

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

A discussion of the concept of agency in Halakah and John

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This paper proposes to examine the concept of agency in the halakic materials of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud and its relationship to the concept of agency in the Gospel According to Saint John. First, some general introductory material on the Gospel will be reviewed. Following the discussion on agency is a brief evaluation of whether Rabbinic material can be used to determine what first-century Jewish practices and concepts concerning agency were.

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL

There have been many hypotheses about the test of the Gospel of John and its source, purpose, and destination. One concerns the relationship between John and the Synoptic Gospels. The view that the evangelist was familiar with the Synoptic tradition and was literarily dependent on it has allowed many scholars to infer that the purpose of his Gospel was to complete, surpass, or replace the Synoptics (see Schnackenburg, I, pp. 26-43 for a summary). It cannot be proved whether or not John was acquainted with one of more of the Synoptic Gospels. There is a growing consensus that John was directly dependent on neither the Gospels (excepting Barrett's view of Mark as a source, p. 45) nor their written sources (Robinson, p. 1). His contact with the Synoptics is explained by the common oral tradition that existed before or contemporaneous with the synoptic tradition. Although Barrett (p. 45) says, "anyone who after an interval of nineteen centuries feels himself in a position to distinguish nicely between 'Mark' and 'something much like Mark,' is at liberty to do so."

The Gospel of John is clearly based on a tradition of the words and works of Jesus, since in it is given historical information about Jesus that is not found in any other Gospel. Additional information given includes: (a) that Jesus, like John the Baptist, had a baptizing ministry; (b) that Jesus went to Jerusalem more than one time; and (c) that the Jewish authorities opposed Jesus throughout his ministry, not just at the end.

The independent tradition of John, together with the author's theological concerns, provides a base from which to view Christological elements as growing with significant differences from those expressed in the Synoptics. First, in John, in contrast to the Synoptics, Jesus performs miracles to reveal who he is, and his teaching is explicitly Christological. Second, the synoptic Jesus is conspicuously 'historical,' while the Johannine Jesus is considered both in his humanity and divinity (Cullmann, *Johannine Circle*, p. 14). Third, the interest expressed in the kingdom of God in the Synoptics is transferred in John to the person of Jesus

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Christ as the Gospel of the kingdom (Barrett, p. 70).

The text's background was the Palestinian Judaism of Jesus' times which had already been affected by the pressure of Greek influence (Barrett, p. 39). The absence of any reference in the Gospel to any actual situation of pre-70 A.D. Judaism and the presence of allusions to the drastic measures against Christians (9.22; 12, 42; 16.2) which reflect the hostile and polemical attitude of post-80 A.D. Judaism, point to a date of composition for the Gospel between 90 and 100 A.D. (Barrett, p. 28).

While opinions about the evangelist's reasons for writing and addressing his audience can assist us in evaluating the kind of Christology presented in the Gospel, the converse is also true. Although this paper does not attempt to present an evaluation of Johannine Christology, it will address, at least peripherally, the issues of the destination and purpose of the Gospel.

John did not write a Gospel merely for its own sake or "primarily to satisfy himself" (Barrett, p. 135). He did have an audience in mind, whether Jewish or Gentile.

As Barrett has written (p. 575), both the purpose of the Gospel and the author's theology are summed up in 20.31; "these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." The evangelist's general purpose is to confirm and strengthen the faith of those who already believe, as evidenced by the present subjunctive. The variant reading with the aorist, which suggests that the Fourth Gospel is primarily a missionary document, is less probable. While both readings are well attested, the present subjunctive is preferable in light of the similar statement and grammatical structure of 19.35 and other statements directed to believers at 13.19 and 16.33. Certainly the general purpose to confirm faith in no way lessens the value of the Gospel as a missionary tract to bring people to a saving knowledge of Christ.

Over and above the main inner-church purpose of the Gospel specified in 20.31 there are notable particular interests which arise from the historical situation of the Johannine community. These interests include: (a) that the Gospel was meant to replace or supplement the Synoptic Gospels; (b) that it was intended to have a missionary purpose, especially in restating the Christian message in Hellenistic terms (Dodd, p. 9); and (c) most frequently heard today, that it was to function as an apologetic or polemic document. There are the polemics about sacramental teaching (Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 84), eschatological teaching (Barrett, pp. 139-141), and against the sectarians of John the Baptist (Brown, pp. 69-71) and the Jews (Perkins, p.x.)

Another particular interest of John's Gospel is the polemic against heretics. Whether this false doctrine is docetism (attributing an apparent body to Jesus), adoptionism (separating the historical Jesus from the Christ), or whether this heresy held that redemption by a man in flesh and blood was superfluous (Schnackenburg, I, pp. 169-170), is beyond the scope of this paper. There is an anti-gnostic tone to the Fourth Gospel, in spite of the many attempts to link it with gnostic views that either make John an incipient gnostic or portray him as editor and

'christianizer' of the gnostic myth of a redeemer figure.

The evangelist has produced a Gospel in which both the divinity and humanity of Jesus receive their due emphasis. They form the two necessary and complementary sides of the person of Jesus. The divine and human are set together in the prologue, in the signs (where Jesus, while performing supernatural deeds, remains a man), and in the discourses (where he presents himself as the heavenly son). John's thrust is not to dwell upon either the divine or human nature of Jesus Christ, but rather, upon his significance in the history of salvation. Most of the terms he uses denote functions or express some particular aspect of Jesus' activity as the mediator of salvation. There is not a full development of ontological categories. The stress is placed on what Jesus does, although his mission ultimately depends on his being a certain kind of entity. John constantly witnesses to Jesus the God-man.

This witness to Jesus presents the historical events as seen through the eyes of faith. It is not a series of made-up stories written to illustrate theological truths. John "wrote the Gospel as a whole, combining discourse material with narrative, in order to bring out with the utmost clarity a single presentation, an interpreted history, of Jesus" (Barrett, p. 141).

CONCEPT OF AGENCY

Principle of Agency

The basic principle of agency is found in the Kiddushin of the Babylonian Talmud. This is a commentary on the earlier Mishnah. Although the context concerns betrothal, the principle is stated in 41b that "a man's agent is as himself." The legal aspects of this are reiterated in Baba Kamina where Rabbi Abbahu said, "the agent was acting for the principal upon the terms of his mandate and it is the same [in law] as if the principal himself had done it" (102b). Rabbi Jonathan said: "We find in the whole Torah that a man's agent is [legally] as himself" (Baba Mezia, 96a). These references are very similar to what is found in John. "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (5.23). There are several other passages that reflect the agency of Jesus and show him to be "as his principal."

He who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him who sent me. (12.44)

And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me. (12.45)

He who receives Me receives that One who sent Me. (13.20)

He who has seen Me has seen the Father. (14.9)

He who hates Me hates my Father also. (15.23)

The agent acts in the place of the principal or represents him. He is to be treated as the equal/equivalent of the sender or as if he were himself the principal. This is true regardless of the position of the sender. "The agent of the ruler is like the ruler himself" (Baba Kamma, 113b). In the Kethuboth Tractate, in the context of a sale through an agent, the agent takes legal title to the goods. Similarly,

the Father has given title to certain “goods” to the Son. “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me” (6.37). The Father gave him both authority over mankind and gave him believers to whom the Son will give eternal life (17.2).

Agent As The One Who Is Sent

Jesus constantly characterizes himself as the one sent from the Father: “I am from Him and He sent Me” (7.29). Believers begin to know him when they understand that Jesus was sent; “and these have known that Thou didst send Me” (17.21). In referring to God, Jesus often said “the Father who sent Me” (5.29) or “him who sent Me” (5.30; 6.38). He called himself “him whom the Father has sent” (6.29).

In the controversy between Jesus and the Jews, Jesus is asked both where his teaching comes from (7.15) and, where he himself comes from (9.29, 19.9). To the former question Jesus answers, “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me” (7.16). In reference to the Jewish view that no one will know where the Messiah will come from but that they all had known where Jesus came from, he responds, “You both know Me and know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true” (7.28). So, when Jesus is asked where he or his teaching comes from, he responds that it does not come from himself, but that he and his teaching are from the Father, he was sent.

Not only is Jesus sent from God (above, heaven), he receives his authority from God. He both speaks as the Father taught him and does things that are pleasing to the Father (8.28-29).

Jesus is wholly the channel through which God communicates himself to the world. His being is relational, and his existence is to be the communication between the Father and humankind. Jesus is the one sent and is thus defined both by his relationship with the Father and by his mission. Thus the Johannine concept of Jesus as “the sent one” adopts the official halakah on agency.

Son As Agent

Many of the citations in the Talmud refer to the agent, servant, and son together (Baba Mezia 96a). If the agent is as the one who sent him, how much more so would the son of the household be as the father who sent him. The son as agent emphasizes both the importance of the agency and replicates in visible form the principal. Instead of the agent having merely a legal or task likeness to the sender, he additionally has an inherited likeness — a likeness of natures or being. The verb “to send” is used forty-one times in the Fourth Gospel. Twenty-four of those times it is in the form of “he who has sent him (me)” or “the Father who has sent him (me).” Each time it is associated with Jesus as the Son or in passages in which Jesus refers to his relationship with the Father who sent him.

Ho hyios as a title for Jesus is used seventeen times in John. It is used almost exclusively by Jesus. The only exception is 3.34-36 where it occurs three times. John the Baptist seems to be the speaker, since there is no indication of a change of speaker from when the Baptist was talking to his disciples about Jesus (Barrett, 224).

The term occurs eight times in 5.19-30. Jesus has cured a cripple on the Sabbath, and, responding to the negative reaction of the Jews, says, "My Father is working until now, and I myself am working." The key issue is the special filial relationship to God, his Father, which gives him the authority to work, like God himself, even on the Sabbath. Since this claim to equality with God is viewed by his audience as blasphemous, Jesus proceeds to explain the role and nature of his Sonship. The Father lovingly reveals to the Son everything that he does, including empowering him to raise the dead from the grave and to bring them to eternal life or judgment. The Son can give life to anyone he chooses, because he shares in the very life of the Father. Similarly, the Son, having been given the divine privilege and power to judge, is thereby entitled to be honored like the Father. Therefore, to have eternal life and escape condemnation in judgment, all must listen to the Son. All these considerations follow from the perfect union of action and being between the Father and the Son. Jesus says "I and the Father are one" (10.30). Observe also:

the Father is in Me, and I in the Father (10.38)

I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me (14.10)

even as Thou, Father, are in Me, and I in Thee (17.21)

The view of the identity of the agent and sender is modified by the dependence of the Son on the Father in everything he does. This is clearly stated in 5.19, introduced by the emphatic *amen, amen*, "the Son can do nothing of Himself," and in 5.30, "I can do nothing on My own initiative . . . because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him" (13.16). Regardless of which verb for "send" is used in the Greek, it is always an active form that is used when referring to Jesus. This places an emphasis on the activity of the Father in sending his Son, but the subordination of the one sent is not one of a servant, rather it is one of a loving son. (Jesus uses the metaphor of slave and son in 8.35 to show the radical difference between the permanent status of the son and the temporary status of the slave in the house. The Son even has the authority to liberate those in slavery.) The son of the household is, in the Jewish view, the most fully qualified agent. The Son of God is the perfect agent.

Witnesses To The Agency

Baba Kamma asks how people are to know that one is an agent. If the sender "did not appoint him in the presence of witnesses, whence could we know that he was appointed as an agent at all" (104a)? The evangelist provides us with many witnesses to Jesus as the Son/agent of the Father. In 1.19-24, John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus as the Son of God. God sent the Baptist to baptize with water and told him that the one coming after him would baptize with the Spirit and could be recognized by the fact that the Spirit would come down and *remain* on the Christ. Schillebeeckx says that prophetic messianism meant "simply the prophet filled with God's Spirit (Zech. 7:12; Neh. 9:30); Christ and *Pneuma-*

possession are synonymous” (p. 443). So the Baptist is truly a witness. He did not initiate the story; he knows how to recognize the one from God because God told him how to do so. At 3.27 John said, “A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven.” Jesus tells us that although John the Baptist has borne witness to him, he does not really need that witness since he has better witnesses. These are “the Father who sent me” (5.37; 8.18), Jesus himself who bears witness to himself (8.14, 18), the Scriptures “that bear witness of me” (5.39), and “the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish” (5.36).

Jesus performs both the work and works of the Father. God initiates the work(s); Jesus obediently does the work(s) of his Father, which reveals Jesus’ special relation with the Father, and the work(s) of Jesus will be continued by the exalted Son. This last point relates to the notation of Tractate Nazir 12b that an agent can be appointed “for something which cannot be done at once but can be done later” (compare with 14.12-14; 5.20-21).

My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work (4.34)

I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou has given me (17.4)

We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day (9.4)

the works that I do in My Father’s name, these bear witness of Me (10.25)

If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe In Me (10.37)

though you do not believe me, believe the works (10.38)

Mission Of The Agent

Jesus being the agent of the Father — sent by God — points to both his relationship of Son to the Father and to his mission or works. In turn, both the mission and works bear witness to him as the agent of the Father. In the Talmud, “there is a presumption that an agent carries out his instructions” (Hullin, 12a). He “carries out his mission” (Erubin, 32a), namely the mission of the one who sent him. The agent is given his brief in obedience to the sender. In 6.38, Jesus said, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” He always does “the things that are pleasing” to the one who sent him (8.29).

Jesus is the one sent by God, from God, to the world. The world is the agent’s destination. He speaks what he has heard from his Father to the world (8.26). He came to the world for judgment (9.29) and as a witness to the truth (8.37). God sent him into the world to save the world (12.47), but if the world does not know Jesus, then it has “no excuse” for its sin (15.22). Not only does the Son “give eternal life” to believers, but he does not allow anyone “to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (10.29). Jesus’ mission includes the provision of a protection plan (6.39; 17.12 — except the son of perdition; 18.9).

In John’s view, Jesus’ mission is unique. Jesus did not come to bring a message;

he is the message. He does not bring truth; he is truth. He does not bring a gift; he is the gift. Truly the medium in the message. Jesus' mission is a communication between God the sender and mankind. His activity or mission depends on his being a certain kind of entity. In fact, his whole being is a certain kind of communication between God and man.

For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God (3.34)

My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me (7.16)

He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard
from Him, these I speak to the world (8.26)

I did not speak on My own initiative, but the
Father Himself who sent Me has given Me command-
ment, what to say, and what to speak (12.49)

the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's
who sent Me (14.24)

I manifested Thy name to the men who Thou gavest Me
out of the world (17.6)

Jesus was commissioned by the Father whose agent he is. The Father, as sender, is the source of Jesus' mission of revelation and salvation. The Son is constantly aware that he has come from the Father and goes to the Father:

knowing . . . that He had come from God, and was
going back to God (13.3)

I came forth from the Father, and have come into the
world; I am leaving the world again, and going to
the Father (16.28)

I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the
work which Thou has given Me to do. And now,
glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father (17.4-5)

Extending Agency

After Jesus returns to the Father, his mission can continue to be accomplished. As noted in Kiddushin 41a, "the agent can appoint an agent." Jesus tells his disciples, "as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." The "disciples" in the Fourth Gospel include not only "Those who are made believers by Jesus through his work and his signs," but also "the later community in contrast to the unbelieving Jews" and "the later believers in that they are challenged and tempted and their faith is inadequate" (Schnackenburg, III, 206-7). In other words, in John the "disciples are firstly Jesus' close companions, secondly his serious adherents and finally all later believers" (Schnackenburg, III, 208). Disciples who love Jesus, as reflected in their deeds, will be loved by him and the Father. Jesus will manifest himself to them and he and the Father will come and dwell with them (14.21, 23).

As Jesus is contrasted with his adversaries, so too will his agents be against the world (15.18). But God loved the world and sent his Son to the world. So too, believers are representatives of the Son and are sent into the world (17.18), but while in the world are kept "from the evil one" (17.15). These believers

are united because of the unity between the Father and the Son and the fact that the Son is in them as is the Father's love (17.26).

These believers are not for John "sons" of God. They are "children" (11.52). They are related to the Son and the Father in a special way. Somehow God initiates the process (6.37) such that they are drawn to him and Jesus, so they can see that Jesus' teaching comes from God (7.17). However, a faith response is also required. There is a dependence on the Son, so that believers must in faith respond to him, in order to become children of God.

Jesus tells his disciples (16.27) that the Father loves them because they love Jesus. But Jesus does not ask his disciples to love him; instead, he loves them so that they may love one another. This altruistic, self-sacrificing love is the kind of abundant fruit by which his disciples should glorify his Father (15.8). The mission that disciples are given is much like the mission of Jesus. There are two levels of agency here that function both for the receivers and the agents; "he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me" (13.20) and "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us" (17.21). Just as Jesus knew that what he said, what he did, and who he was all came from the Father, so too, the disciples should know that their words, deeds, and being are derived from the Father and his agent, the Son.

ANALYSIS OF SOURCES

Of particular interest among sources useful to an examination of Jewish concepts of agency are the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud. At the same time the particular problem of reliability is posed by the question: if the Mishnah came to closure at approximately 200 A.D. and the Babylonian Talmud's reflections on the Mishnah were completed by 400 A.D., how can there be reasonable assurance that what is contained in them has anything to do with Jewish practice and conceptual life two hundred to four hundred years earlier? E. P. Sanders claims, "parallels are often illuminating, as long as one does not jump from 'parallel' to 'influence' to 'identity of thought' " (p. 11).

While the Mishnah was closed at approximately 200 A.D., it was a redaction of ideas and sayings from up to several hundred years earlier. From historical criticism and a systematic literary analysis of the document, Jacob Neusner (p. xff.) has developed a method to determine the earliest period from which the materials are claimed by the Mishnah itself to originate. The Mishnah contains statements that are attributed to authorities prior to the redaction of the document. One of the factors used to test the antiquity of a Mishnah allegation concerns the grouping of the authorities by periods of time during which they flourished. The authorities designated A, B, C, and D are among the earliest, producing their sayings before 70 A.D. The Kiddushin Tractate, from which we derive the principle of agency, lists authorities A, B, and C as the ones who refer to the issue of agency. This suggests that the concept of agency occurs early in halakah. The second factor used to determine how ancient a particular Mishnah allegation is pertains to the logical sequence of a principle to its corollary. A prin-

principle of law logically and chronologically precedes a corollary to or a specific instance of that same law. Thus the principle of agency and an understanding of the concept is prior, in both thought and time, to any debate about whether betrothal can be effected through an agent.

In an article in *Jewish Law Association Studies*, Alexander Guttman argues that laymen held an important role in shaping halakah. Unlike the priests, the rabbis focused their attention on the material and spiritual needs of the people, especially as they related to their real-life situations. "Therefore, they often had to react positively to the wishes of the people, accept and approve of many of their customs. Moreover, in several instances, rabbis had to accept their ways of executing laws, biblical (toraitic) and rabbinical, as legitimate parts of Judaism" (pp. 41-42). Although in principle the law is superior to custom, a dictum of the Palestinian Talmud is, "Custom nullifies the Law." This does not mean that custom would nullify an existing law, but that no future ruling could be introduced as law if it would abolish an existing custom of the people. From this position we can suppose that the principle of agency expressed in the Mishnah not only was pre-70 A.D., but in no way was contrary to the customs of the people concerning agency.

Since there were similarities in the concept of agency in halakah and in the Fourth Gospel, it seems possible that the former was derived from the latter. But, concepts and terminology stressed by early Christianity (including proselytizing practices and religious rituals) tended to be deemphasized by Judaism (Gordon, p. 685). It seems unlikely that during a period when there was much polemic between Jews and Jewish Christians, there would be much Jewish borrowing from Christianity. In fact, if the concept were not an integral part of Jewish conceptual life, one might suppose that, upon recognition of its vital function in the Gospel, Jews would find it easy to forsake.

The arguments favoring the antiquity of the concept of agency reflected in the Mishnah are threefold. First, as Neusner points out in his literary and historical analysis of the document, dating the concept of agency in halakah to pre-70 A.D. is reasonable and likely. Second, any legal application of a principle presupposes the recognition of the principle. The social role of custom in the development and recognition of legal principles, however, suggests an even earlier date for the concept. Finally, had the notion developed from a (Jewish) Christian source, it would have been discarded in the Jewish/Christian polemic. Its very existence in the Mishnah provides *prima facie* evidence for claiming its depth in Jewish conceptual life.

Presuppositions To Agency

There is a concept that seems to be logically prior to that of a divine agent. Certain characteristics of the concept of agent, as later expressed in halakah, were used by the evangelist in his concept of divine agency. This divine agent is totally human, and the totally pervasive human and divine aspects of the agent do not always seem to be what precipitate controversy in the Gospel. While Jesus is threatened with stoning for his perceived blasphemy in calling God his Father

— thereby making himself equal to God — there are underlying currents in which it seems that the truly intense aversion of the Jews to Jesus was not because a human was claiming to be divine. Rather the aversion stems from this particular human claiming to be divine in the particular way in which he claims it. He clearly does not meet their expectations in either his behavior or his being.

This suggests that preconceived notions of the divine agent were prevalent. This agent is not to be merely an instrument, a carrier of messages. While he does the will of the Father it is also his will. To have this kind of conception seems to require a cluster of logically prior notions about the nature of God. The God who would send such an agent must himself be of a certain sort. He cannot be perceived to be a totally transcendent being. He must not only be thought of as immanent, but must be a real person, a *mensch*. He is not just a divine providence who sends rain on both saint and sinner or even divides mankind into two groups — the blessed/saved and the cursed/lost. Rather, he is seen to be a personality with personal activities, even quirks. He must in some way be accessible to man.

To see God in this way may seem to be an instance of “creating God in man’s image,” but some sort of anthropocentric conceptual framework appears to be necessary for acceptance of the idea of divine agency. Clearly it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the Old Testament for a development of this “human” God, this God who feels human feelings and does human things, but it is not out of place to mention this cluster of apparently logically prior concepts and to entice the reader to think about this and its possible ramifications for the history of the doctrine of the incarnation.

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