

The Jewish Principle of Agency in the Gospel According to John

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1. Introduction

Fifty-six years ago, Peder Borgen's article "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel" appeared in the *festschrift* for E. R. Goodenough.¹ Little did Borgen know at the time of publication, the impact that his article on the theme of agency has made upon scholarly work on the Gospel of John would be tremendous. As of the writing of this essay, his article has been cited over 175 times. Every serious English commentary on the Fourth Gospel over the last fifty years lists Borgen's article in its bibliography. Any scholar would be overjoyed to have a piece of their scholarship cited over one hundred times, so we can conclude that Peder Borgen was a highly influential scholar, right? Unfortunately, like many things in the guild of biblical scholarship, the fruit of Borgen's works has not trickled down to seminary graduates and pastors, which means that the churches served by these leaders are not learning about the vital christological portrayal of Jesus as the agent of God in the Gospel of John.² Modern commentaries and articles have come to consistently portray the Johannine Jesus as the agent (Hebrew: *shaliach*) of the Father, but without the principle explained and set squarely within its Jewish setting, readers of these commentaries will fail to grasp the authorial intention behind this important christological illustration.³ Therefore, the problem of noteworthy scholarly works failing to become available and influence average readers of the Bible continues.

The purpose of this essay is to build upon Peder Borgen's important work by disseminating the Jewish Principle of Agency in a far more accessible format. My first aim is to define the Principle of Agency, responsibly set it in its Jewish context, and develop this key concept in order to interpret the relationship between God and Jesus Christ within the Gospel of John. Borgen's article argues that the Johannine Jesus is not just a human and earthly agent but also a divine and heavenly agent⁴ and modern scholarly treatments of the Gospel of John have demonstrated that the *logos* that was in the beginning with God shares remarkably similar characteristics to the personified wisdom of

¹ Peder Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *Religions in Antiquity: Festschrift E. Goodenough*, edited by Jacob Neusner, 137–48 (Leiden: Brill, 1968). To Borgen's credit, he did rerelease the article in *The Gospel of John: More Light from Philo, Paul and Archaeology: The Scriptures, Tradition, Exposition, Setting, Meaning*, NovTSup 154 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 167–78.

² Most graduate students are not assigned readings from scholarly *festschrifts*, and the article's rerelease in an expensive Brill volume didn't make it more accessible.

³ Cf. Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 311; William Loader, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Structure and Issues*, BET 23 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), 155; Paul N. Anderson, "The Having-Sent-Me Father: Aspects of Agency, Encounter, and Irony in the Johannine Father-Son Relationship," *Semeia* 85 (1999): 34–36; Marianne Meye Thompson, "John, Gospel of," in *DJG*, 377.

⁴ Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *The Gospel of John: More Light from Philo, Paul and Archaeology*, 173. Henceforth, all citations of Borgen's article will use the page numbers from this volume.

God in Second Temple Jewish texts.⁵ This offers us the opportunity to explore how the Jewish Principle of Agency coincides with relevant traditions in which the God of Israel sends forth his personified wisdom on a mission. After we synthesize the principle of agency with the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as wisdom's embodiment, we will ask whether there are other important agents in the Gospel of John worthy of our investigation. Since only two-thirds of the instances where "sending" language appears in the Fourth Gospel deal with God sending Jesus, the remaining one-third of the evidence should be accounted for and explored. Finally, I will draw some conclusions, assess the data, and discuss the implications for further research opportunities.

There can be no doubt that the Johannine Jesus is portrayed throughout the narrative as understanding himself as the genuine agent of the true God.⁶ A cursory glance at the data is all that is sufficient to observe this self-evident christological feature:

- "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (5:23)
- "He who believes in me does not believe in me, but in Him who sent me." (12:44)
- "Whoever sees me sees the One who sent me." (12:45)
- "Whoever receives me receives Him who sent me." (13:20)
- "He who has seen me has seen the Father." (14:9)
- "He who hates me also hates my Father." (15:23)

The theological focus in John is not simply about knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ, for the relationship between the two of them is of supreme importance. Jesus is the one whom the only true God has sent as his agent (John 17:3), and eternal life is hinged upon knowing this key relationship. Jesus commonly spoke of himself as God's agent (5:36; 6:57; 7:29; 10:36; 11:42), and even as God's apostle in 13:16: "The slave is not greater than his master, nor is the *apostolos* greater than the one who sent him."⁷ The sonship christology of the Gospel of John must also account for its agency christology. Agency christology, as Robert Kysar defines it, is when God takes the initiative to send a personal representative, which the New Testament authors illustrate in the simple designation, *God "sent" Jesus*.⁸ Andrew Lincoln's summary of the portrayal of Jesus as the agent of God in the Gospel of John is appropriate: "Jesus, then, is viewed as God's authorized agent, who fully and reliably represents the intentions and cause of the one who has sent him . . . Jesus as the sent one fully represents God the sender."⁹ Understanding the status that the agent of

⁵ See the recent treatment in Dustin R. Smith, *Wisdom Christology in the Gospel of John* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 11-48.

⁶ Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God: Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective*, edited by Wayne A. Meeks, SBLSPS 11 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), 147.

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 141; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:912; James P. McIlhorne, "Jesus as God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel: Implications for Christology, Ecclesiology, and Mission," *Chicago Studies* 44 (2005): 312; Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and in the Writings of Philo*, Johannine Monograph Series 4 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 159; "The Gospel of John and Hellenism: Some Observations," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, edited by R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black, 98-123 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 101.

⁸ Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 44.

⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, BNTC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 40.

God possesses and the manner in which he represents God is crucial to making sense of the Fourth Gospel's christology.

What would it mean for a first-century CE Jew to openly speak of himself as the agent of his father, as we repeatedly observe in the words and deeds of the Johannine Jesus? How did the language of "sending" function in the Jewish milieu of Jesus' culture?¹⁰ What were the presuppositions that came with the Jewish understanding of agency? When Jews took the time to discuss the ins and outs of this everyday principle, where did they point to as the origin of its many tenets? Methodologically, we need to examine the *Jewishness* of the Principle of Agency before we can begin to do justice to the various portrayals of a sender and his agent(s) in the Gospel of John, especially since it is not only Jesus who is illustrated as having been sent by another in the narrative of John.

2. The six tenets of the Jewish principle of agency

When we examine the literature of the Jewish people after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, we begin to see several examples of the Jewish Principle of Agency discussed, especially among the various rabbis. The principle is not disputed, challenged, or called into question by any of the authoritative rabbis, rather, it is practically assumed among the readers of the Mishnah, Talmud, and midrashim, as if the principle was already widely accepted by Jews.¹¹ There does not seem to be any awareness that this principle of agency was in need of being defended by opponents, nor is there any indication that any of the rabbis needed to be reminded of it. The rabbis derived their understanding of agency directly from the Scriptures,¹² and human beings are portrayed as agents of God's rule over creation itself (Gen 1:27-28), demonstrating that the concept of agency was founded as early as creation.¹³ The rabbinic literature thus demonstrates that the principle was a settled and established matter, as its practice had become a necessity in the daily life of the Jewish community.¹⁴

Before we may organize and examine the diverse ways in which the Principle of Agency functioned in Judaism, we need to carefully define our terms. The *sender* (or principal) selects a qualified *agent*, invests that agent with his authority, status, and prerogatives, and sends forth that agent on a mission.¹⁵ The entry on "Law of Agency" in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* recognizes that the principle deals with the status of the agent acting by the direction of the sender.¹⁶ The God of

¹⁰ Israel Herbert Levinthal, "The Jewish Law of Agency," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 13.2 (Oct. 1922): 124, helpfully points out that the ancient practice of agency is still present in modern Jewish law.

¹¹ L. M. Simmons, "The Rabbinical Law of Agency," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 8, no. 4 (1896): 616.

¹² Levinthal, "The Jewish Law of Agency," 135. F. Hossfeld and F. van der Velden, "salah," in *TDOT*, 15:52, observe the concept as early as the eighth century BCE.

¹³ Michael E. Cafferky, "Teaching the Gospel from Agency Theory in the Bible," *CBAR* 9 (1): 21.

¹⁴ Simmons, "The Rabbinical Law of Agency," 616. Agency is a regular part of modern Jewish law, having been in use in Jewish communities for over 2,000 years. See Michael Wygoda, "Agency," 449, who helpfully points out that the principle has been recognized as law from ancient times.

¹⁵ See the standard entries in the dictionaries and lexicons: C. John Collins, "salah," in *NIDOTTE*, 4:122-23; Hossfeld and van der Velden, "salah," 49-71; *HALOT*, 1511-16

¹⁶ Lewis N. Dembitz, "Agency, Law of," 232.

Israel was understood by the biblical authors to be the sender of many agents, including heavenly angelic messengers,¹⁷ prophets,¹⁸ priests,¹⁹ his Spirit,²⁰ and even such personified attributes as his wisdom and word.²¹ Human kings and rulers would regularly send forth envoys,²² masters could send forth hired laborers,²³ and parents often sent age-appropriate children.²⁴ The appointment of the agent could simply take place with spoken words, and no formal writing nor witnesses were required to verify the relationship.²⁵

The agent of the sender/principal had to meet some qualifications. The general rule is that an agent needed to have the capacity to legally and mentally act for him or herself. A small child, being one of unsound mind, would not possess the necessary legal knowledge and would be unqualified to be an agent.²⁶ Similarly, a deaf-mute could not qualify.²⁷ A Gentile among the Israelite community, because of the limitations on foreigners and aliens, could not function as an agent.²⁸ Both women and men were qualified; the role of the agent was not limited to males. Marital status would not disqualify an otherwise suitable agent, and even a bondswoman of an Israelite could serve as an agent.²⁹ A household slave, whether male or female, could also serve the role of the master's agent. Hired laborers were often sent by their masters,³⁰ and adult children within a household could be sent as agents by their father. A father's adult son was considered to be the best candidate to represent his father, better than a hired hand or a mere acquaintance. No better agent could be selected than one's own adult son.³¹

Within the literature, we can summarize the Jewish principle of agency into six tenets. First, the agent fully represents the one who sent him. Second, the sender is greater than the sent agent. Third, the agent is fully obedient to the sender. Fourth, in legal contexts, the agent functions in partnership with the sender, to the point that an agent can acquire a piece of property on behalf of the principal. Fifth, the agent returns to the sender when the mission is complete. Lastly, the agent may extend his mission by appointing other agents. Each of these six tenets requires significant

¹⁷ Gen 19:13-15; Exod 23:20-21 ("My name is in him"); Dan 10:11.

¹⁸ Exod 3:10-15; Ps 105:26; Isa 6:8; Jer 1:7; Ezek 2:3; Mic 6:4; Mal 3:23.

¹⁹ The question of whether the priest represents God in mediating the forgiveness to the people or the people in bringing the sacrifice to God was raised in the Talmud, with Rabbi Huna settling the matter by arguing that God appointed the priests to bring the sacrifices. Hence, they naturally function as agents of God. See the discussion in Simmons, "The Rabbinical Law of Agency," 619-20.

²⁰ Ps 104:30.

²¹ Ps 107:20; 147:15, 18; Isa 9:8; 55:11; Wisd 9:10. Yahweh is frequently portrayed as sending forth his personified attributes (e.g., Exod 15:7; Ps 43:3; 78:49; 111:9).

²² Matt 22:2-4. In *Sipre* on Numbers 12:9, the human king states "you have not spoken concerning my servant but concerning me."

²³ Matt 20:2; 21:34.

²⁴ Mark 12:6.

²⁵ Levinthal, "The Jewish Law of Agency," 138; Dembitz, "Agency, Law of," 232.

²⁶ Simmons, "The Rabbinical Law of Agency," 618. The definition of this child described a boy under the age of thirteen or a girl under the age of twelve. See further in m. Baba Kamma 6.4.

²⁷ Dembitz, "Agency, Law of," 232.

²⁸ Simmons, "The Rabbinical Law of Agency," 618.

²⁹ Dembitz, "Agency, Law of," 232.

³⁰ Merrill C. Tenney, *John, the Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 163.

³¹ Helen S. Friend, "Like Father, Like Son: A Discussion of the Concept of Agency in Halakah and John," *ATJ* 21 (1990): 22.

unpacking before we may begin to attempt to read the various portrayals of senders and agents in the Fourth Gospel. It is to this task of unpacking these six tenets that this essay will now turn.

2.1 The agent fully represents the one who sent him

The first tenet of the Jewish Principle of Agency defines the extent of the representation and delegated authority that takes place between the agent and the principal.³² The repeated maxim among the Jewish rabbis states the first tenet clearly: “A man’s agent is equivalent to the man himself.”³³ When the principal commissions the agent, that agent wholly functions as the sender. The nature of this representation should not be downplayed, for *everything* the principal could do or say, the agent could do or say.³⁴ If a ruler of a kingdom sent forth an ordinary envoy with a message, that envoy was to be treated as if he was the ruler himself. The Talmud confirms this point: “the agent of the ruler was as the ruler himself.”³⁵ If someone dealt with an agent, it was understood that the agent possessed all the same rights that the principal possessed.³⁶ No agent, therefore, was a *mere agent*.

This initial tenet was widely recognized by the rabbis, regularly quoted to each other, and never called into question.³⁷ Sometimes, the rabbis would cite the Hebrew Bible for justification of this tenet,³⁸ as even Rabbi Shammai was remembered as doing.³⁹ It wouldn’t matter if the agent were a slave, hired worker, servant, or son of a father, the status and qualities of the agent would come to reflect the status belonging to the sender.⁴⁰ “The agent ranks as his master’s own person,” according to b. Qiddushin 43a. The late F. F. Bruce summarized this tenet well: “He who acts through a duly appointed agent is the real author of the act performed.”⁴¹ In sum, an agent may be appointed to do everything that a principal could do himself.⁴²

³² Cafferky, “Teaching the Gospel from Agency Theory in the Bible,” 20, argues that “the agency relationship emphasizes the dimension of delegated authority.”

³³ m. Berakoth 5.5; b. Qiddushin 42b, 43a; b. Baba Metzia 96a; b. Hagigah 10b; b. Menahot 93b; b. Nazir 12b; Mek. Exod. 12:3, 6.

³⁴ Simmons, “The Rabbinical Law of Agency,” 618. Dembitz, “Agency, Law of,” 233, notes that anyone appointing an agent “may confer upon him wider powers.”

³⁵ b. Baba Kamma 113b.

³⁶ Dembitz, “Agency, Law of,” 233.

³⁷ Levinthal, “The Jewish Law of Agency,” 133, observes that by the writing of the Mishnah, the phrase “a man’s agent if like himself” was established as a recognized legal term.

³⁸ b. Nedarim 72b, “Scripture states, ‘His husband may confirm it, or her husband may annul it’ (Num. 30:14),” the words of R. Josiah. Rabbi Jonathan said to him, “We find in every passage in the Torah that the acts of the agent of a person are equivalent to the acts of the person himself.” Rabbi Joshua ben Korchah observes the principle of agency in the summons for “all the congregation of Israel to slay [the Paschal Lamb]” (Exod 12:6). Since it would be impossible for every single person in Israel to perform the act of sacrifice of the lamb, it becomes self-evident that agency is implied. See further in Simmons, “The Rabbinical Law of Agency,” 617.

³⁹ b. Qiddushin 43a, where Shammai quotes 2 Sam. 12:9 to corroborate his used of agency,

⁴⁰ b. Gittin 23a-23b indicates that a sent slave is to be treated as the master who commissioned him. Hossfeld and van der Velden, “salah,” 53, argue that the sending that God performs is analogous to the sending that human principals perform.

⁴¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 100.

⁴² Levinthal, “The Jewish Law of Agency,” 157.

2.2 The sender is greater than the sent agent

When the sender commissions forth his agent, the agent is subordinate in the relationship—a relationship that makes up the second tenet. This mutual understanding between the agent and the principal was crucial to bringing the mission to completion: “The sender is greater than the one who is sent.”⁴³ In comparison, there were a few occasions where there was no discernable difference in rank or status between the agent and his principal prior to the commissioning,⁴⁴ such as when a husband sent an agent to announce the annulment of his marriage.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the most common scenario took place between a sender who ranked higher than the agent. As we observed earlier, when a ruler sent forth an envoy, there was no question as to who was the master: “The agent of the ruler is as the ruler himself.”⁴⁶ In the first century CE, Philo described the agent of the master as a “servant,” clearly demonstrating the status of the principal.⁴⁷ When the God of Israel commissioned forth a human prophet, there was no question as to who was in charge. Any will or agenda belonging to the agent was naturally set aside in order to give room to the greater will that belonged to the sender.⁴⁸

2.3 The agent is fully obedient to the sender

The principal naturally exercises authority over the agent, and the agent’s role necessitates an observable measure of obedience in this relationship. The agent of the sender sets aside all desires, agendas, and interests in order to obey the task for which he has been commissioned. In this way, the Jewish rabbis characterized the typical obedient agent as one who faithfully “carries out his mission.”⁴⁹ The one who is sent “carries out his instructions” (b. Hullin 12a). This tenet was never really in question, as the most common principals are either the God of Israel, human kings, rulers, masters, employers, or fathers—all persons who self-evidently outrank their respective agents.⁵⁰ A helpful example can be observed in Yahweh’s description of his sending forth of his personified word: “So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11). An agent who failed to obey the mandate for which he was sent was subject to severe punishment, and disobedient behavior on the part of the agent would not stain the reputation of the sender.⁵¹ The agent was to bring honor, and not shame, to his or her principal, and this required an obedient posture to the principal’s will.

⁴³ Genesis Rabbah 78.

⁴⁴ E.g., b. Nedarim 72b.

⁴⁵ Deut. 24:1-4. The rabbis picked up on the verb (הָשִׁיב) that appears three times in this passage and discerned the principle of agency therein. See the discussion in Simmons, “The Rabbinical Law of Agency,” 616.

⁴⁶ b. Baba Kamma 113b.

⁴⁷ Philo, *Conf. Lin.* 63.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Wisdom Christology in the Gospel of John*, 92.

⁴⁹ b. Erubin 32a.

⁵⁰ Thompson, “John, Gospel of,” 378.

⁵¹ Cf. Deut 18:20-22; Ps 82:2-7; Jer 14:14; 23:32.

2.4 The agent is the legal partner of the sender

In the fourth tenet, the legal and judicial roles belonging to the sender are transferred to the agent.⁵² A man may summon his agent and send him on a mission to enter into a marriage contract with a woman, and the agent could even choose for his sender who the suitable female is to marry.⁵³ The father of a daughter could elect to betroth her through an agent of his choosing.⁵⁴ If the principal requests that his agent purchase something, then the moment the agent buys it, it legally belongs to the principal, even before the agent physically delivers the goods.⁵⁵ This understanding covered the purchase of land, entering into business contracts, the acquisition of a title in court, and the retrieval of items belonging to the sender (e.g., money, land, or goods).⁵⁶

This tenet is also clearly observable in the relationship between Yahweh—the cosmic judge—and the human judges who decide cases, vindicate, and deliver on Yahweh’s behalf.⁵⁷ God raised up several human judges,⁵⁸ empowered them with his Spirit,⁵⁹ delivered Israel through them,⁶⁰ and issued verdicts of judgment through them.⁶¹ The human judges functioned as agents of God to the point to where the judges bore the title *elohim* on several occasions in the Hebrew Bible.⁶² As the agents of God’s judicial and legal role, the human judges were to represent God by not taking bribes, ignoring the needy, or perverting justice.⁶³ Those who failed to judge with integrity were forcefully removed by God himself.⁶⁴

2.5 The agent returns to the sender when the mission is complete

The fifth tenet is equally important but often overlooked by readers of the biblical texts. When a principal sent forth his agent, then it is assumed that the agent will return to the sender upon completing the mission (cf. Isa 55:11). This was a critical piece of the mission, especially when a king sent an envoy, as the envoy would need to convey to his master how the message was received by the third party. Similarly, if an agent were to acquire a piece of property, select a wife, or serve as a witness in court, the outcomes of these crucial missions needed to be explained to the invested principal. We may observe the role of the returning agent in p. Hagigah 76d: “Behold we send to you a great man as our *shaliach*, and he is equivalent to us until such time as he returns to us.”⁶⁵

⁵² Borgen, “God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 169, notes that the agent exercising the judicial function and effects of the sender is the usual meaning of the common halakhic principle.

⁵³ Simmons, “The Rabbinical Law of Agency,” 615; Dembitz, “Agency, Law of,” 233.

⁵⁴ m. Qiddushin 2.1, cited by Dembitz, “Agency, Law of,” 233.

⁵⁵ E.g., b. Baba Kamma 52a: “[the agent] is considered like one who says to him, ‘Go, take possession, and hereby acquire it’”; Simmons, “The Rabbinical Law of Agency,” 620-1.

⁵⁶ Borgen, “God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 171; Dembitz, “Agency, Law of,” 232.

⁵⁷ For God functioning as the supreme judge, see Gen 18:25.

⁵⁸ Jdg 2:16.

⁵⁹ E.g., Jdg 3:9-10; 6:34-36.

⁶⁰ Jdg 6:37.

⁶¹ Deut 1:16-17.

⁶² Exod 21:6; 22:7, 8, 28; 1 Sam 2:25; Ps 82:1, 6; 138:1; cf. John 10:34.

⁶³ Ps 82:2-5.

⁶⁴ Ps 82:6-7.

⁶⁵ Borgen, “God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 172.

Similarly, *Mek. Exodus* 12:1 notes “The messengers of human beings must return to those who sent them before they can report.” To give injury or harm to the agent in a manner that would preclude him from returning to the sender was understood as if the harm were directed against the sender himself.⁶⁶

2.6 The agent can commission his own agents

The rabbis acknowledged the sixth and final tenet of agency, namely, a commissioned messenger possessed the capacity to recruit, authorize, and send forth his own agents: “the agent can appoint an agent.”⁶⁷ These agents of the initial agent bore all of the same privileges and responsibilities of the sender-agent relationship, albeit from one rung lower on the ladder of hierarchy. The agents of the agent would obey the original sender, fully represent him, and would regard themselves as subordinate to him. To reject the second agent would be considered a rejection of both the first agent and his principal.⁶⁸ An agent would consider empowering further agents to either assist in the initial project or to extend the influence in a geographical region beyond the initial scope of what the first agent could achieve.

3. Recognizing the agents in the Gospel according to John

Having become thoroughly informed about the various tenets of the Jewish Principle of Agency, we are now in a much more responsible position to assess the sending motif in the Fourth Gospel. According to McIlhorne’s article, there are sixty instances in the Gospel of John where “sending” language take place.⁶⁹ Of those sixty occurrences, forty-one refer to the principal/agent relationship exhibited between God and Jesus. This leaves nineteen references (roughly one-third of the data) to describe agents other than the Johannine Jesus. We will examine these important agents in the order in which the narrative of the Fourth Gospel introduces them.

3.1 John the Baptist

The first figure to be explicitly defined as an agent is John the Baptizer. In John 1:6, the readers learn the identity of both the principal (God) and the agent (John). The mission for which John was commissioned is stated in 1:7 (“to testify concerning the light”), and John’s mission is realized in the narrative in his proclamation of the arrival of Jesus, the Lamb of God (1:19-37). When Jesus begins his ministry, John testifies about the identity and role of Jesus. The Baptist authoritatively testifies to the status of agent that Jesus possesses, “he whom God has sent speaks the words of God” (3:34). There also occurs a transition upon the arrival of Jesus, as John’s role begins to

⁶⁶ Cf. Mark 12:6-9.

⁶⁷ b. Kiddushin 41a; Dembitz, “Agency, Law of,” 232; Levinthal, “The Jewish Law of Agency,” 136.

⁶⁸ Luke 10:16.

⁶⁹ McIlhorne, “Jesus as God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 297.

disappear while Jesus takes the primary focus of the narrative's attention. John is aware of this necessary shift, and acknowledges it openly "he must increase, I must decrease" (3:30).⁷⁰

The author of the Gospel of John seems intent on clarifying that John is not the expected Messiah. Despite John functioning as an authorized prophet who is heaven-sent, he is not to be confused with the mission of God's son, the premier agent of the Gospel of John. John is not the light (1:8), John is not the Christ (1:20), he is not Elijah, nor the promised prophet likened unto Moses (1:21). He is an authorized person to baptize, but he soon finds that Jesus is baptizing more disciples than he is (4:1-2). Even his disciples leave him to follow Jesus (1:35-37), an act to which John does not object. John's purpose is to prepare the way for the Messiah, the primary agent in the Fourth Gospel's narrative.

3.2 Jesus Christ

We have already taken note that the most qualified agent to represent a father figure within Jewish culture was a father's adult son. That Jesus is the agent of God is not up for dispute, and the common designations given to God and Jesus in the Gospel of John are that of the Father sending the son. The sender of Jesus is the Father alone, and the one sent by the Father is the son. Within the Fourth Gospel, the christological role of agent characterizes Jesus' person and mission, and this characterization permeates the entirety of the narrative.⁷¹

When we set the christology of the Johannine Jesus within its Jewish context, we can observe all six of the tenets of the Jewish Principle of Agency. First, Jesus fully represents the only true God.⁷² The most important tenet of agency is also the most obvious to discern in the Gospel of John. Jesus comes in the name of his Father, something Jesus openly acknowledges, as do the believing crowds (5:43; 10:25; 12:13; 17:6). The prerogatives of the sender are shared with the agent, such as the ability to give life,⁷³ to issue forth judgment,⁷⁴ to do good on the Sabbath,⁷⁵ to take away sins, and to give the Spirit. The titles and roles of God are likewise shared with the agent, including "Father" (14:9), "Lord" (13:13; 20:28), and "God" (20:28). Jesus' words are actually the Father's words, he only speaks the words as a representative agent. Moreover, the works and deeds performed by Jesus also belong to the Father who commissioned him.

Second, the Father who sent Jesus on his messianic mission is greater than Jesus the agent. This is plainly self-evident in the repeated designation of "human being" used to illustrate Jesus' person, something Jesus himself freely admits without qualification (8:40). The Father, on the other hand,

⁷⁰ McIlhone, "Jesus as God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," 300.

⁷¹ James H. Charlesworth, "Lady Wisdom and Johannine Christology," in *Light in a Spotless Mirror: Reflections on Wisdom Traditions in Judaism and Early Christianity*, edited by James H. Charlesworth and Michael A. Daise (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003), 107.

⁷² See also Matt 18:5; Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48

⁷³ Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, 162, observes the principle of agency in Jesus bearing God's prerogative to give life: "The life of the Father as the sender is transferred to the agent, the Son."

⁷⁴ E. M. Sidebottom, *The Christ of the Fourth Gospel in Light of First-Century Thought* (London: SPCK, 1961), 206.

⁷⁵ Per Jarle Bekken, *The Lawsuit Motif in John's Gospel from New Perspectives: Jesus Christ, Crucified Criminal and Emperor of the World*, NovTSup 158 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 69–70.

is the only true God, the person to whom Jesus prayed (17:3). Jesus taught his disciples that the Father is greater than the son (14:28),⁷⁶ and this Father is the God of Jesus (20:17). Since all fathers in the Ancient Near East were universally regarded as greater than their sons in rank, it is not surprising that we find the same in John's portrayal of God and Jesus.⁷⁷

Third, Jesus regularly expresses his willing and necessary obedience to God.⁷⁸ The mission of Jesus is to do the will of the principal (4:34). This includes speaking forth the words of God (12:49), performing the deeds of God (10:32), and functioning as the authorized prophet of God (4:19). When Jesus was accused of rebelliously "making himself" into someone or something (5:18), he immediately clarified the misunderstanding by calling attention to his role as the obedient agent of God (5:19, 30).⁷⁹ "The son can do nothing of himself," Jesus declares, "unless it is something he sees the Father doing, for what the Father does, the son does in like manner."⁸⁰ A similar misunderstanding occurs in 10:30-36, where Jesus again responds to his confused opponents by drawing attention to his role as the sanctified agent of the Father.⁸¹ This is precisely what we would expect of one who is not only an agent but also a son—the premiere agent of his father.⁸²

Fourth, Jesus bears the Father's judicial and legal role, functioning as the human agent of God's judgment.⁸³ As a commissioned agent, Jesus possesses the role of judge that formerly belonged to the Father, and Jesus openly admits on several occasions that the Father has handed over the role of judge to the son (e.g., 5:22-23, 26-27; 8:16).⁸⁴ Similarly, Jesus takes possession of things that belong to the Father, as we would anticipate an authorized agent to do (6:44; 10:28-29; 12:31-32).⁸⁵ Jesus states that he has the authority to raise up his own life from the dead and that this authority was given to him by the Father (10:18; cf. 2:18-21).

Fifth, Jesus ascends to the sender when he completes his mission. The ascension of Jesus allows the agent, who has succeeded in the manner for which he was sent, to return to the principal (6:62;

⁷⁶ C. K. Barrett, "'The Father Is Greater than I' John 14:28: Subordinationist Christology in the New Testament," in *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 28, insists that John 14:28, along with other subordinationist passages, "cannot be interpreted in terms of the eternal relations between the Persons of the Trinity; it belongs within the setting which John himself is careful to provide for it, namely that of the historic ministry."

⁷⁷ Anthony E. Harvey, "Christ as Agent," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird*, L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 241, astutely declares that the son functioning as the agent of his father *par excellence* "was empirically the case in ancient Middle Eastern commerce."

⁷⁸ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 251, observes that the son who is dependent upon the Father is pictured in thoroughly human terms.

⁷⁹ Thomas E. Gaston, "Does the Gospel of John Have a High Christology?" *HBT* 36 (2014): 133.

⁸⁰ John A. T. Robinson, "The Use of the Fourth Gospel for Christology Today," in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, edited by Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 68, characterizes this relationship as the son living "in absolutely intimate dependence upon God as his Father."

⁸¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Twelve More New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1984), 175, points out that Jesus refuses the claim to be God in 10:33.

⁸² Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1:655, proposes an unlikely interpretation by suggesting that Jesus is both claiming to be deity and functions as a perfect agent who obeys the Father's will.

⁸³ Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 230–31.

⁸⁴ See also Acts 17:30-31; Rom 2:16; 2 Thes 1:6-8.

⁸⁵ Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," 171.

13:3; 16:28; 20:17). This raises questions about preexistence and the nature of the word (and its close synonym, personified wisdom) that was in the beginning with God (1:1-2). The prologue begins with the word/wisdom that was with God, and the mission of this personification is summarized as having come to his own Jewish people (1:11), suffering rejection, finding belief by a few (1:12-13), and ascending to the bosom of the Father upon completion of the mission (1:18).

Lastly, Jesus can authorize more agents to continue what he started. The clearest example of Jesus' agents in the Gospel of John is the disciples, who act as the object of the verb "to send" on multiple occasions. Furthermore, there is an indication that Jesus sends the Spirit (or at least participates in the act of God sending the Spirit). These examples are noteworthy enough to demand their own sections in order to explore their significant contributions to the theme of agency in the Fourth Gospel.

Before we examine the ways in which the disciples and the Spirit function as agents, we need to listen to the echoes of Jewish wisdom literature that loudly resound when we set the Fourth Gospel in that context.

3.2.1 Jesus as Personified Wisdom's Incarnation

Earlier this year, I published a lengthy treatment on John's christology as Jewish wisdom christology.⁸⁶ I will take the opportunity to summarize my findings here, as they pertain to the themes of agency and portrayals of God sending personified wisdom. In Sirach 24, a chapter that made a demonstrable impact on the Fourth Gospel, God sends forth Lady Wisdom, his agent, to make her dwelling among Israel (Sir 24:8). This sending results in personified wisdom's incarnation in the notable high priest, Simon ben Onias (Sir 50:1-24). The parallels between God's wisdom becoming incarnate in Simon and God's *logos* becoming incarnate in Jesus are too close to ignore.

Solomon's prayer in Wisdom of Solomon similarly petitions God to "give me the wisdom that sits by your throne" (Wis 9:4).⁸⁷ As the prayer unfolds, Solomon requests that God "send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her in order that she may labor at my side" (Wis 9:10).⁸⁸ In this verse, the two Greek verbs for sending (*apostello* and *pempo*) are precisely the same two verbs that appear in the Gospel of John's portrayal of God sending his son as the agent. Moreover, the conjunction "in order that" (*ina*) in Wis 9:10 supplies the precise reason for God to send his wisdom. According to several scholars, Wis 9:10 has influenced John 3:17, where God "sent" the son in order that he might save the world. We observe a remarkably similar passage in John 3:17, where God's act of sending the son is not in order that (*ina*) he may judge the world, but in order that (*ina*) the world would be saved through him. Solomon's prayer concludes by acknowledging that when God sends his wisdom, the "people . . . were saved by

⁸⁶ Dustin R. Smith, *Wisdom Christology in the Gospel of John* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2024).

⁸⁷ Richard Dillon, "Wisdom Tradition and Sacramental Retrospect in the Cana Account (Jn 2,1-11)," *CBQ* 24:3 (1962): 276.

⁸⁸ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:316, admits that Wis 9:10 has influenced the Gospel of John's depiction of God sending Jesus, Wisdom's embodiment, as God's agent.

wisdom” (Wis 9:17–18). Scholars such as James D. G. Dunn⁸⁹ and Ben Witherington⁹⁰ have convincingly argued that Jewish portrayals of God sending his wisdom have convincingly shaped the portrayal of God sending his son as the agent in the Gospel of John.⁹¹ In short, the wisdom christology of the Gospel of John coalesces with its agency christology, allowing the two emphases to enrich the unique portrayal of son of God as God’s wise *shaliach*.⁹²

3.3 The Spirit

The Jewish Principle of Agency overlaps the Pneumatology of the Fourth Gospel in some very key areas. The same Spirit that anointed and empowered Jesus at his baptism (1:32-33) will be sent as an agent.⁹³ This Spirit, which is grammatically neuter in Greek, is characterized by the masculine descriptor *parakletos* (“Helper”) in the process of personification.⁹⁴ The mission of this personified agent is multifaceted. The Spirit will remain with the community of faith forever, presumably because Jesus does not want to leave them as orphans (14:16, 18).⁹⁵ The Spirit will act as a teacher while Jesus, the teacher, is away (14:26).⁹⁶ As an agent of Jesus’ teaching, the Spirit will bring to remembrance all that Jesus taught.⁹⁷ Moreover, it will function as an agent that guides, specifically by imitating the behavior of Jesus himself. Both the Spirit and Jesus do not speak on their own initiative, for they speak only what they hear their sender telling them what to say.⁹⁸ By the Spirit continuing Jesus’ role as the teacher, recalling Jesus’ teachings, and imitating Jesus’ obedient stance as a subordinate agent, we can begin to observe lines of continuity between Jesus as God’s agent and the Spirit as the subsequent agent.

Upon an initial survey, it is not altogether clear who is the principal of the Spirit. Sometimes, it is the Father who is said to send/give the Spirit (14:16-17). On the other hand, Jesus clearly indicates that he will send forth the Spirit (16:7), something readers explicitly witness in 20:22. In John 14:26, the Father is described as sending the Spirit in the name of Jesus, suggesting that Jesus is

⁸⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus according to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 65.

⁹⁰ Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 141.

⁹¹ See further in Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:912; McIlhorne, “Jesus as God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 312; Borgen, “John and Hellenism,” 101.

⁹² Craig A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John’s Prologue*, JSNTSup 89 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 145; Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends: Community and Christology in the Gospel of John*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 58–59; Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, 60; James McGrath, *John’s Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology*, SNTSMS 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 92–93; *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 58–59; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2015), 167. Reginald H. Fuller, “The Incarnation in Historical Perspective,” *ATR*, Supplementary Series 7 (1976): 65.

⁹³ For *pempo* used to describe the sending of the Spirit as an agent, see John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7. For *didomi*, see John 14:16.

⁹⁴ Cf. Ps 104:30, where Yahweh sends forth his *ruach*, the Spirit that belongs to God himself.

⁹⁵ If the Spirit functions as the agent of the agent Jesus, then it makes sense that Jesus said “I will come to you” as he describes the sending of the Spirit.

⁹⁶ Jesus refers to himself as the Teacher in John 13:13. His disciples regard him as a rabbi in 1:38-39, 49; 20:16.

⁹⁷ The narrator recalls several times where the disciples remembered things that Jesus said and taught (e.g., 2:17, 22; 12:16).

⁹⁸ 16:13; cf. 5:19; 7:18.

functioning as the agent of this sending of yet another agent. We find confirmation of this in 15:26 where Jesus declares that he will send the Spirit from the Father. What we appear to have with the agency of the Spirit is another example of the sixth tenet of the Principle of Agency—an agent can appoint other agents.⁹⁹ The Holy Spirit is the agent of Jesus, the one sent by the only true God.¹⁰⁰

3.4 The disciples

The role that the disciples—the ideal readers of the Gospel of John—play as agents should not be overlooked. On several occasions, the followers of Jesus are described as his agents. Jesus sent the disciples to reap that for which they have not labored (4:38). When Jesus declares “he who receives whomever I send receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me” (13:20), he is effectively playing out the appointment of agents by an agent. In other words, the disciples of Jesus, both ancient and modern, are described as agents of Jesus. We find confirmation of this in the lengthy petition to the Father where the son prays “As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (17:18). After Jesus has been raised from the dead and appears to his disciples, he officially sends them forth as his agents: “As the Father has sent me, I now send you” (20:21). McIlhorne helpfully summarized the implications of this passage, “The Apostle of the Father now appoints his own apostles: They are now the ones to carry on the mission.”¹⁰¹ In fact, the same Spirit that God gave to Jesus at the inception of his ministry is now given by Jesus to his agents, similarly empowering them for their mission (20:22).¹⁰²

Even though the disciples are agents of God’s agent, they still return to their sender when the mission is over.¹⁰³ In John 14:1-3, Jesus promises his disciples that he is leaving to prepare a place for the disciples, and he will come again to receive the disciples unto himself. In other words, the agents of Jesus will report back on the completion of their mission at the second coming. It is on this “last day” that the deceased disciples will be raised from the dead.¹⁰⁴ In sum, the promise of Jesus reuniting with his disciples further contributes to their role as agents of the agent.

4. Conclusions and implications

By this point in this brief study, two facts should have emerged as apparent. First, the Gospel of John emphasizes the relationship between the only true God and Jesus, the human Messiah, in terms of a principal and his agent. Second, the christology of the Gospel of John fits extremely well into all six tenets of the Jewish Principle of Agency, further enhancing the Jewishness of this

⁹⁹ McIlhorne, “Jesus as God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 309.

¹⁰⁰ Brant, John, 229, draws a similar conclusion: “the Paraclete is Jesus’s agent, or even a reference to Jesus himself, rather than the third person of the Trinity.”

¹⁰¹ McIlhorne, “Jesus as God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 311.

¹⁰² 20:22; cf. 1:32-33; 7:39.

¹⁰³ McIlhorne, “Jesus as God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” 307.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. John 5:28-29; 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24.

Christian biography of Jesus.¹⁰⁵ The constraints of space imposed by this essay preclude us from giving a full exploration and treatment to several other texts that flesh out the ways in which the Johannine Jesus functions within the cultural understanding of the Jewish agent, but the groundwork has been laid for those who want to take up the torch.

I want to call attention to three pressing implications from this study in order to encourage dialogue and further study. First, there is an irony in the fact that those who rejected Jesus in the Gospel of John were not convinced that Jesus really was the messianic agent sent by Israel's God, and modern readers, by confusing the agent for the God who sent him, have similarly failed to accept Jesus precisely as God's messianic agent. This is why grasping the Jewish Principle of Agency is critical to setting the Fourth Gospel in its Jewish context, allowing us to interpret it responsibly and charitably. Readers would do well to heed the advice of scholars like Jo-Ann Brant who freely acknowledges that the Gospel of John is inconsistent with the Trinity: "John does not offer a full-blown trinitarian doctrine . . . The language of persons, being, and essence found in the fourth-century creeds used to define the relationships of Jesus and God is not in sight."¹⁰⁶ By coming to terms with the heightened status that a Jewish agent bore—especially a son acting as the agent of his father—we can begin to appreciate the Johannine Jesus on his own terms.

The second implication of this study pertains also to the christology presented in the Gospel of John, namely the coalescence of agency and wisdom Christology. Further work needs to be done in raising awareness of the role of the wisdom of God that the Johannine Jesus takes over, particularly the role of personified wisdom functioning as the sent agent of the true God. Marianne M. Thompson has argued that "Wisdom is a category of agency that allows for the *closest possible unity* between the agent and God."¹⁰⁷ Dustin Smith has built upon Thompson's scholarship and suggested that the entirety of the Gospel of John depicts the sent Jesus in terms of wisdom.¹⁰⁸ If the Gospel of John deliberately illustrates the person of Jesus in light of relevant Jewish passages where the God of Israel sends forth his personified wisdom, then the Jewish wisdom traditions from the Second Temple period need to be included with the tenets of the Jewish Principle of Agency as necessary and mandatory contexts for responsibly reading the Fourth Gospel.

The third and final implication from this study deals with the practical Christian application that agency christology encourages. Readers of the Gospel of John must answer the summons to be agents of Jesus, being agents of the agent. The ministry of the Johannine Jesus continues because he has appointed representatives, whom we call disciples, to accept his kingdom proclamation, love one another as he loved the disciples, remain in his teachings, and set their hope on the resurrection to take place on the last day. If Jesus shared the words of eternal life with his agents (6:68), then his agents are equipped to share the life-giving words with the world. By accepting the expressly stated purpose of the Gospel of John (20:31; cf. 1:12-13), readers experience the life in Jesus' name that he offers, and that offer still stands for modern readers as well. I hope that this

¹⁰⁵ This point should not go overlooked, especially in light of the history of interpretation that led to antisemitism due to the primary opponents of the Johannine Jesus being described as "the Jews."

¹⁰⁶ Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 110.

¹⁰⁷ Thompson, "Thinking about God: Wisdom and Theology in John 6," in *Critical Readings of John 6*, edited by R. Alan Culpepper, BIS 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 231, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *Wisdom Christology in the Gospel of John*, 213.

brief study encourages those who read it to take up the mantle of agents of the Johannine Jesus, continuing his ministry until Jesus returns.

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