

“I Will Set His Hand to the Sea”: Psalm 88:26 LXX and Christology in Mark

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A recent trend in NT scholarship is to see Jesus' participation in actions or attributes allegedly reserved for God as indications that a writer depicts Jesus as divine. One set of texts to which such an argument has been applied is that in which Jesus exercises authority over the seas (Mark 4:35–41; 6:45–52). Our study uses the portrayal of the idealized Davidic king in Ps 88:26 as one whose “hand is set to the sea” to call this specific argument into question. In the psalm, the human king participates in God's rule over the sea without being represented as God. Ancillary support for the plausibility of a human ruling the waters comes from (1) other Judean stories of people exercising control over waters, (2) the coherence of Psalm 88 with the manner in which Jesus is depicted more broadly in Mark, and (3) evidence that other early readers of Judean (“Jewish”) Scripture interpreted Psalm 88's language about the Davidic king eschatologically.

καὶ θήσομαι ἐν θαλάσῃ χεῖρα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν ποταμοῖς δεξιὰν αὐτοῦ
(Ps 88:26 [MT 89:25])¹

Over the past several decades there has been much debate about whether Mark represents Jesus as a human, albeit a specially appointed and empowered human, or as a divine figure.² On one end of the spectrum stand scholars such as

¹All translations from Greek sources are our own unless otherwise noted. References to psalm numberings in this article refer to Greek numberings and versification, unless otherwise indicated.

²For a recent overview of relevant scholarship, see Daniel Johansson, “The Identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: Past and Present Proposals,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9 (2010): 364–93. In our short article we restrict our focus to Mark for convenience, even though we consider the

James D. G. Dunn, who denies any preexistence for Jesus in Mark and interprets Mark's Christology primarily in terms of Jesus as a divinely appointed eschatological figure.³ Toward the other end reside scholars such as Daniel Johansson, who affirms "an overlap in the identity between God and Jesus ... which serves to unite God and Jesus.... The exclusive divinity of the God of Israel is maintained, but not to the exclusion of Jesus."⁴ A feature claim among scholars arguing for a divine Jesus in Mark is that the Gospel depicts Jesus taking on the roles of God and/or makes claims about him that Judeans⁵ of the period would make only about their God.⁶

points made below relevant to the kinds of arguments made about Christology in Matthew and Luke as well.

³Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 30–31, 46–48, 61–62, 65–97. Johansson lists and summarizes others who hold similar views ("Identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark," 371–82).

⁴Johansson, "Kyrios in the Gospel of Mark," *JSNT* 33 (2010): 121. Richard Bauckham has pioneered the idea of "divine identity Christology," which seeks to recognize the divinity of Jesus through his participation in actions or attributes that are allegedly reserved for God in early Judean sources (*Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008]). For some other recent occupants of this end of the spectrum, see Johansson, "Identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark," 384–88.

⁵To clarify our terminology, we use the label "Judean Scripture" or "Judean sacred writings" for what is conventionally termed the Hebrew Bible. Our goal is to reinscribe in our article's historical description the "ethnic" nature of how these writings would have been recognized by a variety of people in the Hellenistic through early Roman Imperial period Mediterranean. Just as different peoples were often conceived of as having their own ancestral deities and customs, so too would the writings of (what we call) the Hebrew Bible have been thought of as the ancient and sacred books of a people, the Judeans. We also want to avoid the confusion that the label Hebrew Bible could introduce in our article, since we focus on Greek translations of these writings. With "Judean sources" we refer to Judean writings in general from our period of interest, whether writings in our Hebrew Bibles or writings designated by other categorizations such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the "Old Testament Pseudepigrapha," and so on. On our ethnic emphasis and use of the terminology of "Judean" instead of "Jew," see, e.g., Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *JSJ* 38 (2007): 457–512. For a counter-argument, see Seth Schwartz, "How Many Judaisms Were There? A Critique of Neusner and Smith on Definition and Mason and Boyarin on Categorization," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 2 (2011): 221–38; and for a recent discussion that probes relevant assumptions on both sides of the debate, see Michael Satlow, "Jew or Judaeans?" in *The One Who Sows Bountifully: Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers* (ed. C. Johnson Hodge et al.; BJS 356; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), 165–75.

⁶We recognize that, historically speaking, reducing the options to understanding Jesus as human or divine vastly oversimplifies matters. Since, however, the specific argument we address in this study is deployed by scholars arguing for some identity of Jesus with the God of Israel within a framework often designated by labels such as "christological monotheism," we retain this simple binary.

Numerous studies have appeared recently that revolve around this argument or, at least, deploy it in various ways.⁷

One important claim for scholars who advocate a divine Christology comes from Mark's portrayals of Jesus' control over the sea (Mark 4:35–41; 6:45–52). Those who affirm a Christology of divine identity argue that, in these texts, Jesus exercises power and authority reserved for God alone in Judean sources. Thus, Simon J. Gathercole commences his discussion of the relevant passages in Mark as “cases where Jesus seems to be saying or doing something which is a particular prerogative of Yahweh in the OT. Is he acting as one uniquely endowed by God in a *representative* function, or is he in fact acting simply *as* God himself?”⁸ Gathercole answers this question with reference to the descriptions of God as the one who stills the storm that threatens God's people in Psalm 106 and as the one who walks on water in Job 9:8.⁹ He concludes, “For the moment ... the combination of the two passages showing Jesus' mastery of the sea points very strongly to a close identification of him with Yahweh in the OT.”¹⁰ Others make similar points about how Jesus' control of the sea in these passages casts him in the role of the God of Israel and/or reflects some kind of identification with the God of Israel.¹¹ Of particular note for the current study, Joel Marcus argues that the role played by Jesus here is the role played by $\Upsilon\text{H}\omega\text{H}$ in subduing the forces of chaos in Judean Scripture and thus pushes beyond what is explicable through appeal to the category of Jesus as son of David.¹²

Scholars who assess Jesus' mastery of the sea in Mark as evidence of a divine identity, because Mark thus represents Jesus in ways reserved for the God of Israel in Judean sources, overlook a potentially crucial piece of evidence. In Ps 88:26, God says the following about the royal Davidic figure described in the psalm: “And I will set his hand to the sea and his right hand to the rivers” ($\kappa\alpha\iota\ \theta\acute{\eta}\sigma\omicron\mu\alpha\iota\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \theta\alpha\lambda\acute{\alpha}\sigma\sigma\eta\ \chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\rho\alpha\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \pi\omicron\tau\alpha\mu\omicron\iota\varsigma\ \delta\epsilon\acute{\xi}\iota\acute{\alpha}\nu\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$). Thus, in the very Judean sacred writings that constitute a significant part of Mark's discursive reservoir, we find a figure other

⁷ E.g., M. Eugene Boring, “Markan Christology: God-Language for Jesus?” *NTS* 45 (1999): 463–70; Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012); Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 57–64; Johansson, “Kyrios in the Gospel of Mark,” 112, 120; idem, “Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone? Human and Angelic Agents, and Divine Forgiveness in Early Judaism,” *JSNT* 33 (2011): 351–74.

⁸ Gathercole, *Preexistent Son*, 61 (emphasis original).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62–64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹¹ E.g., Boring, “Markan Christology,” 466, 467; Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 144–45.

¹² Marcus, *Way of the Lord*, 144–45.

than God with authority over the sea.¹³ In the context of the psalm, the Davidic king's control over the sea mirrors and is derived from God's own control of the sea highlighted earlier in 88:10.¹⁴ This passage in Judean Scripture therefore attests both the commonly noted specification of Israel's God as the one who controls the sea and the sharing of this authority over the sea with God's royal representative on earth, the king who rules over the sea precisely as a divinely appointed Davidic royal representative. The representation of the Davidic king's authority over the sea in Ps 88:26 thus problematizes standard arguments that Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52 indicate a divine identity for Jesus due to their depicting of Jesus in ways reserved for the God of Israel alone in Judean sources.¹⁵

For the purposes of this short article our goal is not to establish an intertextual presence of Ps 88:26 in the author of Mark's sketches of Jesus but to illustrate how Ps 88:26 necessitates rethinking a common argument for Jesus' divine identity in Mark. Several points further amplify the relevance of Ps 88:26 to this discussion. First, the psalm itself is a plea for the restoration of the Davidic dynasty after the exile, not a celebration of a current-day king or kingship (88:38–45).¹⁶ The depictions of the Davidic king can thus be read as idealized anticipations of what Israel's coming messiah will be and do. Broadly speaking, Mark attempts to answer such biblical anticipations in his story about Jesus the Messiah (Mark 1:1).¹⁷ Second, it has been argued that the overall redaction of the Psalter has brought the reader to a point of exile: lamenting the failure of God to preserve the land, temple, and king.¹⁸ Even if the overall argument is not accepted, the recognition that the lack of

¹³ From the standpoint of Classical and Hellenistic Greek, the use of *ἐν* to designate what a royal figure has authority over is surprising. This, however, is the most plausible reading of the passage in context (see 88:10 and comments about it below). The awkward choice of *ἐν* likely reflects the translators' grappling with the preposition *ב* in their Hebrew *Vorlage*. Given this situation, we have chosen to retain the ambiguity and awkwardness in our translation of *ἐν*, rendering it with "to," while we also explain that readers would understand Ps 88:26 in context as specifying the Davidic figure's authority over the sea and rivers.

¹⁴ In its historical context, these positions in Psalm 88 about Israel's God, the king, and the sea operate within and innovate upon ancient sensitivities about gods' control over the sea and kings as representatives of their gods. See Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁵ Scholars have reached similar conclusions regarding the storm-stilling episodes on different grounds as well. For example, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (*Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009]) argues that "son of David" is a misstatement of how Mark identifies Jesus (e.g., pp. 87–91), but nonetheless reads the storm-stilling passages as indications that Jesus receives his authority from God rather than as indications that Jesus is thereby identified as God (e.g., pp. 140, 141).

¹⁶ See Bernard Gosse, "Le parallélisme synonymique *ḥsd ʾmwnh*, le Ps 89 et les réponses du quatrième livre du Psautier, Ps 90–106," *ZAW* 122 (2010): 185–98.

¹⁷ See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 145–49.

¹⁸ Robert E. Wallace, "The Narrative Effect of Psalms 84–89," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 11 (2011): 1–15.

kingship itself is a lingering effect of exile underscores that the psalm participates as one thread in the knot of Judean scriptural hopes that God would restore Israel to full participation in the covenant promises (contrast Ps 88:4, 29 with 88:40). Third, for later readers Ps 88:26 not only looks ahead to an idealized future but also potentially links to stories from Israel's past. Both Moses (Exod 14:16, 27) and Joshua (Josh 3:7–4:19) were agents through whom the waters of sea and river (respectively) were controlled.¹⁹ In the case of Moses (whom God had made God [!] to Pharaoh [Exod 7:1]), God tells Moses to do what the text assigns to God himself: “stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it” (Exod 14:16 NRSV), and “the LORD drove the sea back” (14:21). In Joshua, the purpose of the water parting is for Joshua to be established as one with whom the Lord is present as the Lord was present with Moses (Josh 3:7). The fact that only God can control the waters demonstrates, in these texts, that God is at work when a human performs such a task, not that the person has somehow begun to participate in God's identity. Fourth, at least one revolutionary from the first century claimed for himself such God-given authority over the water. Josephus tells of a self-proclaimed agent of God named Theudas, “He stated that he was a prophet and that by a command he would divide [σχισας] the river” (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97). A first-century revolutionary claims to be able to control the waters not as a claim to be God but as a claim to be God's agent. We should not, therefore, underestimate the possibility that ancient readers of Judean Scripture could see Ps 88:26 anticipating a human king controlling the waters in a manner seemingly reserved only for God. The God who has this power has already shared it with human agents at earlier points in the biblical narrative. Such a possibility of a God-empowered, water-ruling king might inform the connotations to be drawn from Jesus' control of the seas.

Mark's Gospel has several points of contact with Psalm 88. Verse 27 anticipates that the king will address God, saying, “You are my father.” Joachim Jeremias's famous study on Jesus' prayer, ἀββὰ ὁ πατήρ (Mark 14:36), a prayer found only in Mark, argued that the uniqueness of this form of divine address comes precisely from Jesus addressing God as *my* father.²⁰ Beyond this address to God, both Mark 14:36 and Ps 88:27 depict God as father being one who has the power (and obligation) to deliver his anointed king. Moreover, in the psalm God says he will

¹⁹The interconnections between Ps 88:26, the Moses/Joshua tradition, and a coming messiah are drawn in the later rabbinic commentary *Pesiqta Rabbati*: “The Holy One, blessed be He, will reply, ‘He is the Messiah, and his name is Ephraim, My true Messiah . . . And even the seas and rivers will stop flowing,’ as it is said (Psalm 89:25 [MT]), ‘I will set his hand also on the sea, and his right hand on the rivers’” (*Pesiq. Rab.* 36:1).

²⁰Joachim Jeremias, *Abba: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 1–67. Though Jeremias's study is problematic in a number of ways, this point of connection between Mark and the psalm, that an anointed figure addresses God as “my father,” is worth noting; even James Barr's famous rejoinder to Jeremias affirms that ʿabbāʿ can connote “my father” when used in the vocative (“ʿAbbā Isn't Daddy,” *JTS* [1988]: 28–47, esp. 37).

make David his firstborn (Ps 88:28); God speaks twice in Mark, affirming Jesus' sonship in both cases (Mark 1:11; 9:7). In Ps 88:21 the Davidic king is God's *δοῦλος*; in Mark 10:44–45 the need to become *δοῦλος* in order to become first is illustrated by the self-giving Son of Man. Finally, the psalm ends not with a vindicated king but with a king who is rejected by God (88:39–40) and who is an object of scorn to his enemies (88:42–46), events that Mark's Jesus endures in ch. 15. The significance of these points of contact is not that Mark intends an extended allusion to Psalm 88 or its particular claims. Rather, the significance is to be found in Mark's having created a discursive world that trades on a set of descriptions of God's coming Messiah similar to those found in the psalm.

Beyond the coherence of Psalm 88's description of the Davidic king with Mark's portrayal of Jesus as God's appointed eschatological representative, we have evidence to suggest that some other literate Christ followers (some of them Judeans) of the early Roman imperial period read Psalm 88 as referring to an eschatological Davidic figure. Several scholars have explored such potential understandings of Psalm 88 in or behind various early Christian writings, including some in the NT.²¹ *Testament of Judah* 22 may be particularly relevant for our discussion.²² In *T. Jud.* 22 we read of a period during which kingship by Judah's descendants will be brought to an end "until the salvation of Israel, until the arrival of the God of righteousness, of Jacob being at rest in peace, and all the nations" (22:2).²³ Then the text describes the eschatological kingship of Judah's line:

Καὶ αὐτὸς φυλάξει κράτος βασιλείας μου ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος. "Ὁρκῶ γὰρ ὡμοσέ μοι Κύριος, μὴ ἐκλείψειν τὸ βασιλείον μου καὶ τοῦ σπέρματός μου, πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας, ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος.

And he [God] will preserve the power of my kingdom until eternity. For by oath the Lord swore to me that the royal dwelling of mine and my offspring would not pass away, forever. (*T. Jud.* 22:4)

²¹ E.g., Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 107–10; Douglas A. Campbell has made suggestions about Psalm 88 and Paul's underlying conceptions of Christ; see *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 58, 87–89. Of course, none of the earliest extant writings by Christ followers explicitly cites Psalm 88; see Richard B. Hays's comments about both this issue and Juel's discussion of Psalm 88: *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 110–11.

²² Though acknowledging that the author likely worked with existing sources, we treat the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* as a writing by a Christ follower from, perhaps, the second century C.E.; on this, see Marinus de Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature: The Case of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (SVTP 18; Leiden: Brill, 2003). On this kind of approach to many so-called OT Pseudepigrapha/Apocrypha often claimed to be essentially pre-Christian "Jewish" compositions, see James R. Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (JSJSup 105; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

²³ The Greek text of the *Testament of Judah* comes from the TLG; translations are our own.

The language here potentially draws from several Davidic texts, including 2 Kgdms 7:16 and Ps 131:11–12.²⁴ However, the eschatological Davidic language of *T. Jud.* 22:4 also seems to work from Ps 88:4–5, 29–30, and 36–37 inasmuch as the psalm shares several lexical choices with *T. Jud.* 22:4 that are lacking in 2 Kgdms 7:16.

First, both Psalm 88 and *T. Jud.* 22:4 use the same verb of God's oath swearing (ὄμνυμι) and specify that God swears to David or to Judah, who stands for the Davidic lineage in the *Testament of Judah*: ὄμοσα Δαυιδ τῷ δούλῳ μου (Ps 88:4); ἀπαξ ὄμοσα ἐν τῷ ἀγίῳ μου εἰ τῷ Δαυιδ (Ps 88:36); Ὅρκῳ γὰρ ὄμοσέ μοι [Judah] Κύριος (*T. Jud.* 22:4). Second, both passages deploy the same verb (φυλάσσω) to describe God's maintaining mercy to David forever (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα φυλάξω αὐτῷ τὸ ἔλεός μου; Ps 88:29), which links to his establishing David's throne forever in 88:30, and God's preserving the power of [Judah's] kingdom forever (φυλάξει κράτος βασιλείας μου ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος; *T. Jud.* 22:4). Third, just as Psalm 88 specifies that God's actions for David also concern his offspring (τὸ σπέρμα; 88:5, 30, and 37) and their continuing rule, *T. Jud.* 22:4 spells out that Judah's royal dwelling will not ever pass away from him or his offspring (τοῦ σπέρματός μου).²⁵ The parallels between *T. Jud.* 22:4 and Ps 88:4–5 are especially strong, with both stressing that God's swearing an oath (ὄμνυμι) to David involves ensuring the kingship for his offspring (τὸ σπέρμα) forever (ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος).²⁶ It seems likely, therefore, that Psalm 88's language about the Davidic king factors into the matrix of *T. Jud.* 22:4's outlining of Judahite kingship in the end-time.²⁷ Thus, *T. Jud.* 22:4 provides evidence that an interpreter of Judean Scripture in the early Roman imperial period could read Psalm 88's discourse about the Davidic king as relevant for discussing eschatological Davidic kingship.

²⁴ 2 Kingdoms 7:16 speaks of David's kingdom being made sure forever (ἡ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ ἕως αἰῶνος), just as *T. Jud.* 22:4 uses similar language about the power of Judah's kingdom forever (κράτος βασιλείας μου ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος).

²⁵ ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐτοιμάσω τὸ σπέρμα σου καὶ οἰκοδομήσω εἰς γενεὰν καὶ γενεὰν τὸν θρόνον σου (Ps 88:5); θήσομαι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ ὡς τὰς ἡμέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (Ps 88:30); τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα μενεῖ καὶ ὁ θρόνος αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος ἐναντίον μου (Ps 88:37); μὴ ἐκλείψῃ τὸ βασιλεῖόν μου καὶ τοῦ σπέρματός μου, πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας, ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος (*T. Jud.* 22:4).

²⁶ Though Ps 131:11–12 uses the same two verbs (ὄμνυμι and φυλάσσω) shared by Psalm 88 and *T. Jud.* 22:4 while discussing substantially the same themes, it lacks the specific offspring language (τὸ σπέρμα) and, instead, discusses the royal lineage in terms of David's sons (οἱ υἱοί σου).

²⁷ Psalm 88's language may factor into *T. Jud.* 22:4 with 2 Kgdms 7:16 and Ps 131:11–12 also operating as traditional resources on which the author drew. As is well known, one finds similar interpretive activity across early Judean literature, especially various creative readings capitalizing on similar words or other "hooks" in the text to bring different passages together—generally with some kind of contemporizing focus, whether in relation to ethical, eschatological, or other concerns. For a recent discussion of this kind of interpretive activity for depictions of eschatological figures, though focusing on portrayals involving specifically messianic language, see Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34–63.

When one combines the future-oriented potential of Psalm 88 itself with the correlation noted here between, on the one hand, how the psalm describes the Davidic king as God's royal son with God's authority and, on the other hand, how some scholars understand Jesus in Mark as God's eschatological Davidic son, and when one adds in *T. Jud.* 22:4's use of Psalm 88, the relevance of Ps 88:26 to the discussion of Mark's Christology increases. We have reason to postulate that a literate Christ follower who draws on Judean Scripture and associated interpretive activity for a representation of Jesus, such as the author of Mark, could plausibly consider God's eschatological Davidic representative to have authority over the sea without necessarily being identified with God himself in the sense that this identification is taken by those arguing for a divine Christology in Mark. Though we thus advance a modest claim, especially as we do not intend to argue here for the presence of Ps 88:26 as an intertextual allusion in Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52, we consider it significant for scholarship on the identity of Jesus in Mark. Contrary to the claims of many scholars, Jesus' mastery over the sea in Mark does not necessarily indicate that the author of Mark thus considers Jesus to be divine in the sense of sharing in the identity of Israel's God. While scholars who advance such a position about Jesus in Mark may be correct, this particular argument does not lend the support often claimed for it. Psalm 88:26 and ways that readers of Judean Scripture in the early Roman imperial period handled it illustrate that literate Christ followers could envision a nondivine figure with authority over the sea. In step with Ps 88:26, and in concert with the prior stories of Moses and Joshua, they could well envision that such authority had been granted to an eschatological Davidic figure who was filling the role of God's royal son.