The authors explore how and in what ways the figures of king and Messiah were understood to be divine in biblical texts. John J. Collins wrote the first four chapters on Old Testament texts, and Adela Yarbro Collins wrote the last four chapters on New Testament texts. Six of the eight chapters were originally presented as Speaker’s Lectures at Oxford in May 2006. Each author produced an additional new chapter for this book.

The title seems a bit cumbersome and confusing. The book is about the concept of Messiah in the Bible but is not limited to texts that specifically mention the Messiah. It focuses upon language of divinity that is applied to the ruler and/or Messiah in biblical texts. Prominent attention is given to the expression “Son of God.” There are also two chapters on “Son of Man.” Other heavenly figures who serve as divine agents such as personified wisdom and angels are also addressed.

In the first chapter (“The King as Son of God”) there is a discussion of how the language of “Son of God” was used for rulers in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan and how similar language is used in Pss 2 and 110. While in Israel the king was never worshiped as God, the king had great power and authority from God and had an exalted position as God’s son. The divine nature of the king is emphasized here.
In the second chapter (“The Kingship in Deuteronomistic and Prophetic Literature”) one finds a more critical view of kings in Deuteronomistic texts (2 Sam 7). Messianic texts that speak of a future ideal figure are found in prophetic books, but rarely is the divine nature of the king emphasized. While the texts in Isa 6–9 may have initially referred to a living ruler, they later were interpreted as referring to a future ideal figure. Only Isa 9 clearly links the Messiah to divinity.

The third chapter (“Messiah and Son of God in the Hellenistic Period”) gives attention to Hellenistic ruler cults that affirm the divine nature of rulers. There is no hesitancy in the Septuagint to use divine language for kings, but there is little evidence that massive changes have been introduced into the texts to emphasize this understanding. There is considerable evidence of messianic expectation in the Dead Sea Scrolls from the Hasmonean and Herodian periods. The Son of God text should be understood as referring to the Davidic Messiah.

Chapter 4 (“Messiah and Son of Man”) gives attention to Son of Man traditions in Daniel, 11QMelchizedek, the Similitudes of Enoch, and 4 Ezra 13, which focus upon a heavenly redeemer sent to earth to carry out God’s purposes. Sometimes this figure is linked explicitly to the Messiah. There is “a growing tendency in this period to conceive of the messiah as a preexistent being of heavenly origin (or conversely, to speak of a heavenly, angelic deliverer as messiah” (99). John Collins summarizes: “In the context of first-century C.E. Judaism, it is not surprising or anomalous that divine status should be attributed to someone who was believed by his followers to be the messiah” (100).

In the fifth chapter (“Jesus as Messiah and Son of God in the Letters of Paul”) attention is given to how Jesus is referred to as Christ in 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Jesus’ status as Son of God is linked to his death on behalf of others. These writings show that the messianic connection with Jesus took place very early in the development of the Christian tradition. The preexistence of Jesus is clear in the hymn of Phil 2:5–11.

In chapter 6 (“Jesus as Messiah and Son of God in the Synoptic Gospels”) the language of the Son of God and Messiah is connected to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Stories of the baptism in Mark and the birth stories in Matthew and Luke show how Jesus is God’s Son. There is no evidence of the idea of the preexistence of the Messiah in the Synoptic Gospels, but there are several texts in Paul’s letters that deal with the preexistence of the Messiah, and here Jesus is related to the preexistent and personified divine wisdom” (148).
Chapter 7 (“Jesus as Son of Man”) turns to the sayings related to the Son of Man in the Synoptic Gospels and how these relate to Jesus. The expression “son of man” originated in Dan 7:13–14. Jesus viewed himself as an eschatological prophet, and, “It is plausible, then, that Jesus spoke about the one like a son of man in Daniel as a heavenly messiah who was coming soon or who would be revealed soon” (173). During Jesus’ lifetime his followers may have hoped that Jesus would act like such a Messiah and after his death may have expected that he would return to carry out that mission.

Chapter 8 (“Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man in Gospel and Revelation of John”) offers an analysis of how the language of Son of God, Son of Man, and Messiah is linked to Jesus in the Gospel of John. The prologue of John is explicit about the preexistence of the Logos, which is Jesus. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is depicted as the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Word of God, and sometimes even as an angel. In both John and Revelation, Jesus is viewed as “preexistent and divine in some sense” (203). Jesus participated in creation and will rule as God’s agent in the world. There are differences in how Jesus is portrayed as Messiah in each book.

Throughout the book there is much interaction with other scholarly views. Both authors have contributed many studies to this topic. Not only do they present helpful overviews and critiques of the work of other scholars, but they also summarize some of their own work. Detailed footnotes and an extensive bibliography point the reader to further discussions of this topic. An index of modern authors helps one locate the ideas of individual scholars.

Careful attention is given to the exegesis of biblical texts concerning different views related to the divinity of the Messiah and king. The chapters are arranged chronologically according to when particular groups of texts were written. Biblical texts are read within the context of texts from the ancient Near East, Hellenistic texts, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Views about the divinity of rulers and messiahs are compared and contrasted within the different bodies of texts. An index of scripture and other ancient literature directs readers to discussions of specific texts.

The authors are interested in how this idea relates to the understanding of Jesus in the New Testament. They see continuity between the Old and New Testaments. They disagree with the view of Wilhelm Bousset that Jesus was viewed as divine only in Hellenistic Christianity and not in Jewish Christianity. One purpose of this book is to show that “ideas about Jesus as preexistent and divine originated in a Jewish context, in the conviction that he was the messiah, although they were subsequently transformed as Christianity spread in the Gentile world” (xiv).
The authors do not answer the question “How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?” as Larry W. Hurtado does, but they show that expressions such as Son of God, Son of Man, Word of God, and Wisdom of God are sometimes connected to divinity and may imply preexistence, which provide a framework for viewing Jesus as divine. Unlike Hurtado, Adela Yarbro Collins does not think that the language of adoration and worship of Jesus means that Jesus is worshiped in the same sense as God. She seems more certain that early Christian writers saw Jesus as functioning as God rather than being equal to God in all respects. As she says, “If Jesus was seen as taking over God’s functions as king, warrior, and judge at the End, as God’s agent, his divinity may have been perceived primarily in functional terms at first” (174). Ideas about preexistence as applied to Jesus expanded perceptions about Jesus. Later she says, “Given the practices of the imperial cults, it is not surprising that Jesus was viewed as a god and that worship of him became an alternative to the worship of the emperor” (174).

One of the most interesting questions that this book has raised is how and in what ways rulers could be understood as divine. The first chapter has insightful sections on “Begotten or Adopted?” and “In What Sense Was the King Divine?” in which John Collins discusses various possibilities. At the end of the book (213) mention is made of the distinction between “functional” divinity and “ontic” divinity, but no explanation of that distinction is given. More explanation of various ways of understanding divinity should have been given.

It is surprising that little attention is given to the General Epistles or the Deutero-Pauline Epistles. This means that many of the christological hymns are omitted from discussion. After the extensive treatment of 11QMelchizedek in chapter 4, it is surprising that the book of Hebrews is not given more consideration. Furthermore, one wonders whether later debates about Christology can be ignored in light of the later editing and textual transmission of the New Testament noted in Bart Ehrman’s The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effects of the Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament.