

THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND JOHN'S PASSION NARRATIVE IN LIGHT OF JEWISH ROYAL MESSIANISM

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JOHANNINE SCHOLARS ARE INCREASINGLY INTERESTED in interpreting the Fourth Gospel within the Roman imperial context. A number of recent publications emphasize that John's portrayal of Jesus as king is politically subversive, and they point out that this portrayal endeavors to confront Roman imperial ideology. Richey argues that "on both a structural and a lexical level, the final redactor(s) of the Fourth Gospel made a conscious effort to address issues raised for the Johannine community by the Augustan ideology."¹ Carter asserts that "John's Gospel with its 'rhetoric of distance' is a text of imperial negotiation."² And Thatcher contends that "imperial terms and images were foundational to John's Christology, and that his thinking about Christ was always informed by the premise that Jesus is greater than Caesar."³ These three studies, published in the last few years, witness to a growing scholarly interest in John's political perspective and the critical role of Roman imperial ideology as a key to understanding Johannine Christology.

Without denying the insights offered by the imperial approach to John's royal Christology, a correct construal of the Johannine

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¹ Lance B. Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2007), xix.

² Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: Clark, 2008), ix.

³ Tom Thatcher, *Greater Than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 11.

kingship motif must give due weight to the stated intent of the Fourth Gospel, namely, to induce faith in Jesus as "the Christ," that is, the Messiah (20:31). In this Gospel the majority of kingship terms (e.g., βασιλεύς and βασιλεία) are in the trial and crucifixion accounts (18:33, 36 [three times], 37 [two times], 39; 19:3, 12, 14, 15 [two times], 19, 21 [two times]), accounts that exhibit sundry points of contact with Rome. Given John's explicit concern about Jesus' messianic identity, it is reasonable to suppose that these contact points serve primarily a royal messianic purpose. This article seeks to demonstrate that the Johannine passion narrative's thematic and conceptual resonances with Roman imperial ideology serve to enhance the Christological depiction of the universal Messiah-King. By accentuating the universality of Jesus' kingship, these royal resonances reinforce the Johannine claim that the crucified Jesus is Israel's Messiah-King. The following sections survey biblical and postbiblical Jewish texts in which the royal Messiah is envisaged as enjoying worldwide ascendancy. Then the motif of Jesus' universal kingship in the Johannine passion narrative in light of this Jewish royal-messianic hope will be examined.⁴

THE UNIVERSALITY OF MESSIANIC KINGSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Undergirding the concept of the universality of messianic kingship is the Jewish conviction that Yahweh, who appointed the Messiah as His earthly viceroy, is the Sovereign of the cosmos. As the psalmist wrote, Yahweh is "a great King over all the earth" (Ps. 47:2; cf. v. 7) and He "reigns over the nations" (v. 8; cf. Jer. 10:7). In Psalm 22:28 the "kingdom" belongs to Yahweh, who "rules over all the nations." The concept of worldwide Davidic ascendancy is seen in several psalms.⁵

"You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession" (Ps. 2:7b-8).

⁴ For a fuller treatment of the Johannine kingship and cross motifs see the present writer's published dissertation, *The Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John: Jesus' Death as Corroboration of His Royal Messiahship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

⁵ Robert D. Rowe, *God's Kingdom and God's Son: The Background to Mark's Christology from Concepts of Kingship in the Psalms* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 38, 42-43; and Kenneth E. Pomykala, *The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism: Its History and Significance for Messianism* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 15-16.

“He [will] rule from sea to sea and from the [Euphrates] River to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 72:8).

“Let the nomads of the desert bow before him, and his enemies lick the dust. Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings bow down before him, [and] all nations serve him” (Ps. 72:9–11).

“I shall also set his hand on the sea and his right hand over the rivers” (Ps. 89:25).

“I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (Ps. 89:27).

“Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet” (Ps. 110:1).

“The Lord will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying, ‘Rule in the midst of Your enemies’” (Ps. 110:2).

Psalm 72:10–11 announces that the nations will stream to Zion to pay tribute to the king, whose dominance manifests Yahweh’s sovereignty on earth.⁶ The scope of the Davidic dynasty will be vast and global, as indicated in the four-directional geographical description in Psalm 72:8 (cf. Zech. 9:10).⁷ The author of Psalm 110 affirmed the divine promises regarding the Davidic monarchy and its king, who will subdue all his enemies and rule over them. The Davidic king’s military success will be achieved through the power of his God, who will enable the king to defeat his foes and expand his reign beyond Israel’s territory (cf. Ps. 110:1–2, 5–6). This expansion of Davidic authority is intimated in the symbolic description of God sending forth the monarch’s “scepter from Zion” (v. 2).

Micah 5:2–5a envisions the future restoration of Israel under the wise leadership of a shepherd-ruler. This Davidic ruler will be Yahweh’s instrument in reinstating His people and implementing

⁶ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Klaus Blatzer, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 216.

⁷ John Goldingay, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 2:388; and Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 178.

Yahweh's kingship over the renewed Israel.⁸ As declared in Micah 5:4, the ruler's dominion will be far-reaching, "to the ends of the earth."⁹ This belief pertaining to global Davidic authority is in keeping with Micah's eschatological vision that a glorious temple will stand in Zion (4:1–2), to which "many nations" (v. 2) will flock to worship the God of Israel.

Two texts in Isaiah affirm the universal jurisdiction of the (ideal) Davidic dynasty. The first is 10:33–11:10, where the "shoot" (חֹטֶר) or "branch" (נֶצֶחַ) from the stump of Jesse (11:1) links with the eschatological transformation of the whole earth (vv. 6–9), the ingathering of the nations (v. 10), the assembly of the dispersed of Israel and Judah (vv. 10–12; cf. 10:20–23), and the liberation of God's people from foreign subjugation (11:10–16).¹⁰ In 11:10 the "root" (שֹׁרֶשׁ) stands "as a signal" around which the people will rally. While the shoot/branch/root in 11:1 and 10 may symbolize a past or current Judahite king,¹¹ it seems more likely that the oracle in 10:33–11:10 presages the future appearance of a Davidic king. This is more likely because the Davidic regimes did not rise to the utopian condition declared in this oracle.

Another relevant text is Isaiah 55:3–5. A number of commentators interpret the third-person masculine singular suffix in the first-person Qal perfect נִתְחַיֵּי ("I have made him") in verse 4 as conveying a collective sense.¹² Thus this verse speaks of the democratization of God's covenantal promises and the transfer of these promises from David's dynasty to the people of Israel. Although this reading is probable, it is important to observe that the references to God's "everlasting covenant" (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) and "mercies" (חַסְדֵי) at the end of 55:3 call to mind the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:15–16, where "mercy" (חַסְדֵי) and "everlasting" (עוֹלָם) also

⁸ Francis I. Anderson and David N. Freedman, *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 463; and Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailer, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 97.

⁹ Hans W. Wolff, *Micah: A Commentary*, trans. Gary Stansell (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 146.

¹⁰ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 267.

¹¹ John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 213; and John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 174.

¹² John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40–55* (London: Clark, 2006), 2:371–73; and Pomykala, *The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism*, 39.

occur. Isaiah 55:3 includes the final mention of “David” in Isaiah and seems to evoke the earlier descriptions of the ideal Davidic ruler in chapters 7, 9, and 11. While there is some measure of democratization of the Davidic dynastic promise in 55:1–5, it is unlikely that the Davidic hope has been totally abandoned in Isaiah 40–55.¹³ Gentry argues that “David” in 55:3 does not denote the historical David but the typologically new David (cf. Hos 3:5). In Gentry’s contention, the phrase *חַסְדֵי דָוִד*—“the mercies of David” in Isaiah 55:13—should be understood as mercies provided by David rather than as mercies given to David,¹⁴ and thus Isaiah 55:3–5 announces the future coming of the Davidic king.¹⁵ All these considerations suggest that the suffix in *נַחֲמֵי* (v. 4) most likely refers to Israel as well as this Davidic king, who is regarded as being in solidarity with God’s people. If the new David is in view in verses 3–5, the prophetic designation of this figure (along with Israel) as a “witness” (*עֵד*) to the nations and a “leader” (*נָגִיד*) and a “commander” (*מְצַוֶּה*) of them, as well as the description of the nation(s) “running” (*רָוַץ*) to him, point to his international role.

Ezekiel 17:22–24 records an allegory that may speak of the future advent of a universal ruler.¹⁶ As announced in verses 22–23, Yahweh will take a shoot “from the lofty top of the cedar” (v. 22) and plant it on “the high mountain of Israel” (v. 23; cf. 20:40; 34:14). This “cedar shoot” will bear fruit and become “a stately cedar,” under which “birds of every kind will nest” and find shelter (17:23). As a result all trees in the field will realize that Yahweh topples the tall tree and elevates “the low tree” and He dries up “the green tree” and makes “the dry tree flourish” (v. 24). In light of the application of similar cedar-language to the royal family of Judah in verses 1–15, this “sprig” in verses 22–23 most likely symbolizes the future Davidic king (cf. Isa. 11:1).¹⁷ The depiction then of all birds taking shelter in this thriving cedar (Ezek. 17:23) signifies this king’s worldwide ascendancy.

¹³ In Isaiah 40–55 David is mentioned by name only once (in 55:3).

¹⁴ Peter J. Gentry, “Rethinking the ‘Sure Mercies of David’ in Isaiah 55:3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 279–304.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁶ In Ezekiel 34 and 37 the Davidic shepherd-king functions mainly as Yahweh’s representative in presiding over the reunited southern and northern kingdoms.

¹⁷ Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 226; and Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 1–24*, trans. Ronald E. Clements (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 368.

The Book of Zechariah makes two references to the Davidic "Branch" (3:8; 6:12; cf. Jer. 23:5; 33:15)¹⁸ and prophesies the arrival of an end-time "king" in Zion (Zech. 9:9–10). The oracle in 9:9–10 announces that the end-time king's "dominion" will be "from sea to sea and from the [Euphrates] River to the ends of the earth" (cf. Gen. 15:18; Pss. 2:8; 72:8).¹⁹ The phrase "from sea to sea" occurs in Psalm 72:8 in association with the global realm of the idealized Davidic empire. In addition this phrase is found in Amos 8:12, which predicts that many people "from sea to sea and from the north even to the east" will earnestly seek the words of Yahweh. In line with the global language of Psalm 72:8 and Amos 8:12, the "sea" references in Zechariah 9:10 accentuate the universality of the end-time king's rule.²⁰

Two texts in the Pentateuch merit attention. The first is Genesis 49:8–12, which records Jacob's blessing to Judah. In verse 10 the term שִׁלֹחַ ("Shiloh") most likely links with the parallel words "scepter" and "staff," and in keeping with their royal denotation they point to a future king from the tribe of Judah. The prepositional term לְ at the beginning of the last clause in verse 10 probably refers back to the preceding שִׁלֹחַ, who will win "the obedience of the peoples."²¹ The plural word עַמִּים ("peoples") in this phrase "probably refers to non-Israelite nations, not just Israelite clans."²² Thus Genesis 49:8–12 portrays the future advent of an international ruler.

Another text in the Pentateuch is Numbers 24:17–19, where "star" and "scepter" symbolize a triumphant king (v. 17). This figure appears as a powerful warrior annihilating Israel's adversaries in the Transjordan. Verse 19 can be rendered, "Jacob shall have dominion" or "Jacob shall rule his enemies."²³ Or for its subject

¹⁸ Since Jeremiah did not explicitly speak of the Branch's universal reign, this article does not analyze the two prophetic texts (Jer. 23:5; 33:15) that refer to this figure.

¹⁹ David L. Peterson, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 60.

²⁰ Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 137.

²¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 229–30; cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 476–78.

²² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 478.

²³ Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 203; and

verse 19 may hark back to royal prophecy of the “star” and “scepter” in verse 17. Thus the king will lead God’s people to victory and “rule over,” that is, “have dominion over,” all the nations (v. 19).²⁴

THE UNIVERSALITY OF MESSIANIC KINGSHIP IN LATE SECOND-TEMPLE JUDAISM

The Jewish community that produced the *Psalms of Solomon* (late first century B.C.) propounded the double assertions of universal divine kingship (cf. 2:30; 8:8; 15:12) and universal messianic kingship.²⁵ The seventeenth poem places emphasis on the perpetual character of God’s kingship or kingdom (17:1–3, 46). This emphasis lends substance to the seventeenth psalm’s depiction of the Davidic Messiah as a worldwide king, who presides over Israel as well as the nations. On the one hand the Messiah will cleanse Jerusalem from the Gentiles (v. 22), destroy the unlawful nations (vv. 23–24), and subjugate the Gentiles to serve under his yoke (v. 30; cf. v. 28). On the other hand the Messiah will probably incorporate the (reverent) Gentiles into the eschatological people of God. The Gentiles will come “from the ends of the earth” to Jerusalem to behold the glory of God and the Messiah (v. 31). Thus the Messiah of *Psalms of Solomon* 17 is a universal ruler.

In Qumran eschatology the royal Messiah performs primarily the militaristic function of combating the enemies of God’s people and protecting them. In CD-A VII, 20 (// 4Q266 frg. 3 III), the Prince is connected with Amos’s prophecy of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom (Amos 9:11) and the Balaam oracle pertaining to a future royal figure (Num. 24:17). Line 20 reveals that the “scepter” in Numbers 24:17 is a token of the Prince.²⁶ Because of the royal ideology of Numbers 24:17, this Qumran text probably envisions the Prince as a triumphant warrior slaughtering his foes and

Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 180.

²⁴ Ronald B. Allen, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 910; cf. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 427–28.

²⁵ For the date of the *Psalms of Solomon* see Robert B. Wright, *The Psalms of Solomon: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text* (London: Clark, 2007); and George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A History and Literary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 238–47.

²⁶ The Qumran text and the English translation are from Florentino G. Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition*, 2 vols. (New York: Brill, 1997–1998).

realizing the hope for restored Davidic rule. In another Qumran scroll, 1QSb (col. V), the Prince appears as a victorious combatant defeating all his adversaries. Moreover, God will establish the Prince as a scepter so that all earthly rulers will be subject to him (V, 27–28).²⁷

The opening lines of 4Q246 describe a seer falling before an enthroned king, who is terrified by the disastrous events that he has seen in a vision. The remaining lines in column I offer the exposition of this vision, which announces the rise of this king's heir. In line 1 of column II all the earthly inhabitants hail this royal heir as the "Son of God" and the "Son of the Most High." Most likely this Son of God is messianic, because of 4Q246's similarities to certain texts in the Davidic traditions (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:5–14; Isa. 10:20–11:16) as well as with the Lukan infancy narrative.²⁸ Thus the depiction of the Son of God reigning on the whole earth (I, 7–8; II, 7–9) points to His global dominion.

In the *Similitudes of Enoch*, the Messiah is God's heavenly viceroy who has universal authority and royal prerogatives. As revealed in *1 Enoch* 46:3–5 God confers unparalleled ascendancy on the messianic Son of Man, who is authorized to "overturn the kings from their thrones and their kingdoms" (v. 5).²⁹ In chapter 48 the Son of Man is described as the "the light of the nations" and the "hope" of the distressed (v. 4). All people will fall before the Messiah and worship him and give homage to "the Lord of the Spirits" (v. 5). The notion of worldwide messianic dominance is suggested in *1 Enoch* 62, where earthly authorities are prostrate before the Son of Man and pay tribute to him (v. 9; cf. 63:11).

In the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 the author of *4 Ezra* underlined the Messiah's twofold martial mission of rescuing the remnant of Israel and vanquishing the Romans. In

²⁷ See also 4Q161 frgs. 8–10, III, 21–22.

²⁸ See Johannes Zimmermann, *Messianische Texte aus Qumran: Königliche, priesterliche und prophetische Messiasvorstellungen in den Schriftfunden von Qumran* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1998), 159; and Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 108–9.

However, Fitzmyer and Schreiber object to a messianic identification of the "Son of God" in 4Q246 (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 105; and Stefan Schreiber, *Gesalbter und König: Titel und Konzeptionen der königlichen Gesalbtenwartung in frühjüdischen und urchristlichen Schriften* [New York: de Gruyter, 2000], 506).

²⁹ The English translation of *1 Enoch* is from George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

chapter 13 the Messiah is portrayed as destroying Israel's enemies with the "fiery breath" (= the law; 13:38) from his mouth (13:26–27; cf. Isa. 11:4) and taking his triumphant stand on Mount Zion (4 *Ezra* 13:35–36). Bryan claims that the description of the Messiah as a "conqueror (13:8–12) and gatherer of the Gentiles and exiles (13:12–13) suggests his possession of royal dominion."³⁰ If the royal figure in 4 *Ezra* 5:6–7 is messianic, his description as ruling over the earthly dwellers is suggestive of global messianic kingship.³¹

To summarize this section, various late Second-Temple Jewish writings anticipate the appearance of a worldwide messianic king whose arrival is an eschatological event with global ramifications.

JESUS' "UNIVERSAL" KINGSHIP IN THE TRIAL AND CRUCIFIXION ACCOUNTS

This section analyzes features in the Johannine narrative of Jesus' trial (18:28–19:16a) and in part of the account of Jesus' crucifixion (19:16b–22) that are germane to the theme of universal messianic kingship.

THE TRIAL ACCOUNT (18:28–19:16a)

All four Gospels report the Roman tribunal of Jesus (Matt. 27:11–31a; Mark 15:2–20a; Luke 23:1–25; John 18:28–19:16a), but the Johannine account is the most detailed and is located at the central position in the passion narrative. The trial account contains most of the kingship terms in the Fourth Gospel (18:33, 36 [three times], 37 [two times], 39; 19:3, 12, 14, 15 [two times]) and refers to Caesar three times (19:12 [two times], 15). Most scholars divide the trial narrative into seven scenes, which oscillate between outside and inside Pilate's praetorium.³² The following table delineates the seven scenes in John's passion story and highlights the kingship-related expressions in the scenes.

³⁰ Steven M. Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions of Judgment and Restoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 195 n. 26.

³¹ On a royal-messianic reading of 4 *Ezra* 5:6–7 see Jonathan Moo, "A Messiah 'Whom the Many Do Not Know'? Reading 4 *Ezra* 5:6–7," *Journal of Theological Studies* 58 (2007): 525.

³² E.g., Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1097; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1:758.

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Main Characters</i>	<i>Kingship-Related Expressions</i>
1	18:28–32	Outside	Pilate and “the Jews”	(Nil)
2	18:33–38a	Inside	Pilate and Jesus	“the King of the Jews” (18:33) “my kingdom” (18:36, three times) “king” (18:37, two times)
3	18:38b–40	Outside	Pilate and the Jews	“the King of the Jews” (18:39)
4	19:1–3	Inside	Pilate, the soldiers, and Jesus	“a crown of thorns” (19:2) “a purple robe” (19:2) “Hail, King of the Jews” (19:3)
5	19:4–7	Outside	Pilate, the Jews, and Jesus	“the crown of thorns” (19:5) “the purple robe” (19:5) “the Son of God” (19:7)
6	19:8–11	Inside	Pilate and Jesus	“authority” (19:10 [two times], 11)
7	19:12–16a	Outside	Pilate, the Jews, and Jesus	“friend of Caesar” (19:12) “king” (19:12) “opposes Caesar” (19:12) “your King” (19:14) “your King” (19:15) “We have no king but Caesar” (19:15)

Scene 1 (18:28–32) lifts the curtain of the Johannine story of Jesus’ trial and passion. Although there is no explicit kingship term in this scene, the presence of Pilate, a representative of Rome,

signifies the presence of the imperial power. Verse 32b alludes to the crucifixion of Jesus and the phrasing (“signifying by what kind of death He was about to die,” σημαίνων ποίῳ ἤμελλεν ἀποθνήσκειν) is identical to the wording in 12:33, which comments on Jesus’ declaration that His being “lifted up” from the earth will draw “all” (πάντας) to Him.³³ This declaration accords with the universal implication of the first “lifting up” statement in 3:14–15. As this statement indicates, the elevation of the Son of Man will effect the bestowal of eternal life on “whoever” (πᾶς) believes. By echoing these “lifting up” sayings, the Johannine aside in 18:32 adds force to the universal significance of the death of Jesus as “King of the Jews” (v. 33).

Scene 2 (18:33–38a) recounts the first dialogue between Pilate and Jesus inside the governor’s palace. This scene includes six occurrences of the terms βασιλεύς and βασιλεία (vv. 33, 36 [three times], 37 [two times]). On the lips of a Roman official the epithets “King of the Jews” (v. 33; cf. 18:39; 19:3) and “king” (18:37) are laden with political connotations. In His rejoinder to Pilate (18:36), Jesus did not directly say whether He is a βασιλεύς, but He repeatedly spoke of His βασιλεία. Thus Jesus implicitly affirmed that He is a “king” (18:37), but at the same time He indicated that He is not the kind of king Pilate had in mind.³⁴ In 18:36 Jesus further asserted that His “kingdom is not of this world.” This assertion does not mean that Jesus is king only in the heavenly realm. De la Potterie is correct when he states that the kingship of Jesus “is sovereignty in this world” and “it does not depend upon the powers of this world and is not inspired by them.”³⁵

In the Fourth Gospel the word βασιλεία (“kingdom”) occurs five times and is mentioned only by Jesus—three times regarding His kingdom (18:36) and twice regarding the kingdom of God (3:3, 5). The preceding sections have demonstrated that in the biblical and extrabiblical Jewish traditions, the royal Messiah is often depicted as enjoying global dominion. This idea of a worldwide messianic rule stands on the ingrained beliefs that Yahweh is King of the universe and that the Messiah is His chosen agent. Thus it is reasonable to infer that the kingdom of Jesus, the Messiah-King, is universal.

³³ See Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus: The Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus according to John*, trans. Dom G. Murray (New York: Alba, 1989), 64.

³⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 594.

³⁵ De la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus*, 68.

In scene 3 (18:38b–40) Pilate came out of his headquarters and announced Jesus' innocence to "the Jews." Citing the Jewish custom of freeing a prisoner during Passover, the governor proposed to release Jesus, "King of the Jews" (v. 39). This proposal was immediately repulsed by the Jews, who asked for the release of the "robber" (ληστής) Barabbas (v. 40; cf. Matt. 27:16; Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19). The term ληστής is not in the Synoptic parallels, though it is used elsewhere in the Synoptics. In the Fourth Gospel it surfaces only in the trial scene (18:40) and the shepherd discourse (10:1, 8). Its reappearance in the trial scene has the effect of recalling the shepherd discourse, where the "robber" is contrasted with Jesus, the good Shepherd. Thus this word strengthens the passion narrative's intratextual linkage with the shepherd discourse, where the shepherd's death is instrumental in establishing a unified, multi-ethnic flock (cf. 10:16–17).

Scene 4 (19:1–3) unfolds Jesus' ironic coronation by the Roman soldiers, who put "a crown of thorns" (v. 2) on His head, dressed Him in "a purple robe" (v. 2), and sarcastically lauded him as "King of the Jews" (v. 3). In antiquity a crown and purple garments were emblems of royal dignity. For example Jonathan Maccabeus received the gifts of "a purple robe and a golden crown" from king Alexander (1 Macc. 10:20). According to Josephus the messianic pretender Simon bar Giora from Gerasa was wearing "a purple cloak" when he surrendered to the Romans.³⁶ The soldiers' derisive praise points to their scornful attitude behind the "salutation" of Jesus as King.³⁷ The mock coronation of Jesus by the *Gentile* soldiers is an "oblique" affirmation of His universal kingship.

In scene 5 (19:4–7) Pilate pronounced his initial verdict on Jesus before "the Jews." Two features in this scene are noteworthy. First, the two royal emblems—"crown of thorns" and "purple robe"—appear again in verse 5 to further augment Jesus' identity as King (cf. v. 2). Matthew and Mark refer to the crown only once in the mocking scene, and they mention that the soldiers took off Jesus' purple cloak after they ridiculed Him (Matt. 27:31; Mark 15:20). In John's Gospel Jesus stood before His accusers with both the crown and the purple attire on Him, and no mention is made of when they were removed. Second, Pilate's words "Behold, the

³⁶ Josephus, *The Jewish Wars* 7:29–36. See also 2 Maccabees 4:38; Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 17:273, 280; and idem, *The Jewish Wars*, 2:57. See Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*, 305, 314 n. 34.

³⁷ Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 58.

Man!" (John 19:5) may entail a theological connotation. Most likely his speeches to "the Jews"—"Behold, the Man!" (v. 5) and "Behold, your King!" (v. 14)—are parallel and hence the former speech "functions as a mock royal acclamation."³⁸ Further the words "Behold, the Man!" may allude to the prominent Christological designation "Son of Man" (3:14; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:31).³⁹ The fact that the Son of Man will receive perpetual and worldwide dominance from God (Dan. 7:13) is suggestive of the Johannine interest in presenting the crucified Jesus as the universal Messiah-King.⁴⁰ This allusion in the passion account echoes the "lifting up" statements regarding Jesus' death as the Son of Man in the earlier narrative (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34). In particular, according to 12:32 the "lifting up" of Jesus (as the Son of Man; cf. v. 34) from the earth will lead to the drawing of all people to Him. This statement indicates that Jesus' death as the (royal-messianic) Son of Man is an event of international importance.

Scene 6 (19:8–11) opens with the Johannine notice of Pilate's fear. In verse 9 Pilate's question to Jesus regarding His provenance is met with Jesus' silence, which may function as "a tacit claim to superiority," since silence is "an appropriate response when challenged by the inferior."⁴¹ To coerce Jesus into compliance, Pilate boasted that he had "authority" (ἐξουσία) to release or crucify Jesus (v. 10). The term ἐξουσία surfaces eight times in the Fourth Gospel (1:12; 5:27; 10:18 [two times]; 17:2; 19:10 [two times], 11), including twice in the shepherd discourse and three times in the present

³⁸ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 2:1123.

³⁹ De la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus*, 105–6; and Francis J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man*, 2nd ed. (Rome: LAS, 1978), 202–7.

⁴⁰ In 19:7 "the Jews" indicted Jesus for claiming to be "the Son of God." This indictment probably included their charge that He committed blasphemy (cf. 5:17–18; 10:30–39), which deserved capital punishment according to Leviticus 24:16 (cf. *m. Sanh.* 7.5; *b. Sanh.* 43a; Mark 14:55–64). See also Köstenberger, *John*, 534; and Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 89. Köstenberger provides two examples in *Vita Apollonii* 1.21 and 4.44 with regard to "such fear on the part of a judge of one accused whom he came to recognize as a higher being" (*John*, 534 n. 66). Alternatively some scholars claim that the "Son of God" language in John 19:7 had a political tone for Pilate, on the grounds that since the time of Augustus, the Roman emperor in the first century (e.g., Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, and Domitian) was widely recognized as *divi filius*. As the adopted son of the deified Julius Caesar, Augustus was exalted as *Imperator Caesar divi filius Augustus* (see Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*, 307; and Lance B. Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John* [Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2007], 91–103).

⁴¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 260.

scene. In both 10:18 and 19:10 the two occurrences of ἐξουσία in each verse are placed in emphatic positions to give importance to the term. Up to scene 6 in the trial story, the reader has been told of the Father bequeathing authority (17:2; cf. 5:27) and "all things" (3:35; 13:3) to Jesus. These three passages (3:35; 13:3; 17:2) unanimously tell of the universal "authority" of Jesus over all humanity, a belief that links with the soteriological concepts of becoming God's children (1:12) and receiving eternal life (17:2) within the wider Johannine context. Abbott observes that the phrase "all flesh," which denotes the object of Jesus' "authority" in 17:2, is often employed in the Old Testament to describe "all animate nature" (e.g., Gen. 6:12, 17, 19; 7:15, 16; Isa. 40:5 [cited in Luke 3:6]; Joel 2:28 [cited in Acts 2:17]).⁴² When these Johannine and Old Testament texts are taken into consideration, the exchange between Jesus and Pilate on the topic of "authority" amounts to an implicit affirmation of Jesus' universal supremacy over all humanity and earthly dominion.

The final scene 7 (19:12–16a) includes four occurrences of the term βασιλεία, "king" (vv. 12, 14, 15 [two times]). The occurrence of this term again in the closing scene of the trial narrative hoists the kingship theme to its apex, a theme that pervades the whole story and climaxes in the chief priests' declaration in 19:15, "we have no king but Caesar." To persuade Pilate to crucify Jesus, the Jews reminded Pilate that if he released Jesus, who made Himself "King," the governor would fail to uphold the imperial interests and would fail to act in accord with his esteemed status as friend of Caesar (19:12). The Roman historian Suetonius spoke of the emperor's "friends," who enjoyed a special relationship to the imperial family (e.g., *Augustus* 35.1; 45.1; *Tiberius* 65.1; *Caligulus*, 19.2).⁴³ According to van Tilborg, a number of residents in Ephesus were honored as φιλόκαισαρ.⁴⁴ In the Johannine context the adherents of Jesus are referred to as His friends (15:13–16). Thus the procurator faced the dilemma of being a friend of either the Roman emperor or of Jesus, the true King. Since Caesar was viewed as the sovereign of not only the Italian and Mediterranean regions but also of the

⁴² Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary: A Comparison of the Words of the Fourth Gospel with Those of the Three* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1902), 100, §1592.

⁴³ Cf. Dominique Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorable Terms in the New Testament* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1947), 46–63.

⁴⁴ Sjeff van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus*, Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* (New York: Brill, 1996), 216. See also Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, 166–75.

whole world (cf. Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 8–13; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6:788–97; and Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2:179),⁴⁵ the contrast between Jesus and Caesar may function to enhance the Christological portrait of a crucified universal Messiah-King.

In his interlocutions with “the Jews” Pilate twice referred to Jesus as “your King” (19:14–15). These two references recall the royal epithet “King of the Jews” in 18:33 (scene 2), 18:39 (scene 3), and 19:3 (scene 4). In all these instances the speaker was either Pilate (18:33, 39; 19:14, 15) or the soldiers (19:3). The cumulative effect is ironic in that the representatives of Rome unwittingly acknowledged the kingship of Jesus and proclaimed Him as “the King of the Jews.” In their Johannine context these professions in the mouths of *Gentiles* implicitly affirm the crucified Jesus’ universal supremacy.

THE INSCRIPTION ON THE CROSS (19:16–22)

Turning to the Crucifixion narrative, the inscription “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews” (19:19), was written in three languages—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (v. 20). Verses 19 and 21 include the final occurrences of the title “King of the Jews” in the Fourth Gospel. Of the four Gospels only John employed the technical term τίτλον to denote the inscription on the cross. The words “the Nazarene,” in the inscription occur in the Fourth Gospel only in the passion narrative (18:5, 7; 19:19). The cognate word “Nazareth” is used twice in 1:45–46.⁴⁶ There Nathanael showed contempt for Jesus’ provenance from Nazareth, but he soon recognized His messianic status as the Son of God and the King of Israel (v. 49). Several scholars assert that the terms Ναζωραῖος and Ναζαρά are etymologically related to the Hebrew word נָצַר.⁴⁷ In the Old Testament this word is applied to the ideal Davidic king as anticipated in Isaiah 11:1, where “a shoot from the stem of Jesse” will thrive and “bear fruit.” Coloe calls attention to the exegetical con-

⁴⁵ See Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*, 362; and Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, 41–50. Several Roman emperors including Augustus and Trajan were denoted “the savior of the world” (cf. John 4:42). See *ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁶ Cf. Rudolf Pesch, “‘He Will be Called a Nazorean’: Messianic Exegesis in Matthew 1–2,” in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 174–75; and James A. Sanders, “Ναζωραῖος in Matthew 2.23,” in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, 117–18.

⁴⁷ Mary L. Coloe, “The Nazarene King: Pilate’s Title as the Key to John’s Crucifixion,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert van Belle (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 843–85.

nection between this text in Isaiah and Zechariah 6:11–13 in Second-Temple Judaism (cf. 4Q161 frgs. 8–10, III, 11, 18; Targum of Isaiah 53:5).⁴⁸ The latter text looks forward to the advent of the Davidic “Branch” (cf. Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8), who will erect a magnificent temple in Zion. According to Coloe, the Johannine identification of Jesus as βασιλεύς in 19:19 signifies Jesus’ “messianic role as builder of the eschatological temple.”⁴⁹ If the Johannine description of the crucified Jesus as King carries a messianic connotation, this description may serve to heighten the universal significance of Jesus’ death as the Messiah-King. Zechariah 6:12 and 15 speak of the eschatological reinstatement of the temple and the Gentiles’ ingathering to it. According to John the death of Jesus is the means by which He will achieve His royal-messianic mission of establishing the eschatological temple where “all people” will gather (John 12:32–33).

The Gentile soldiers’ derisive laudation of Jesus as “King of the Jews” in the earlier narrative (19:3) anticipates His public “enthronement” as the “King of the Jews” on the cross (v. 19). While all four Gospels report the words in the inscription (with slight variations in phrasing), only John, as stated earlier, noted that these words were written in three languages—Hebrew (or Aramaic), Latin, and Greek (v. 20). Aramaic was the vernacular among the Jewish people in the land of Palestine, Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire, and Greek was the lingua franca of trade and commerce spoken by most Gentiles and Diaspora Jews. The significance of these three languages is clear: the crucified Jesus is proclaimed “the King of the Jews” in *the whole world*.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to shed light on the Johannine passion narrative’s resonances with Roman imperial ideology by examining them from the perspective of John’s *messianic* purpose (cf. 20:31). It has been shown that in relation to this purpose, these resonances perform the function of espousing Jesus’ royal-messianic validity by underlining the “universality” of His kingship. Within

⁴⁸ Coloe, “The Nazarene King,” 843–45; cf. Pesch, “He will be Called a Nazorean,” 174–75.

⁴⁹ Coloe, “The Nazarene King,” 846.

⁵⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 714; and Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 502. In 4:42 Jesus is designated “the Savior of the world.”

the scheme of John's messianic Christology, the prominence of the kingship theme in the passion account and the imperial elements in it collaborate to portray Him as the universal Messiah-King reigning on the cross. This notion regarding the universality of Jesus' kingship evoked the Jewish hope that the royal Messiah would enjoy global ascendancy. However, this hope diverged from the traditional expectation in that the Messiah was exalted through crucifixion rather than by military combat. Seen in light of this Jewish royal-messianic hope, the Johannine passion narrative's contact points with Rome play a crucial part in persuading the Gospel readers that the crucified Jesus is the Messiah-King of Israel. Of course significant insight can be gleaned from the imperial approaches to the kingship theme in the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless the preceding analysis reveals that the Johannine points of contact with Rome serve primarily a royal-messianic rather than a socio-political purpose.