

Reconsidering Psalm 89:25, Jewish Water Miracles and Markan Christology

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Abstract

In this article I respond to Daniel Kirk and Stephen Young's argument (JBL: 2014) that the Markan sea miracles (Mark 4:35–41; 6:45–52) may depict Jesus within the same human paradigm as the idealized Davidic king of Psalm 89:25, whose “hand is set to the sea”, rather than imputing divine prerogatives to Jesus. They find support for this in other Jewish water miracle accounts, coherence between Psalm 89 and Mark's depiction of Jesus, and the eschatological interpretation of Psalm 89 in early Jewish literature. The argument is also developed further in Kirk's book, *A Man Attested by God* (2016). This study raises concerns as to whether Psalm 89:25, and the other texts adduced by Kirk and Young, provide significant parallels for Jesus' performance of sea miracles. Further, when Jewish texts describing water miracles are considered, a strict paradigm emerges which casts doubt on Kirk and Young's more inclusive construction. Consequently, I will argue that Mark's portrayal of Jesus in the water miracles does not fit within any human paradigm that can be established for early Judaism.

Keywords

Christology, Miracles, Water, Early Judaism, Psalm 89, Sirach 50, Gospel of Mark

1. Introduction

In a 2014 *Journal of Biblical Literature* article, Daniel Kirk and Stephen Young make an important contribution to the early high Christology debate by questioning whether the Markan Jesus, in exercising authority over the sea (Mark 4:35–41; 6:45–52), is depicted as divine.¹ Examining the idealized Davidic king of Psalm 89:25,² whose “hand is set to the sea,” they argue that he is “a

¹ J. R. Daniel Kirk and Stephen L. Young, “‘I Will Set His Hand to the Sea’: The Relevance of Ps 88:26 LXX to Debates about Christology in Mark,” *JBL* 133 (2014): 333–340.

² MT 89:26; LXX 88:26; for simplicity I will refer throughout to NRSV numbering.

[human] figure other than God with authority over the sea.”³ They find ancillary support for this in other Jewish water miracle accounts; coherence between Psalm 89 and Mark’s depiction of Jesus, and the eschatological interpretation of Psalm 89 in early Jewish literature. Their proposal has been accepted by other scholars.⁴ The argument is also developed further in Kirk’s book, *A Man Attested by God*. Despite the admirable clarity and carefulness of their argument, concerns may be raised as to how far Psalm 89:25 really is an informative background text for Jesus’ performance of sea miracles. Further, when other Jewish texts describing water miracles are considered, a paradigm emerges which casts doubt on Kirk and Young’s construction. Consequently, I will argue that Mark’s portrayal of Jesus in the water miracles does not fit within any human paradigm that can be established in early Judaism.

2. A Challenge to Divine Christology in the Markan Sea Miracles

The sea miracles in Mark’s Gospel (Mark 4:35–41; 6:45–52) are of particular significance for those who argue for an early high Christology.⁵ While many of Jesus’ miracles resemble those performed by prophets in the Jewish scriptures, the sea miracles are unique and unprecedented for a biblical human miracle worker.⁶ Rather, the sea miracles evoke the scriptural prerogatives of God and have consequently been argued to open the way for speculation beyond a merely “functional” identification of Jesus with God.⁷

³ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 335–336.

⁴ See e.g., Michael Kok, “Marking a Difference: The Gospel of Mark and the ‘Early High Christology’ Paradigm,” *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting* 3 (2016): 102–124 at 115; Richard Bauckham “Confessing the Cosmic Christ (1 Corinthians 8:6 and Colossians 1:15–20)”, *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Matthew Novenson, *NovTestSup* 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 139–171 at 164. Bauckham’s adoption of Ps 89:25 as a background text for Mark 4:35–41 contrasts with his two critical reviews of J. R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). See Richard Bauckham, “A Case for High Human Christology”, *Expository Times* 129.3 (2017): 121–124; idem. “Is ‘High Human Christology’ Sufficient? A Critical Response to J. R. Daniel Kirk’s *A Man Attested by God*,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27.4 (2017): 503–525.

⁵ See e.g. Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 61–65; Philip G. Davis, “Mark’s Christological Paradox,” *JSNT* 35 (1989): 7–8; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 66–70; Michael F. Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son: Answering Adoptionist Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 94–97.

⁶ William F. McInerney, “An Unresolved Question in the Gospel Called Mark: ‘Who Is This Whom Even Wind and Sea Obey?’ (4:41),” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 23 (1996): 259.

⁷ So R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 225.

However, Kirk and Young argue that scholars who consider the water miracles to demonstrate some manner of divine identity for Jesus “overlook a potentially crucial piece of evidence.”⁸ This evidence is Ps 89:25, “I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers” (NRSV). For Kirk and Young this text demonstrates Jewish expectation of a messiah who could control waters as part of his idealized humanity and kingship.⁹ This coming messiah would, like Moses (Exod 14:16, 27) and Joshua (Josh 3:7–4:19), be an agent of God’s power who could control water.¹⁰ Indeed this expectation found concrete expression in the rebel Theudas as recounted in Josephus. *Ant.* 20.97. This Theudas told his followers he was a prophet and would divide the river Jordan by his command.¹¹ The possible use of Ps 89 in Testament of Judah 22 is given as evidence that the Psalm was read messianically and eschatologically in the early Roman imperial period.¹² When making the same argument elsewhere, Kirk provides two further important texts. Firstly, *Pesiqta Rabbati* 36:1, where interpreting Ps 89:25 it reads concerning the messiah, “even the seas and rivers will stop flowing.”¹³ For Kirk, this later Jewish expectation for the messiah “is particularly striking precisely because it reflects the Jesus tradition in ways that later Jews may have generally been keen to avoid.”¹⁴ Secondly, Sirach 50:3 is argued to show an idealized high priest with creative power over the waters and thus is a further instance of a human with God’s authority over water.¹⁵

Despite Kirk and Young’s presentation of this evidence, it remains to be shown, even if such a belief was operative in Second Temple Judaism, that it is pertinent for interpretation of Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52. As noted by Kirk and Young, Mark nowhere explicitly quotes from or appears to allude to Ps 89.¹⁶ Their argument is rather that Mark has “created a discursive world that trades on a set of descriptions of God’s coming messiah similar to those found in the Psalm.”¹⁷ This point is well taken. However, for Kirk and Young the relevance of Ps 89:25 to Markan Christology is that it generates the possibility that,

A literate Christ follower who draws on Judean Scripture and associated interpretive activity for a representation of Jesus,

⁸ J. R. Daniel Kirk and Stephen L. Young, “‘I Will Set His Hand to the Sea’: The Relevance of Ps 88:26 LXX to Debates about Christology in Mark,” *JBL* 133 (2014): 333–340, (335). See also Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 90–92, 102–104, 434–442.

⁹ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 336.

¹⁰ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 337.

¹¹ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 337; See also Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 103–104.

¹² Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 339.

¹³ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 104.

¹⁴ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 250.

¹⁵ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 125.

¹⁶ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 337–338.

¹⁷ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 338.

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.¹⁸

Such a nuanced conclusion is certainly plausible, but is it probable? Without intending to argue here for a divine Christology, however understood, I hope to show that the texts with which Kirk and Young support their conclusion do not provide the requisite evidence.

3. Evidence for a Messianic Interpretation of Psalm 89:25

The first witness, given by Kirk and Young, to a messianic interpretation of Ps 89:25 is the account of Theudas in *Ant.* 20.97. While Theudas (if recounted accurately by Josephus) was certainly drawing on traditions around Moses and Joshua in his promise to divide the river for his followers,¹⁹ it is not evident that in doing so he was interpreting Ps 89:25. Neither does a highly symbolic attempted crossing of the Jordan necessarily imply the expectation of general power over water in any situation. The simplest explanation for Theudas's intent was to imitate Joshua in crossing the Jordan and conquering Canaan.²⁰ Like Joshua, this power over water would not have been understood as an ongoing ability but as a onetime act to show God's favour on a particular person and their course of action (Josh 3:7).²¹ Strikingly, it must be observed that the miracles described in the Gospels do not fit the mould that Kirk and Young have suggested. Jesus does not part the sea or the river and walk across on dry land as Moses and Joshua both did or as Theudas was hoping to do.²²

On the other hand, the 6th or 7th century *Pesiqta Rabbati*,²³ while associating Ps 89:25 with the messiah in *Pesiq. Rab.* 36:1, does not relate this to human miracle working power over creation. The pertinent extract from *Pesiq. Rab.* 36:1 reads:

¹⁸ Kirk and Young, "I Will Set His Hand to the Sea," 338.

¹⁹ See e.g. Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 230.

²⁰ "The symbolism of his action most obviously recalls Joshua," John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 216.

²¹ Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 219.

²² Of course, as Josephus recounts, Theudas had his head cut off by the Romans before he had the chance to try (*Ant.* 20.98).

²³ Daniel Sperber, "Pesikta Rabbati," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnic, 2nd ed., vol. 16 (Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), 12–13. For full discussion of date and Palestinian provenance see Leon Nemoy, ed., *Pesikta Rabbati*, trans. William G. Braude, Yale Judaica 18, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 1.20–26.

The Holy One, blessed be He, will reply: He is the Messiah, and his name is Ephraim, My true Messiah, who will pull himself up straight and will pull up straight his generation, and who will give light to the eyes of Israel and deliver his people; and no nation or people will be able to withstand him, as is said *The enemy shall not do him violence, nor the son of wickedness afflict him* (Ps. 89:[22]). And all his enemies and adversaries shall be beaten before him, as is said *I will beat to pieces his adversaries before him* (Ps. 89:[23]). And even seas and rivers will stop flowing, as is said *I will set his hand also on the sea, and his right hand on the rivers* (Ps. 89:[25]).²⁴

In the pesiqta, two verses are cited (Ps 89:22 and 23) immediately prior to Ps 89:25. In all three verses cited, the messiah is not the subject of the action. In Ps 89:23, and 25 God is the subject and in 89:22 the enemy is the subject. In each instance the messiah is the beneficiary but not the actor. The rabbinic commentary on these verses follows this scheme and does not describe any explicit action on the messiah's part. This scheme places the unnatural behaviour of the water in the category of divinely ordained apocalyptic phenomena, similar to, for example, Joel 2:31, rather than messianic miracle working. This coheres with similar imagery in the *piska* (reading) on which Pesiq. Rab. 36 is an exposition, namely Isa 60:1–2, “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples” (Isa 60:2).²⁵ Consequently, it is not clear how this rabbinic text can be read as “imputing control over the waters to the coming messiah”²⁶ as no explicit mention of the messiah's agency is made. *Contra* Kirk, it may even be that the rabbinic commentator consciously avoided any hint of the Messiah performing water miracles to avoid reflecting the “Jesus tradition.”²⁷

The Testament of Judah, which following Kirk and Young we may consider a Christian text,²⁸ is plausibly shown by Kirk and Young to draw on

²⁴ See Nemoy, *Pesikta Rabbati*, 2.678. In this instance the editorial insertion goes against the flow of the immediate context and so should be discounted, “And even seas and rivers will [yield to his power and] stop flowing,” but if accepted would weaken the force of my argument here. However, such a late text can hardly be decisive either way; Kirk rightly omits the insertion when quoting the pesiqta (*A Man Attested by God*, 104).

²⁵ Nemoy, *Pesikta Rabbati*, 2.676–677.

²⁶ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 250.

²⁷ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 250.

²⁸ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 338 n. 22. See further, “The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: Christian and Jewish: A hundred years after Friedrich Schnapp,” in Marinus De Jonge, *Jewish Eschatology, Early Christian Christology and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, NovTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 233–243.

the language and themes of Ps 89 in T. Jud. 22:1–5.²⁹ However, if we accept this connection it renders the absence of any reference to power over waters in T. Jud. significant. Why would early Christians, using Psalm 89 to retrospectively provide the patriarch Judah with prophetic words concerning Jesus, not seize on the opportunity to connect Jesus' water miracles with Ps 89:25, the only (supposed) promise of messianic power over water in the Jewish scriptures? The subsequent and apparently Christianized section T. Jud. 24:1–6,³⁰ could surely have contained a reference to its messianic figure, the "sinless man" of "the seed of Judah" (T. Jud. 24:1), walking on water or calming storms. One explanation would be that the Christian redactor of Testament of Judah did not do so because he or she did not read Ps 89:25 as promising such power nor connect that particular verse to Jesus' earthly ministry. If, on the other hand, the connections in Testament of Judah 22 with Psalm 89 are from an earlier Jewish tradition, unnoticed by later Christian editors, the lack of interest in the water imagery of Ps 89:25, while an argument from silence, at the least does not indicate that Ps 89:25 was significant in messianic speculation.

4. Psalm 89:25 and Miraculous Power over Water

It is not clear, then, that Ps 89:25 has been previously read in the way proposed by Kirk and Young.³¹ When read in context of the whole of Psalm 89, verse 25 does not easily read as a promise of miracle power at all, perhaps explaining why it is not used in this way in early Jewish or Christian literature. An ancient reader could, of course, have taken Ps 89:25 out of context in order to support a belief in messianic miracle power over water. It cannot be claimed that Ps 89:25 was never read in this way. But there is no evidence that this has happened, as discussed above. On the other hand, the literary and historical context of the Psalm is critically important to Kirk and Young's argument and so it bears some analysis here.³² The Psalm is in three distinct sections (89:1–18, 19–37, 38–48) with a small conclusion (89:49–52). All the sections follow a parallel thematic

²⁹ Kirk and Young, "I Will Set His Hand to the Sea," 338–339. Kirk and Young thus helpfully fill out the observations of earlier commentators, see further: the marginal notes of James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 801; also H. W. Hollander and M. De Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 224.

³⁰ De Jonge, *Jewish Eschatology*, 239; Hollander and De Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, 227–228.

³¹ Even if Kirk and Young's argument regarding Ps 89:25 were accepted, Mark's sea miracles cannot be considered an example of such a use of Ps 89, as they acknowledge: "we do not intend to argue here for the presence of Ps [89:25] as an intertextual allusion in Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52." Kirk and Young, "I Will Set His Hand to the Sea," 340.

³² Kirk and Young, "I Will Set His Hand to the Sea," 336–338.

structure, especially in the earlier verses of each section.³³ While the parallelism is not strictly adhered to, and is less obvious in the latter parts of each section, it is consistent enough to be significant for the interpretation of the Psalm. So, for example, the initial verses of the first two sections and the conclusion refer to faithfulness, while in opposition the initial verse of the lament section refers to rejection (89:1–2, 19, 38, 49). The second theme of each section is David as servant (89:3, 20, 39, 50–51), and so on. Indeed, Kirk comments on the significance of this structure several times.³⁴

However, Kirk limits his observation of the parallelism to the first two sections and does not include the third section in his interpretation. Yet the correspondences are sometimes stronger between the second and third sections than between the first and second sections. For example, between verses 5, 22, and 41 the stronger correspondence is between enemies unable to outwit or humble (89:22) and enemies plundering and neighbours scorning (89:41); and between verses 6, 23, and 42 the stronger resonance is between enemies crushed and struck down (89:23) and enemies exalted and rejoicing (89:42). The third section, therefore, should not be discounted in the interpretation of the second section as it is sometimes more strongly linked to it than the first section. Moreover, any early Jewish or Christian reader of the Psalm who would notice the correspondence between the first two sections would also reasonably be expected to notice the correspondence between the second and third sections.

The pertinent parallelism for this study is the theme of God’s extensive dominion over the heavens and earth, including stilling the waves and crushing Rahab/chaos in 89:9–12.³⁵ Kirk and Young rightly see this as mirrored in 89:25.³⁶ However, their suggestion that this mirroring can be read as implying YHWH-like power over the sea and rivers for the human king is less plausible. This goes against the logic of the parallelism within the Psalm which does not promise any other miraculous power to David but only that God will faithfully grant success in the very human actions expected of a king, namely war (89:22–24) and procreation of heirs (89:29).

While Kraus asserts, regarding 89:25, that “Perfections of power which only Yahweh possesses are transferred to the ‘servant of God,’” he qualifies this immediately with, “In this way the conception of the king’s worldly dominion is suggested.”³⁷ Tanner is surely correct to interpret Ps 89:25 alongside 1 Chr

³³ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 406–407; John Goldingay, *Psalms: Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 665.

³⁴ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 248–249, 435.

³⁵ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II 51–100*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 313–314; James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 284; But see Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 409, who argue Rahab should here be read as “Egypt.”

³⁶ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 336.

³⁷ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 209.

18:1–6, where David expands his kingdom from the coastal Philistine territory to the Euphrates River, and Ps 80:11, which describes Israel’s territory extending from the sea to the river.³⁸ In terms of messianic texts, Zech 9:10 and Ps 72:8 specifically use the language of river and sea to define the messianic king’s territorial authority, not his miraculous power.³⁹ These texts thus predispose scriptural language of river and seas to be references to messianic rule over land. For a scripturally literate early Jew to read otherwise is not impossible, but would be against the grain.

Michael Kok, in defence of Kirk and Young’s argument, dismisses the view that Psalm 89:25 is simply about earthly power: “It still seems to me that Ps 89:9–10 sets the context in the ancient Near Eastern combat myth where the celestial potentate subdues the forces of chaos symbolized in the raging waters and establishes order.”⁴⁰ But this is to fail to note the clear change of context and language between the three sections of the Psalm. Following the parallelism to the third section of the Psalm, Ps 89:25 finds its own mirror in the lament of 89:44, which does not lament natural disasters, exposure to bad weather, or an inability to cross natural water obstacles. Rather, it laments the loss of sovereignty, that is, the throne being taken away from David’s line.⁴¹

Recognising the thematic parallelism between 89:25 and 44 provides an unforced interpretation through all three main sections, and suggests that 89:25, “I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers,” is simply and straightforwardly to be understood as referring to the extent of a human king’s mundane sovereignty over territory marked by the sea on one border and a river on the other, not to miracle working power.⁴² The image is of the king’s reach, the extent of his arm. Within his territory his sovereignty is total, just as God is sovereign over the heavens and earth (Ps 89:11). Moreover, the previous extent of the kingdom of David is restored to Israel. It is in this way, I would argue, that the Psalm was most likely to be read and hence why there is no evidence of it being read in terms of miracle power for the messiah in early Jewish literature.

I must respectfully disagree, then, with Kirk when he writes, “These very functions of ruling the world on God’s behalf, including ... raging waters,

³⁸ Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 682.

³⁹ Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 572; Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 387–388.

⁴⁰ Kok, “Marking a Difference,” 115.

⁴¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 687; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 412.

⁴² So Dahood, *Psalms II 51–100*, 317; Mays, *Psalms*, 285; Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 678–679. While, against the majority view, Hossfeld and Zenger state “There is not so much thought of metaphorical statements about the geographical extension of governance” but this verse is “a mythical way of saying the king dominates chaos”, the effect is still that the king will imitate God’s subdual of chaotic forces through his military subdual of forces which threaten his kingdom, not that he will have miraculous power (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 410).

is part and parcel with the idealized portraits of Davidic kingship that we see in ... the lyrical anticipations of Psalm 89.⁴³ Rather, I conclude that Ps 89:25 does not provide evidence of, or reason for, a Second Temple Jewish association of a Davidic messiah with the ability to control the sea in the way that Jesus does in his miracles.

5. Evidence of Human Power over Water from Sirach 50

A further suggestion made by Kirk is that “What Psalm 89 anticipates for a future Davidide, Sirach 50 ascribes to an idealized high priest.”⁴⁴ Following Fletcher-Louis he argues that the priest’s “creation of the bronze sea” was a re-enactment of the third day of creation and thus sees the priest, Simon son of Onias, acting as the warrior-creator God defeating the chaotic waters.⁴⁵ The specific verse interpreted thus is Sir 50:3. In context it reads:

Sir 50	Greek	NETS
1	Σιμων Ονιου υἱός ἱερεὺς ὁ μέγας ὃς ἐν ζωῇ αὐτοῦ ὑπέρραψεν οἶκον καὶ ἐν ἡμέραις αὐτοῦ ἐστερέωσεν ναόν	Simon son of Onias was the great priest, he who in his life repaired a house and in his days fortified a shrine.
2	καὶ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ ἐθεμελιώθη ὕψος διπλῆς ἀνάλημμα ὑψηλὸν περιβόλου ἱεροῦ	And by him the height of the courtyard was founded, a high retaining structure of the temple enclosure.
3	ἐν ἡμέραις αὐτοῦ ἐλατομήθη ἀποδοχεῖον ὑδάτων λάκκος ὡσεὶ θαλάσσης τὸ περίμετρον	In his days a cistern for water was quarried, a reservoir like the circumference of a sea.
4	ὁ φροντίζων τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ πτώσεως καὶ ἐνισχύσας πόλιν ἐν πολιορκήσῃ	He who gave heed to his people out of calamity and strengthened the city in a siege,

Note the words I have highlighted in bold: στερεώω-strengthened, ἀνάλημμα-fortified wall, ἐνισχύω-strengthen and πολιορκήσις-siege.⁴⁶ These are all terms that

⁴³ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 441.

⁴⁴ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 125.

⁴⁵ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 125; Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, “The Cosmology of P and Theological Anthropology in the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira,” in *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture*, vol. 1, Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity 9 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 69–113, at 102.

⁴⁶ In the LXX, for στερεώω compare 1 Macc 9:62, 10:50; for ἀνάλημμα, 2 Chron 32:5; for ἐνισχύω, Judg 3:12; 2 Sam 22:40; and for πολιορκήσις, compare 4 Kgdms 18:9; Isa 1:8; 9:21; 37:9. Note πολιορκήσις is the verbal noun of πολιορκέω. See further T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Louvain: Peeters, 2009), 573.

serve to set a context of martial reinforcement.⁴⁷ So Kirk and Fletcher-Louis are correct to argue that Simon is portrayed as a warrior. However, confusion is created by identifying the cistern of 50:3 as the bronze laver of the temple in order to relate it to the temple imagery found in Genesis 1. In the context of martial fortification it can be nothing less than a cistern for storing water in the event of a siege, which interpretation has the added advantage of being what the Greek of 50:3 describes.⁴⁸ Indeed, far from being “bronze” the cistern is hewn from rock (*λατομέω*) and the reference to sea (*θάλασσα*) is simply a hyperbolic description of its great size.⁴⁹ What Simon’s cistern (*ἀποδοχείον ὑδάτων*, מקוה, 50:3) does clearly relate to is the cistern (*κρήνη*, מקוה, 48:18) built in Hezekiah’s fortification of Jerusalem recounted in Sir 48:17–18.⁵⁰

That said, even if one were to follow Kirk and Fletcher-Louis in their interpretation of Sir 50:3 it would only be depicting Simon playing God’s role in, to use Kirk’s words, the “dramatic re-enactment” or “microcosm” of the temple worship, something ordained by God for the priests to do.⁵¹ The microcosmic re-enactment of cultic worship is a non-miraculous human activity. This hardly provides a paradigm of idealised humanity into which the depiction of Jesus by Mark, actually taming the chaotic sea with his powerful

⁴⁷ See translation and commentary in Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, vol. 39, AYB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 546–550, which agrees with this reading of the text and with the interpretation of water as a reservoir.

⁴⁸ Notably, textual variants and other traditions are in agreement with this basic sense, see Joseph Ziegler, *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*, 2nd ed., vol. 12, 2 Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 357; J. H. A. Hart, ed., *Ecclesiasticus, the Greek Text of Codex 248: Edited with a Textual Commentary and Prolegomena* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22; Victor Morla, *Los manuscritos hebreos de Ben Sira: traducción y notas* (Estella Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2012), 336–337.

⁴⁹ This is not to contradict Fletcher-Louis’ wider thesis which at 44 pages is too large and complex to address here. However, he does assert that “both the Hebrew and Greek [texts of Sirach 50] are clearly organised along the lines of the Priestly creation-Tabernacle heptadic structure. This is more pronounced in the Greek text.” Consequently, I have restricted my analysis here to the Greek text as the presumably stronger version for Kirk’s case. Fletcher-Louis, “The Cosmology of P,” 94.

⁵⁰ “The protection from capture and defense against the enemies by Simeon recall the time of Hezekiah, a figure from history who is uppermost in our minds because of the many lexical parallels that Ben Sira draws. Ben Sira’s portrayal of Hezekiah is his longest praise of a ‘Father’ apart from the priests Aaron and Simeon himself, and therefore should probably be considered of some importance.” So, James K. Aitken, “Biblical Interpretation as Political Manifesto: Ben Sira in His Seleucid Setting,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 51 (2000): 191–208, at 197. The same point is made by Crispin Fletcher-Louis, “The High Priest in Ben Sira” in *Atonement: Jewish and Christian Origins*, ed. Max Botner, Justin Harrison Duff, and Simon Durr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 89–111, esp. 102.

⁵¹ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 127.

word or walking across the water as if on land, can fit. Rather, Simon son of Onias is depicted in Sir 5:1–4 as fortifying the temple and digging a reservoir against the prospect of a siege, an impressive, admirable, but non-miraculous, human undertaking.

6. The Paradigm of Water Miracle Texts

However, despite disregarding Ps 89:25 and Sir 50:3 as pertinent data for discussing the Christology of the Markan sea miracles, might Kirk and Young's proposal regarding human figures with power over water still stand on the other texts mentioned, that is, Josephus' account of Theudas and the scriptural water miracles? Are not the sea miracles ascribed to Jesus simply variants upon the theme of miraculous human control over water begun with Moses' parting of the Reed/Red Sea?

On the contrary, Kirk and Young's account of early Jewish texts reveal a paradigm of human power over water which is surprising in its strict repetition. Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha all perform essentially the same miracle, and there is little development, only a change of narrative and geographical context.⁵² In each instance the miracle is presented as a one-off, with a specific purpose, and with no indication that it is a continuing ability of the prophet. Theudas was thus highly unoriginal in his stated intention as he is closely following the exact form of water miracles recounted in the tradition before him.⁵³

Texts not adduced by Kirk and Young also support this strict paradigm. In the *Lives of the Prophets* 3:7–9 we read a Jewish tradition where Ezekiel made “the water stop” (ἐποίησεν σῆναι τὸ ὕδωρ) of the river Chebar so that the people could escape the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans who tried to follow were drowned (οἱ τολμήσαντες τῶν ἐχθρῶν ἐπιδιώξαι κατεποντίσθησαν). The echoes of the Exodus are clear.

In Isaiah 11:15 and 4 Ezra 13:44, 47, there is an eschatological expectation that Israel's God will stop the waters for his people to cross, as in the Exodus. However, given the model for this expectation is the scriptural miracle narratives, all of which involve a human figure, it is easy to see how a messianic claimant could take it upon themselves to perform such a miracle. While Theudas never got the chance to attempt his dividing of the Jordan, in the fifth century CE, an enigmatic character named Fiskis, or Moses of Crete,

⁵² Exod 14:15–25; Josh 3; 1 Kgs 2:8, 14, respectively.

⁵³ Josephus also records another false prophet, “the Egyptian,” who promises a re-enactment of Joshua 6, substituting the walls of Jerusalem for Jericho (*Ant.* 20.169–71; cf. also *J.W.* 2.258–60; 6.283–87). In general, there is evidence of a pattern of aspirant messianic prophets who promised to reproduce scriptural miracles as signs of their “credibility” and “indicated to observers that the drama of salvation was underway.” Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 217–219; see also P. W. Barnett, “The Jewish Sign Prophets – A.D. 40–70: Their Intentions and Origin,” *NTS* 27 (1981): 679–697.

serves as another example of this paradigm in action. Having claimed himself to be Moses *redivivus* and a forerunner to the Messiah, in ca. 431 CE he reportedly convinced a large number of Cretan Jews to cast themselves into the Mediterranean Sea in expectation that they would walk back triumphantly to Palestine on dry land. The dry land did not appear and the surviving Jews had to be rescued by the Christians who had gathered to watch (Socrates of Constantinople, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII 38; John of Nikiû, *Chronicle*, LXXXVI.1–11).⁵⁴

There is thus evidence that, while messianic expectation could and did vary greatly within early Judaism, the act of parting the sea/river to walk across on dry ground was so imprinted on the Jewish religious consciousness that when it was repeated in different traditions, prophesied for the future, or imitated by would-be messiahs, the paradigm was strictly adhered to and not varied apart from incidentals like place and persons. This adherence is even seen in one variant of *Pesiq. Rab.* 36:1 where *Parma MS 1240* contains the additional comment, presumably echoing Joshua 3, “And even the sea and rivers will stop flowing to make it possible for the scattered children of Israel to go to the Land of Israel without let or hindrance.”⁵⁵

By contrast Jesus’ sea miracles bear a much weaker resemblance to those water miracles of Moses, Joshua and Elisha. The water is not parted, nor do the prophet and people walk across on the ground beneath. Moreover, rather than a preordained miracle (like Moses, Joshua and Elisha) or a premeditated miracle (like Theudas and Moses of Crete), Jesus’ sea miracles are described as spontaneous responses to the circumstances (only Ezekiel in *Liv. Pro.* 3:7–9 appears similar in terms of spontaneity). When read against the background of the Jewish texts which describe human agents performing water miracles, I would argue that what is being described by Mark in Jesus’s sea miracles portrays Jesus acting well outside of any Jewish expectation for a human figure. This is not to deny the possibility of elasticity and development within the paradigm of exalted human figures in early Judaism, especially in regard to taking on characteristics usually reserved for God. This is simply to observe that in the specific case of the water miracles such elasticity and development is conspicuous by its absence in any extant non-Christian early Jewish literature.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein, *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315–1791* (Pittsburgh: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 505–507; R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiû: Translated from Zotenberg’s Ethiopic Text* (London: William & Norgate, 1916), 103–104.

⁵⁵ Nemoy, *Pesikta Rabbati*, 2.678 n. 7. I mention this late text, only because it is adduced by Kirk as part of his argument.

⁵⁶ The Rabbinic examples of Onias/Honi (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.2.1 21; *m. Ta’an.* 3:8) and Gamaliel (b. B. Meš’a 59b–f), whatever else may be said about them, do not present themselves as parallels to Jesus’ water miracles. They are both examples, rather, of God answering the prayers of a righteous man. Neither perform a miracle themselves, but only witness one in answer to prayer.

Instead we have found a striking conformity to the scriptural pattern in the early Jewish sources.

7. Conclusion

While I agree with Kirk and Young that “Jesus’ mastery over the sea in Mark does not *necessarily* indicate that the author of Mark thus considers Jesus to be divine,”⁵⁷ I would disagree with them that Ps 89:25 or Sir 50:3 provides a plausible background for Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52. Thus, those texts employed by others in the early high Christology debate (e.g. Psalm 107, Jonah 1, Job 9:8), which have demonstrable lexical and thematic links with Mark 4:35–41 and 6:45–52, *prima facie* present as a more plausible and more significant background.⁵⁸ When considering the background of Mark’s presentation of Jesus, scriptural texts that are quoted or alluded within the Gospel passage in question must be considered the most relevant. That those scriptural texts describe, not a human, but God having control over the waters must be recognised as significant, even if the precise implications of this are still moot.⁵⁹ Furthermore, if my analysis of Psalm 89 is correct, it is yet another Jewish scriptural text which represents the stilling of storms as God’s unique prerogative (89:9). In the psalm this prerogative is specifically distinct from any power granted to the kingly messiah.⁶⁰

Many wonderful things were predicted of and expected for the human Davidic messiah; walking on water or calming storms were not among them. There is no evidence that the water miracles of Mark’s Gospel fit within an already established Jewish messianic paradigm. Indeed, while “Mark’s Jesus is an unpredictable combination of affirmation, denial, and transformation of... early Jewish messianic expectations,”⁶¹ in the Markan sea miracles Jesus displays power unexpected of any human figure. To coin a phrase, he blows those expectations out of the water.

⁵⁷ Kirk and Young, “I Will Set His Hand to the Sea,” 340. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ A list of studies specifically on the scriptural background to these texts would include, Robert Meye, “Psalm 107 as ‘Horizon’ for Interpreting the Miracle Stories of Mark 4:35–8:26,” in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of George E. Ladd* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 1–13; Kent Brower, “‘Who Then Is This?’ - Christological Questions in Mark 4:35–5:43,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 81 (2009): 291–305; Joel Edmund Anderson, “Jonah in Mark and Matthew: Creation, Covenant, Christ, and the Kingdom of God,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42 (2012): 172–186; Dane Ortlund, “The Old Testament Background and Eschatological Significance of Jesus Walking on the Sea (Mark 6:45–52),” *Neotestamentica* 46 (2012): 319–337; Jonathan Rivett Robinson, *Markan Typology: Miracle, Scripture and Christology in Mark 4:35–6:45*, LNTS 678 (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 81–100.

⁵⁹ Note particularly Kirk’s discussion of Richard Hays (*A Man Attested by God*, 23–26).

⁶⁰ Pace Bauckham, “Confessing the Cosmic Christ,” 164.

⁶¹ Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 290.