, Smith wants to show that the language in the book of Ephesians reflects already established motifs concerning ideal kingship. Since we serve a discipline that derives its conclusions from the written text, Smith’s biggest challenge is that he has no direct parallels between Ephesians and Greco-Roman literature. One must decide whether allusions—however subtle they may be—suffice for suggesting the dependence of Ephesians on Greco-Roman tradition—or Jewish tradition, for that matter. This requires a level of subjectivity on the part of the reader—in this case Smith—in order to make the parallels ‘work’. Smith might answer the question of ‘why’ the author of Ephesians *might* allude to Greco-Roman concepts of ideal kingship, but he never really answers the question of ‘how’. Being that his examples are loosely drawn, Smith must rely on the idea that expectations of ideal kingship are somehow ‘in the air’, so to speak. This is a dangerous place to start, and it demands some type of clearly stated methodology with regards to how one might overcome it. Smith spends just over half of this volume surveying examples of Hellenistic authors who discuss ideal kingship, but he fails in his attempt to synthesize them because he offers no theory as to *how* the author of Ephesians or his audience understand Christ in those ways.

This surfaces in Smith’s paraphrastic and interpretive summary of Ephesians. In it, he replaces the term Χριστός with ‘king’ in an attempt to prove his point. Perhaps the most obvious question is why the author of Ephesians would choose not to use the term ‘king’ if he meant ‘king’? It is possible that the term Χριστός may carry enough weight to be associated with an ideal king of some sort, but the term Χριστός does not appear in any Greco-Roman literature. This involves a lot of interpretive energy and relies too heavily on the notion that these concepts were ‘in the air’. In addition, Smith bases his argument on the

hope that the Ephesian audience would have understood his suggested parallels to Hellenistic and Roman concepts of ideal kingship in the same way he has. Smith also does his argument a disservice by suggesting that Ephesians was written by someone other than Paul, and that none of the other epistles talks about ideal kingship. Smith must then rely on his own interpretation of Ephesians with no textual support from the other epistles. Since Smith has no access to the psychological processes of the Ephesian audience, one is unable to safely conclude anything with regards to how they were thinking. Smith himself adduces this when he says ‘little can be known about the author or recipients of Ephesians from the letter itself’ (p. 9). Therefore, there is little or no textual evidence to suggest what texts or concepts the author of Ephesians may have been alluding to—if any at all.

In conclusion, I found this book an interesting read. However, I believe that it has failed in its goal to present the Christ of Ephesians in light of ideal kingship. A number of issues surrounding the subtlety of the allusions and a lack of textual evidence make Smith’s argument unconvincing. He does, however, provide a well-written summary of Greco-Roman and Jewish views of ideal kingship. These may be helpful for someone who is researching within this area. That being said, Smith fails to synthesize this summary with Ephesians in a convincing way.

Adam Z. Wright
McMaster Divinity College