Towards a theological understanding of Johannine discipleship

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ABSTRACT
Discipleship in the Fourth Gospel indicates a personal relationship between Jesus and his disciples. This relationship is modelled on the Father/Son relationship which is elucidated by the agency model. A descent-ascent schema forms the setting for this concept, with the Johannine dualism as the determining factor for this schema. The ‘agency’ motif constitutes the conceptual framework from which discipleship flows.

1 INTRODUCTION
During the first seven decades of this century, there was relatively little interest in discipleship as a Johannine theological concept. The literature consulted (see Van der Merwe 1995:9ff) is sketchy about discipleship in the Fourth Gospel. Research on this concept has been limited to articles and a few monographs and references in writings which do not deal specifically with discipleship. Sometimes only aspects of discipleship were addressed: Appold (1976) discusses ‘oneness’; Caird (1968) and Bratcher (1991) ‘glory’ and Hartin (1991) ‘remain in me’. During those decades there was no systematic and comprehensive reflection on discipleship in the Fourth Gospel as a theme. The first substantial approach to research about discipleship in the Fourth Gospel came in 1971 when Jiménez wrote his El discípulo de Jesucristo según el evangelio de S Juan. In the eighties greater interest followed. The first monograph after Jiménez appeared in 1982 when Pazdan wrote her thesis on Discipleship as the appropriation of eschatological salvation in the Fourth Gospel. Since then the interest in this subject has increased considerably (see Van der Merwe 1995:11ff).

This renewed interest on discipleship in the Fourth Gospel is partly due to Rudolph Bultmann who left a gap in his Johannine studies by virtually ignoring one particular area of enquiry, namely Johannine ecclesiology. Consequently, to the most significant advance in Johannine studies in the latter half of the twentieth century is in this area (Ashton 1991:44).¹

¹ Some factors that could contribute to this lack of interest: (1) The major theological focus in the Gospel has been christological and eschatological. (2) There has been renewed concern about the sources for the Gospel. (3) There has been a growing inter-
After Bultmann, a paradigm shift took place regarding Johannine research and more attention was paid to the situation and circumstances of the audience, which definitely contributed to a greater interest in discipleship and ecclesiology in the Fourth Gospel.

This paper represents an attempt to contribute to the research on discipleship in the Fourth Gospel from a specific perspective: I shall try to formulate the theological setting and framework for the interpretation of Johannine discipleship.

In the last discourses where Jesus prepares his disciples for his ascent and their mission into the world, but especially in 17:18 and 20:21, it seems that discipleship in the Fourth Gospel relates to the continuation and extension of the mission of Jesus. In 17:18 Jesus said καθὼς ἐμὲ ἀπέστησας εἰς τὸν κόσμον, καὶ γὰρ ἀπέστησα αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν κόσμον. This would imply that the Jesus-disciples relationship (discipleship) is placed parallel to the Father-Son relationship. If discipleship is thus seated in and based on the Father-Son relationship, then the mission of Jesus constitutes the theological setting and framework in which Johannine discipleship should be interpreted.

2 MISSION IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

'Sending' plays a central role (Waldstein 1990:310; Allen 1953:166) and is

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1 The following scholars discuss the situation and circumstances of the Johannine audience: Schweizer, Schnackenburg, D’Aragon, Moule, Grayston, Pancaro, Baumbach, Haacker, Culpepper, Meeks, Pancaro, O’Grady, Kysar, Brown, Collins, Woll, Renner, Dahl, Domeris, Prysor, Lombard. Through their respective approaches these studies begin to clarify and outline the meaning and nature of Christian discipleship from the Johannine perspective. The results have not been at all dissimilar; indeed, general agreement may be said to prevail with respect to certain fundamental aspects of discipleship in the Johannine community: for instance the central role of belief and unity in such discipleship and the sustained contrast between believers and unbelievers.

2 In South Africa the following scholars have made contributions regarding discipleship in the Fourth Gospel: Neethling (1984), Du Rand (1991), Tolmie (1992) and Van der Merwe (1993).

3 The christology of the Fourth Gospel has been subjected to extensive systematic analysis (Loader 1984:188ff). Much attention has been given to individual motifs and their historic-traditional background. Traditionally it concentrated on the perception of the titles by which Jesus was most commonly addressed or designated, such as Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, and Logos (Kysar 1993, esp :27–57). Apart from the major commentaries by Bultmann, Lenski, Bernard, Schnackenburg, Brown, Morris, Barrett, Lindars and Carson, there are also the works of Bultmann 1953, Blank 1964,
one of two major motifs in the Fourth Gospel. The Father sends his Son with a mission, that is, to reveal the Father (1:18; 5:37) in the world 'below' as ὁ πέμψας με (1:33; 5:37; 6:44; 7:28; 8:16,18,26,29; 12:49) and the Son (1:19–36; 5:31–40) as the one who was sent by the Father (cf 16:30; 17:8), and who will return to the Father through the cross (13:1; 17:1, 13).

The theme of the Father sending his Son from the 'world above' to the 'world below' occurs throughout the Fourth Gospel (3:13; 6:33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58; 7:28; 8:14,42; 13:3) and is presented in various ways. This is discernible from the direct statements in 8:42 and 11:42 and indirectly from the references of Jesus to his Father as 'the one who sent him' (5:24,30; 7:28,29). Even more frequent is the stereotype designation of Jesus as 'the one who has come', while no mention is made of his origin (1:9,11; 3:19; 5:24,43; 10:10; 12:13,27,46,47; 15:22; 16:28; 18:37; confer also 6:14; 4:25; 7:27,31; 11:27). This motif is frequently the focus of discussion. This is seen particularly in chapter 6, where the contrast between heavenly bread and manna is based on the fact that Jesus is the true bread that came down from heaven. In some discourses this receives central attention (cf 7:27ff; 8:14ff; 8:42ff). Probably the most

Käsemann 1968, Müller 1975 and Moloney 1978. Pryor (1991:341) states that 'no one would care to dispute that John makes use of a descent-ascent Christology'. But in the meantime a paradigmatic shift of the christology of the Fourth Gospel has taken place, viewing it from a new perspective: Christ the Agent, or missionary (Borgen 1968, Harvey 1987, Waldstein 1990, Mercer 1990, Van der Watt 1991, cf Kuhl 1967, Bühner 1977, Miranda 1977, Loader 1984). The word 'agent' offers a new way of describing the person and work of Christ, and framing the Christology in its totality. Although the term 'agent' is more familiar to us in modern times, it has recently been argued that 'the use of the term has historical justification, in the sense that the concept of agency can be discerned as underlying some of the language used with reference to Jesus in the New Testament' (Harvey 1987:239). Although there is apparently no direct reference to an 'agent' or 'agency' in the entire NT, it is clear that this concept was used by the Fourth Evangelist, and in such a way as to prove that he was familiar with the concept of agency (cf Harvey 1987:242). According to the work of Borgen (1968) and Bühner (1977) it seems that the Fourth Evangelist was familiar with the basic technicalities of the Jewish law of agency and that he exploited this concept in order to clarify the relationship of the Son (Jesus) to his heavenly Father. In his most recent theological work Gnülka (1994:226–324) discusses the theology of the NT and Johannine theology, including the 'agency' motif as part of Johannine Theology. For the origin of a 'sending christology' see Bühner (1977).

Waldstein (1990:311f; also see Okure 1988:1,285) is of the opinion 'that mission is the "central view" and "fundamental conception" of John, the Gospel's "fundamental hermeneutic or leitmotiv"'. The family-metaphor is the other major motif (J G Van der Watt, personal communication). We must regard these two major motifs as complementary to one another; the family motif figures on the horizontal level and the sending motif on the vertical level.
prominent text comes from the prologue.\(^6\) Finally, the centrality of this motif is also confirmed in summary statements.\(^7\) The sending from heaven continues when the Father and the Son send the Paraclete (14:26; 15:26). On earth Jesus also sends the disciples (13:20a; 17:18; 20:21) to continue the mission jointly with the Paraclete, just as John the Baptist was sent to inaugurate it (1:33; 3:28). According to Mercer (1992:457) ‘This threefold sending of the Baptist, Jesus, and the Disciples-Paraclete serves to incorporate ‘sending’ into the flow of the Gospel and to highlight its importance.’ In the Fourth Gospel, particularly in the second half of the Fourth Gospel nearer to the time of his death and in his conversations with his disciples, Jesus also frequently refers to his return to the Father (6:62; 7:33,35; 8:14,21,22; 13:3,33:36; 14:2,4,5,12,28; 16:5,7,10,17,28; 17:11,13; 20:17). The descent of Jesus is clearly linked with his returning to the Father (cf 3:13; 8:14; 13:3). Consult Meeks (1986:141) for a thorough discussion on this point.

An important theological aspect concerning Jesus’ mission, which is important for the understanding of where discipleship fits into God’s revelatory-salvific plan, is that Jesus came from the ‘above’ into the ‘below’ to live for a while among us (καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ημῖν, 1:14). Firstly, ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ημῖν indicates that Jesus did not come to physically stay on earth permanently. His ‘physical coming’ was only temporary. This then would mean that if the revelatory-salvific work which he came to initialise on earth should be continued, this could be done only through his disciples. This continuation and extension of Jesus’ mission would imply a new way of life for his followers (disciples), which is called discipleship. Secondly, this new way of life (which consists of the continuation and extension of Jesus’ mission) is characterised, emphasised and motivated by the fact that ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ημῖν does not mean that Jesus became part of the ‘below’ (17:16), but that he made the ‘above’ present in the ‘below’ (1:14,17). It also does not mean that the contrast between these two worlds is cancelled or eliminated.

In a spatial sense, the sending of Jesus brings about a possible concrete contact between these two ‘realities’. The ‘above’ comes in an audible, sensible and experiential sense to exist in the ‘below’. According to Van der Watt this contact makes interaction between these two realities possible.

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\(^6\) The prologue already provides a ‘theological foundation’ (Waldstein 1990:312) for the sending of Jesus by claiming that ἐν ἀρχῇ ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν καὶ ὁ θεός ἦν ὁ (1:1). John 1:9 is the first reference of Jesus’ mission from ‘the world above’ (the heavenly sphere—vn 1,2) to ‘the world below’. Ὁ ἐν τῷ φως ἐς ἄλλην ἄλλην, ὁ φωστήρ τὰν ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον.  

\(^7\) Cf 13:3 where Jesus’ thoughts on the eve of his departure are given as his εἰδὼς ὅτι πάντα ἔδωκεν αυτῷ ὁ πατὴρ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας καὶ ὅτι πάντα ἀνθρώπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. Also see Jn 17.
Because the incarnate Jesus brings the ‘above’ to the experience of man, it now becomes possible for man to have contact with the ‘above’ in the person of Jesus and to come to a personal salvatory relationship with him (Van der Watt 1991:108f). This concrete contact is best formulated in 1:14: Καὶ ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἔδεικνύει τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ως μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. Thus, in Jesus, God came to live among people. After Jesus’ departure God will continue to live among people through the disciples-Paraclete.


These different terms and motifs can be combined and categorised as the following two concepts: the descent-ascent schema and the agency motif.

2.1 The descent-ascent schema: the setting for Jesus’ agency (and discipleship)

2.1.1 The descent and ascent of Jesus

The narrative of the Fourth Gospel is set between two eschatological events, namely the descent and ascent of Jesus, and is dependent upon them. Jesus’ descent from heaven is not described in the Fourth Gospel, but is presupposed everywhere as a fait accompli (Meeks 1986:145). Jesus is to be understood as the one who comes from ‘above’ (3:13b,31; 6:38; 8:23; 13:3; 16:28a) and who will later return to the ‘above’ (3:13a; 13:1–3; 16:5,28b). Despite frequent indications that Jesus belongs to the world ‘above’, the Jesus events are all played out on earth. The two static divisions (spheres) of ‘above’ and ‘below’ constitute the origin and destination, the place where he has come from and where he is going to. It creates a fundamental contrast and

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8 In this sense the sending-motif constitutes the particular context for the soteriology, Christology, (pneumatology) eschatology, and other important themes in the Fourth Gospel (cf Van der Watt 1991:109).

9 This Descent-Ascent Schema occurs exclusively in the discourses of Jesus (i.e 3:10–14; 6:26–59) and not in the narrative parts of the Fourth Gospel. The reason is to reveal Jesus through his own words. In these passages Jesus is depicted as ‘the Stranger par excellence’ (Meeks 1986:146).
tension from which a κρίσις arises. This contrast and κρίσις explain why Jesus’ mission and the continuation of this mission were necessary.

In chapters 1-12 of the Fourth Gospel Jesus speaks of his coming from the Father and his relationship with the Father that continues throughout his mission (3:16,17,31-35; 4:34; 5:19-23,37; 6:29,38,40-46; 7:16,28,29; 8:36-38,42,54; 10:17,30-38; 12:45-49; 14:9-11,20,28; 16:5,28; 17:8,11-24). In this descent of Jesus and his relationship with the Father, the Holy Spirit plays an important role (3:34). Even when Jesus is ‘below’ he remains, through the Spirit (6:63; 1:32), one with the Father, the source of his actions, words and authority. This relationship between the Father and Jesus is also described in terms of movement: Jesus is the one who is ‘sent by the Father’,10 while the Father is described as ‘he who sent me’ (i.e., 5:23b-24, 30, 37).

It is with increasing frequency that, from chapters 13-17 especially, Jesus speaks about his imminent departure which is described in chapters 18ff. Any understanding of who Jesus really is, can only be in terms of this schema: to know where he came from, what he accomplished and where he is going. In the Fourth Gospel people’s faith is judged in terms of this understanding of Jesus. Now, at the end of his earthly mission, as at the beginning of this mission, the Holy Spirit plays an important role. It is only after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Jesus’ disciples could know his identity (20:22).

2.1.2 Terminology used to describe the descent-ascent of Jesus

This dualism, inherent in the ‘above’ and ‘below’ (8:23), appears to be of great importance to the Fourth Evangelist. This is confirmed by the richness of the language that is used to describe this schema. In fact, the mission of Jesus has primarily been expressed by two verbs ἀποστέλλω (texts as relative clauses with ἀποστέλλω as a limited verb spoken by Jesus are: 3:34; 5:38; 6:29; 10:36; 17:3) and πέμπω (πέμπω used by Jesus in a participle phrase occurs in the following texts: 4:34; 5:23; 24,37; 5:30; 6:38,39,44; 7:16,18,28,33; 8:16,18,29; 9:4; 12:44,45,49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5) (Mercer 1992:457). Secondarily, Jesus’ mission is expressed in related terms (cf. Waldstein 1990:310):

10 The Fourth Evangelist maintains that the way to understand who Jesus is, is to understand him in this schema: to know where he comes from and where he is going. The disciples, who gradually come to what is true belief, truly believe in Jesus at the closing of the Fourth Gospel (ch 20). For the first time, after Jesus had given them the Spirit (20:22) they have come to believe that Jesus came from God and that he is returning to God. This growth in their belief comes through periods of misunderstanding and ‘quantum jumps’ (Nicholson 1983:22) in understanding. The understanding on the part of the disciples is the result of periods of intense, repetitive and patient teaching by Jesus.
the descent of Jesus from ‘above’ is depicted in terms of καταβαίνειν, πόθεν, ἀνωθεν, ἐρχόμαι, δίδωμι, σάρξ ἐγένετο, ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν and ἐπέρχομαι. His ascent is described in terms of ἀναβαίνειν, ἐρχόμαι, δίδωμι, μεταβαίνω, ὥπου, ύψω, δοξέω, ὑπαγω, πορεύομαι, ἀφημι and ἀπέρχομαι. From this variety of terms it is clear that the Fourth Evangelist is not bound to the use of any particular word to describe the descent and ascent of Jesus. It seems clear that he uses these semantically related terms to refer to the same aspects (descent/ascent), but from different perspectives in order to emphasise different aspects in his coming and going. A study of the Fourth Gospel’s usage of these terms and phrases (see Van der Merwe 1995:141ff) proves that the descent-ascent schema is concerned with issues such as movement (most of these semantically related terms are verbs, which together stress this cosmic movement from ‘above’ to ‘below’), contrast, salvation and revelation (cf Nicholson 1983:21). The descent-ascent schema primarily depicts Jesus’ movement between the ‘world above’ and the ‘world below’. Also significant and prominent is the contrast depicted by the descent-ascent schema. The Son’s continuing relationship with the Father, and the works he came to perform, emphasise this contrast.

2.1.3 Conclusion

(1) This brief discussion of the descent-ascent schema in the Fourth Gospel, clearly shows that the mission of Jesus was not the stackpole around which Johannine Christology was built. It is indeed the integral part of the Fourth Gospel’s view of Christ in particular, and other theological affirmations in general. Thus the mission of Jesus must be integrated into the total message of the Fourth Gospel, in relation to the dualism. The descent-ascent schema indicates that Jesus’ descent and ascent are closely connected. One cannot understand the descent without incorporating the ascent, and no understanding of the ascent can take place without the incorporation of the descent. Therefore all other motifs (even discipleship) should be interpreted from this perspective. In this context, the mission of Jesus serves to reveal Jesus himself and also the Father in the ‘world above’, and in the ‘world below’ in order to achieve salvation for those who believe that Jesus came from ‘above’ and will return there.

(2) A theological aspect: The descent-ascent schema constitutes the framework within which the work of God is done. This implies that it constitutes

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a setting for the missions of Jesus and his disciples. It becomes the cipher for:
(i) the unique self-knowledge of Jesus, (ii) his foreignness to the people of the
'world below', (iii) true faith and salvation, and (iv) discipleship. It indicates
God's plan for the world. He Himself is the architect behind this plan of
revelation and salvation. He is the Initiator and the one in control.

(3) A Christological element: In the descent-ascent schema the identity of
Jesus is the key element. In fact, in this schema Jesus is clearly portrayed as
the 'Agent' of God. The descent-ascent schema indicates that Jesus stands in
a permanent relationship with God. As the Messiah his obedience to the
Father has been portrayed, while his oneness with the Father is seen in his
Sonship. In fact, he is the presence of God in this world. Jesus came on behalf
of God and is the ultimate self-disclosure of God to man. Therefore a disciple
of Jesus will know that Jesus, as the Messiah, came from God and was sent by
God. He will also know, through the inspiration of the Spirit, that Jesus has,
as the Son of God, returned to God.

(4) A discipleship aspect: The descent-ascent schema constitutes the setting
for the agency of Jesus and that of the disciples. This schema brings together
the mission of Jesus and that of his disciples. The divine mission of Jesus
started with the descent of the Son, while Jesus' ascent puts his disciples in a
position to continue with this divine mission. After Jesus' departure his disci-
iples will perform greater works than their Master did. In fact, it is Jesus
himself who will perform his works through them. This performance will be
an act of association of the disciples with Jesus—which indicates the act of
discipleship. Whoever joins Jesus in following him finds in him the goal of
his existence, the 'light of life'. Thus, Jesus' departure brings a new dimen-
sion to his relationship with his disciples. His departure gives his disciples the
opportunity to take his place and continue with his work. Through disci-
pleship he will live in them and they in him.

(5) A pneumatological aspect: Jesus' ascent leads to the sending of the
Paraclete who will continue the divine mission of Jesus through his disciples.
This does not imply that the Spirit was absent during Jesus' ministry. In fact,
it is the Spirit that made possible the whole mission of Jesus. The coming of
the Spirit creates a new communion of the disciples with Jesus. Thus Jesus'
ascent is not an end in itself. Jesus continues his presence among his disciples
in another mode; through the Spirit-Paraclete he is present in them.

The agency motif, which characterises the relationship between the
Father and the Son (and the Holy Spirit), and which describes the conceptual
framework of the mission of Jesus and the disciples, will now be discussed.
2.2 The agency of Jesus: the conceptual framework for the mission of Jesus (and discipleship)

2.2.1 Jesus depicted as God’s agent

Throughout the Fourth Gospel Jesus is depicted as God’s agent in the world. He was sent (ἀπέστειλεν) by God (3:17) on a specific mission: οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνῃ τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ’ ἵνα σώθῃ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ (3:17; also cf 3:34; 7:16; 8:26, 28, 29, 42; 12:49; 14:24) and in 5:43 it is stated that Jesus came in the name of God (Father). A person who comes in the name of God, comes on behalf of God (Bultman 1941:203). This makes Jesus God’s representative in the world. Here he has to act on behalf of God.

By using ἀπέστειλεν frequently and throughout the Fourth Gospel in connection with Jesus’ mission, Jesus is characterised as the one who is sent on a mission¹². The profile of this mission, as constructed throughout the

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¹² The noun ἀπόστολος occurs 79 times in the New Testament. The vast majority of instances occur in the Pauline and Lukan material. Paul views an apostle as someone who has been sent to proclaim an authoritative message of salvation (Rengstorf 1933:421; Müller 1975.129–130). In Acts this title is applied to a select group of authorities in the early Christian Church (Müller 1975:128–129), and in the Synoptic Gospels this title has been related to the twelve (Müller 1975:128). According to Müller (1975:128) ἀπόστολος is used in the NT only in the general sense of messenger, and in particular as a fixed designation of the primitive apostolate, a definite office. Rengstorf (1933:421ff) agrees with Müller and adds that the one who is sent, is sent with full authority. Can Jesus and even his disciples, in this sense, be called apostles in the Fourth Gospel? It is striking that the Fourth Gospel does not attribute the title ἀπόστολος to Jesus (cf Bühler 1977:265f; Harvey 1987:242), nor to his disciples. He, as the Son, is sent by his Father and his main objective, according to the Fourth Gospel, was (i) to reveal the truth about God in order that (ii) people may be called to faith (cf Mercer 1992:460). Although the evidence surveyed so far strongly suggests the appropriateness of labeling Jesus ‘the apostle’ of the Fourth Gospel, a very good reason exists as to why the Fourth Evangelist did not do so. Unfortunately such a point of view will harm the image of Jesus as depicted in the Fourth Gospel. ἀπόστολος occurs only once in the Fourth Gospel (13:16) where it is used in the nontechnical sense of messenger (Rengstorf 1933:421; Bultmann 1941:364; Müller 1975:129), while in the the NT, it is only in Hebrews 3:1 that Jesus is called an apostle. Mercer (1992:460f) gives an unsatisfactory answer to the above question. He says ‘that the apostles, while clearly authoritative and revered, were men. For John to call Jesus an apostle—given the prior use of the term in early Christianity—would be to run the risk of demeaning his Lord by denoting him to the level of human apostles. Therefore to refer to God sending Jesus on a religious mission John used ἀπόστειλεν (as opposed to πέμπειν), which was different from, but related to the title ἀπόστολος.’ In the case of Jesus one must consider that he is more than an apostle; he is not only the proclaim of salvation, he is salvation. His mission comprises not only revelation, but salvation; he gave his life on the cross (τετέλεσαν—19:30) to work salvation. In the case of the disciples the solution should be sought in the frequency and in the way in which the Fourth Evangelist used the term μάθητης. An apostle’s main function is to proclaim the message about Jesus Christ, while in the case of discipleship it concerns a
Fourth Gospel, also relates closely to the principles of agency in extra-biblical texts. According to this construct about the mission of Jesus, He can therefore be depicted as 'The agent of the Father'.

The appointment and legitimacy of Jesus as the agent of the Father is described in 10:36 and 3:34. John 10:36 clearly states ὁ πατὴρ ἡγίασεν καὶ ἀπέστειλεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον..., and 3:34 reads: God has sent Jesus to speak the words of God and that God has given (sanction) him the Spirit through which he will accomplish this mission (ὁ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὰ ρήματα τοῦ θεοῦ λαλεῖ, οὐ γὰρ ἐκ μέτρου δίδωσιν τὸ πνεῦμα). Even in 8:42 Jesus says ...ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον καὶ ἤκω οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀπ' ἐμαυτοῦ ἐλήλυθα, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνος με ἀπέστειλεν. Jesus only speaks of what he has seen with his Father (8:38).

Finally the agency character of Jesus' mission can also be deduced from the fact that Jesus came to speak the words of God (3:34; 7:16; 8:26; 12:49; 14:24; also cf 8:28, 38, 47; 12:50; 14:10; 17:8); Jesus came to finish the work of God (4:34; 5:36; 17:4; also cf 8:28); and finally Jesus came prepared to do the will of God (4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:29; cf 8:55).

In all the above-mentioned texts, with the exception of 5:36 and 17:4, the Father is depicted as the one who sent Jesus (τοῦ πέμψαντός με). He is the initiator, the SENDER, and Jesus is the AGENT. Jesus speaks only on behalf of the Father and finishes the work of the Father, also on his behalf. Thus Jesus fulfills the will of his Father. This he accomplishes only through the Spirit (3:34).

2.2.2 The Fourth Evangelist influenced by some concept of agency

This conceptual framework in which the Fourth Evangelist moulded his understanding of Jesus' mission, is not his own creation, but was undoubtedly influenced by some concept of agency. There are various pos-

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13 Harvey (1987:239) points out that it was argued fairly recently that the use of this concept of 'agency' can be discerned as historically underlying some of the language used by Jesus in the NT. He argues that this concept throws light on the early history of Christology. Harvey (1987:241) seems to be correct in his opinion that although the origins of this emphasis of Father and Son may lie further back in the tradition.
possible influences because the idea of 'An Agent from heaven' was not so unique: from Gnostic mythology (Bultmann 1953:380ff), from the Jewish halakhic principles of agency (Borgen 1968:137ff; Miranda 1977:130ff; Bühner 1977:421; Mercer 1992:461; cf Harvey 1987:238ff); ¹⁴ Hellenistic Jewish wisdom (Schweizer 1966:199ff); and, finally, the Hellenistic principles as found within the Roman world (see Kysar 1993:45). ¹⁵ A brief discussion of some of represented by the Synoptics, the presentation of the Son as the agent par excellence of the Father is the product of the Fourth Evangelist's innovative mind. This point of view is supported by Bühner (1977). This means that the Fourth Evangelist, unlike the Synoptics, has innovatively chosen to present Jesus' identity and the work he came to do from the perspective of agency, though he was influenced by other sources.

¹⁴ It seems as if Théo Preiss (1954:9–31) was one of the first authors to draw attention to certain similarities between the Fourth Gospel and the halakah. Some years later Barrett (1958:216,474) supported him. The importance of judicial ideas in the Fourth Gospel has been stressed by Dahl (1962:137ff) and Borgen (1968:37ff), and in 1977 Miranda located the roots of Johannine 'sending' in Jewish sources.

¹⁵ In order to find an appropriate background for the Johannine 'sending' some proposals were made. Bultmann (1950:187) rightly places the commissioning and sending of the Son in the centre of the Fourth Gospel's message. He finds certain points of contact between the Johannine ideas and the proverbs of the OT. According to Bultmann the Fourth Gospel goes beyond the thought of a prophet and interprets gnostic mythology about divine and pre-existent agents, commissioned by the Father and sent into the world (one must bear in mind that Bultmann makes these deductions from the Mandaean literature). Dodd (1980:254ff), like Bultmann, finds a connection with the OT prophets. According to him the status and function of God's representative, the Son of God, recalls the language of the OT prophets. Dodd's interpretation does not consider seriously the commissioning and sending of the Son. Schweizer (1966:199ff) provides evidence for an origin in Hellenistic Jewish wisdom. Two years later Borgen (1968:137ff) indicated that rabbinical agency had been combined with the concept of a divine agent in Philo. Miranda (1977:130ff) locates the roots of Johannine 'sending' in Jewish sources. This correlates with the current trend in which the Christian apostle is interpreted in the light of the Jewish halakah and its OT background and is opposed to Gnostic sources (cf Müller 1975:134). According to his perception of the history of the Johannine community, Miranda shows how the 'sending' convention in the Fourth Gospel can be placed in the context of the development of that community and its conflict with Judaism (Mercer 1990:624 Fn 29). Allen (1953:161ff) writes about the representative role of Jesus and uses the entire NT as text. Unfortunately he discusses this motif incompletely with only a few references to the Fourth Gospel. His contribution to the understanding of this motif in the Fourth Gospel is that he could have stimulated the discussion on this motif which followed some years later. Although the major contributions on this theme were mentioned in the previous paragraph, it should be noted that Rengstorff (1933:397) did fundamental and extremely influential work on this theme when he investigated the terms ἄποστέλλων and τεμπεῖν. Unfortunately he gave only an attenuated point of view on how this concept appears in the Fourth Gospel. Loader (1984:196) again investigated the central structure of the Johannine Christology which, as he points out, contains the following features: (i) the Father-Son terminology, (ii) that the Son came from and returns to the Father, (iii) that the Son is sent by the Father, (iv) that the Father has given all things into his hands, and (v) that the Son has made the Father known. These
these scholars’ contributions will determine their interpretative contributions to this motif in order to construct a hypothetical framework of ‘agency’ which can be used as an angle of incidence in order to determine deductively the ‘agency framework of the Fourth Gospel’.

The following scholars have made valuable contributions regarding the origin and understanding of the concept of Jesus as God’s agent: Borgen (1968:137–148) wrote a valuable article about the ‘agency’ of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. Influenced by Preiss and Barrett, who found close parallels in the halakah which encouraged the investigation aimed at determining the extent to which the christology and soteriology of the Fourth Gospel are moulded on the Jewish rules for agency, he tried to relate the mission of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel to the principles of agency in the halakhic literature. The principles of agency16 spelled out by Borgen, which clarify the meaning of ἀποστέλλων, are as follows:

1. The unity between the agent and his sender,
2. The subordination of the agent,
3. The obedience of the agent to the will of the sender,
4. The return and reporting back of the agent to the sender,
5. The agent appoints other agents as an extension of his own mission in time and space.

Borgen (1968:144) maintains that, in order to find a background for this extraordinary point of view, a stream of Jewish thought would be the solution; a stream containing a combination of halakah, heavenly figures and agents from the heavenly world. Borgen suggests that such a background is to be found in an early form of Jewish Merkabah speculations (1968:144).

features relate strongly to those of agency. According to Loader each of these statements is of ‘central significance for the Johannine Christology’. Van der Watt’s (1991) discussion on Johannine theology also refers to the agency concept as the structure of the theology. The most recent contribution comes from Gnilka (1994:226–324). In his discussion of Die Theologie des johanneischen Schriftums he discusses Christ as der Gottgesandte. He looks at aspects such as: the ‘I am’-sayings, Jesus as the one sent, the Son of Man who came as forerunner, and finally the Messiah who has been misunderstood. Gnilka (1994:246) excellently sums up Jesus’ position in the Fourth Gospel in his comparison of the Fourth Gospel with the Synoptics as: ‘Die bemerkenswerteste Unterschied zwischen dem vierten Evangelium und seinen synoptischen Vorgängern dürfte darin bestehen, da Christus zur Mitte der Verkündigung geworden ist. Der johanneische Christus verkündigt sich selbst. Er ist Subjekt und Objekt der Verkündigung.’

16 In ancient agency different connotations were attached to the two terms used: ἀπόστολος and ἀποστέλλων. Both Rengstorff (1933:397ff) and Müller (1975:126ff) discuss these terms.
The important monograph by Bührner carried the discussion of Borgen further. Bührner sets his argument within the discussions of 'the sent one'. ¹⁷ He tries to provide an alternative by studying the ancient East's concept of a 'messenger', which is intimately linked to the sender, entrusted with a task, after the completion of which he is required to return to where he belongs. The pattern that appears is therefore: 'Beantragung, Durchführung, and Rückkehr' (1977:118ff). This is a popular pattern that finds many parallels in the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus as 'the one sent'.

In the next few pages Bührner focuses the attention on the link between the Jewish 'messenger' teaching and the messenger's use of ἤλθον and ἐγὼ εἰμι. The latter justifies his presence while he is performing his task (1977:138ff). After Bührner has laid this foundation he carefully examines the way in which the Johannine concept of Jesus as 'the one sent' takes over and adapts the official Rabbinic halakah on agency in a Christian mould. Bührner refers to an enormous amount of Rabbinic material which leaves no doubt that this 'messenger scheme' was part of their thought. From this he then locates the Johannine community in a cultural setting. ¹⁸

In the final part of this work he investigates the ascending and descending messengers of God in Judaism as a background to Johannine Christology (1977: 270ff). Bührner shows that the Rabbis used the 'messenger scheme' in their own particular way to speak of a prophet as a heavenly messenger. Central to their notion was the thought that the prophet (especially Moses) 'went up' so that he could see the heavenly. While he was there he was transformed into an 'angel', and subsequently descended as an authentic revealer. Therefore, in Judaism, a prophet is regarded as an angel who saw the heavenly realm by way of an ascent, was transformed there, and then descended to perform his task as a 'messenger' of God (1977: 341ff).

It is into this scheme that Bührner places the Christology of the Fourth Gospel (1977: 374ff). He correctly maintains that this Christology depends upon the dualism of 'above' and 'below', the 'heavenly' and the 'earthly'. ¹⁹

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¹⁷ He evaluates (pp 8–115) the suggestions that this concept reflects a Gnostic background, 'divine man' speculations, Hellenistic religious thought, early Christian enthusiastic streams and Wisdom speculation. But in the end Bührner concludes that none of these theories provides the solution to the problem.

¹⁸ Moloney (1978:238) asks a legitimate question regarding the relevance of this much later material in such a discussion and also supplies the answer: According to him the close parallel of the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus with the Rabbinic material, and the conflict with official Judaism, is an indication that Bührner and Borgen could have been correct.

¹⁹ Bührner points out the importance of the ἀναβαίνεις-καταβαίνεις scheme, referred to by Nicholson as the descent-ascent schema. According to Bührner (cf also Moloney 1978) this language is associated exclusively with 'the Son of Man' in the Fourth Gospel and therefore leads him to see the Fourth Gospel's oldest christology as
Bühner's book probably represents the first major investigation undertaken to determine how the Jewish law of agency relates to the New Testament. He provides an extensive collection and discussion of sources (see esp. 118–267). Bühner's discussion of agency relates to some extent to that of Borgen. He is convinced that the Johannine Father-Son terminology is elucidated by the agent model. According to him, the Father sends Jesus under conditions which clearly imply the authorisation of Jesus; the sphere of Jesus' authorised activity on behalf of his Father is defined (activities such as creation and judgment); his activity conforms to the aphorisms that 'a man's agent is like himself' and that 'an agent cannot work to his principal's disadvantage; and the agent returns to his sender (Father) at the discharge of his agency'.

In another excellent article, although not as systematised as Borgen's, but influenced by Bühner, Harvey (1987:238–250) supports Borgen and Bühner's view of the fundamentals of agency. Although he does not focus primarily on the Fourth Gospel, but on agency in the New Testament in general (Christ as agent), he presents some refreshing ideas. Harvey tries to stimulate and refresh the christology of the New Testament by calling it an 'agency christology'. An 'agency christology' will probably supply adequate human words to express the nature of Christ. His whole argument leads to the point of view that christology developed an early understanding of the term 'god'. Christianity was situated between the Greek and Jewish cultures, each with its own perception of the meaning of 'god'. Eventually the Jewish Christians leaned towards a 'functional identity' between Jesus and God, and the concept of 'agency' provided a useful model for doing so.²⁰

Very recently Mercer (1992:457ff) tried to present Jesus as the 'apostle' of the Fourth Gospel (1992:460f) since 'sending' is an integral part of the Fourth

²⁰ The fact that the main source that could have influenced the Fourth Evangelist in his writing was the OT, namely the rabbinic halakah, was not excluded (Preiss 1954; Barrett 1958; Dorese 1960:167; Borgen 1968:147), for the halakah was the explanation, application and enlargement of the law (Duvenage 1999). The contributions of Borgen and Bühner indicate possible similarities regarding agency between the Fourth Gospel and the rabbinic halakah. According to Borgen (1968:147), influenced by E. R. Goodenough, this Jewish background should be characterised as the early stages of Merkabah mysticism. Dorese (1960:167) indicates that strong support for this statement is found in a Nag Hammadi text. Dorese (pp. 146f.), also indicates that from the Nag Hammadi text it is clear that the Jewish Merkabah traditions of heavenly agents in gnostic/Mandaean literature were influenced by Jewish principles of agency and Jewish ideas of heavenly figures. Therefore, in conclusion, the gnostic agents do not explain the background of God's agent in the Fourth Gospel, as Bultmann thinks. The Fourth Gospel rather gives a clue to the Jewish background of the gnostic/Mandaean mythology (Borgen 1968:148).
Gospel (1992:462). He correctly communicated that ‘sending’, a major motif in the Fourth Gospel, is expressed by the two verbs ἀποστέλλειν and πέμπειν, and that the primary thrust of this motif is that God sent Jesus into the world with a special commission. In this paper Mercer tries (i) to show how ‘sending’ is integrated into the larger theology of the Fourth Gospel, (ii) to demonstrate how ‘sending’ solves the theological problem of the Fourth Gospel, and (iii) to argue that his analysis supports an incarnational view of the message of the Fourth Gospel.

Another important point stressed by Mercer (1992:458) is that the sending motif is best understood in connection with the ‘vertical dualism’ in the Fourth Gospel (1992:458). Unfortunately Mercer fails to prove that Jesus is seen as apostle in the Fourth Gospel. According to him (1992: 460) Jesus’ sending corresponded to that of an apostle. Jesus was sent by God in order to reveal the Father so that the world might believe.²¹

Mercer also answers the question regarding the Fourth Gospel’s failure to utilise the term ἀποστόλος inappropriately. He feels that the Fourth Gospel would then demote Jesus to the level of human apostles (1992:460f). In order to solve this problem he refers to the Fourth Evangelist’s usage of ἀποστέλλειν (as opposed to πέμπειν) ‘which was different from but related to the title ἀποστόλος. In this way John communicated the idea of Jesus as the apostle sent by God, but he did so in a manner that preserved Jesus’ special status and was consistent with John’s high Christology’. The problem here is that although the verb ἀποστέλλειν stems from the noun ἀποστόλος, one cannot come to the conclusion that, because the Fourth Gospel uses the verb ἀποστέλλειν very frequently, Jesus is depicted as ‘the’ apostle in the Fourth Gospel. The fact is that the meanings of words are derived from the context (Louw 1991:118). The way in which Mercer creates meaning makes him guilty of the ‘illegitimate totality transfer’.

Finally, Mercer (1992:461), like Borgen and Bühner interprets ‘sending’ in the Fourth Gospel against the background of the Rabbinical concept of ‘agency’. On the basis of this rabbinical literature Mercer (1992:461) indicates that ‘the principle of agency, in which "a man’s agent is like to himself" (e.g Ber. 5:5), taught that the agent or deputy was a separate person who acted and spoke with the authority of the one who sent him’. The oneness of the Father and Son is an important theme in the Fourth Gospel, which is confirmed by the many passages that refer to God’s sending of Jesus. This oneness of the Father and the Son is seen in terms of the Son doing the will of

²¹ Rengstorf (1933:443) incorrectly suggests that Jesus, the one who is sent, is in reality the ἀποστόλος of the Fourth Gospel. Even Painter (1975:78) refers to the mission of Jesus as his ‘apostleship’.
God and accomplishing his work (4:84), honouring (5:23), judgement (8:16), bearing witness (8:18), believing (12:44), seeing (12:45), and receiving (13:20). The Father and the Son will send the Paraclete (14:26; 15:26). In 8:29 Jesus says that the one who sent him is 'with him' and has not left him alone (Mercer 1992:461).

Kysar (1993:40-45), in his discussion of different approaches to the Johannine christology, also incorporates 'agency christology'. He discusses this concept briefly and very systematically points out the following aspects:

1 Jesus was the Son of Man (9:35-38). The author wants his readers to understand that the man 'Jesus of Nazareth' was indeed the mysterious Son of Man.

2 His origin and home was in the heavenly realm with God.

3 This Son was sent by the Father, which relates to his heavenly origin and destination.

4 The Son of God will ascend to heaven after completing his mission.

5 The functions of the Son are also the functions of the Father.

6 The Son carries the full authority of the Father.

7 The Father and the Son are presented in the Gospel as one, yet with distinct individuality.

8 Jesus was called as the 'only Son'.

Kysar (1993:45) correctly states that

...Johannine Christology is a creative wedding of two different themes. In Jewish thought "to be a son of God" was primarily a matter of obedience. To be obedient to God made one a son of God. But sonship of the deity in Hellenistic thought was a cosmic or ontological matter. To be the Son of God was to have the nature of deity in one's person. The sons of God were mythologically begotten by the gods. Hence, the Hellenistic divine sonship was a matter of the essence of the person, while Jewish divine sonship was a matter of the function or behaviour of the person.

The Fourth Evangelist portrays Jesus in his Gospel as the Son of the Father by virtue of his obedience to the Father (4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:29 and cf 7:18 and 8:50a by implication). But Jesus is more than this. His essence is the essence of the Father (1:1,18; 20:28). In fact, in the Fourth Gospel (in the person of Jesus) the Jewish and the Hellenistic worlds meet. Jesus' sonship is the fulfilment of both.

2.2.3 Conclusion

From the brief discussion of the relationship between the agency concept and the Rabbinic halakah by these scholars, we cannot deny the fact that there are similarities in respect of agency between the Fourth Gospel and rabbinnic
halakah. Although the contributions of Borgen, Bühner, Kysar, Harvey and Mercer are invaluable in providing a context in which the mission of Jesus (which depicts the Father-Son relationship) can be interpreted, one must still bear in mind that the mission of Jesus was unique only in the sense that the Son of God descended to the world below in order to reveal God and accomplish salvation through the cross before returning to his Father. Therefore, these scholar’s findings will not be considered as a schema for the agency of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, but rather as background.

Consequently, the mission of Jesus should be understood particularly from the agency perspective and his agency should be interpreted deductively from the Fourth Gospel and not inductively from Judaism, though Judaism could be helpful in constructing the main agency structure and background. The following are the important aspects of agency as depicted in the Fourth Gospel:

(a) Jesus is the agent of the Father (3:34; 10:36)
(b) Jesus is like the Father who sent him (5:19-20)
(c) The mission of Jesus (His incarnation—3:34; 7:16; 8:26,28,29,42; 12:49 14:24 and God’s love as the leitmotif behind Jesus’ mission—3:16)
(d) The revelatory-salvific assignment of this mission of Jesus—
   (1:14,18; 12:44; 14:9-11; 3:16; 20:31)
(e) Jesus obedient to the will of God (4:30; 5:30; 6:38; 8:29)
(f) The report of Jesus to the Father (17:1-8)
(g) Jesus appoints his disciples as his agents (17:18; cf 20:21)
(h) Jesus returns to his Father who sent him (17:9-16)

In the above agency construct it is especially point (g) that is of concern. This point, as depicted by 17:18 (also 20:21), indicates that Jesus appoints his disciples as his agents. In this text Jesus links the mission of his disciples with his own mission. This means that Jesus‘ agency has been transferred to his disciples. They have to continue with his mission which originated in the initiative of the Father. Through a new way of life (discipleship), based on the example set by Jesus, a disciple of Jesus will continue and extend the mission of Jesus.

The ‘agency’ motif indicates a new spiritual union between Jesus and his disciples. With the appointment of the disciples as his agents, the pattern of the relationship between Jesus and the Father has been duplicated in/transferred to the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus displays his relationship with his Father and sets an example to be followed by his disciples.
The preceding discussion of the 'agency' of Jesus proves that this theme is definitely one of the two major themes in the Fourth Gospel into which the Johannine christology, pneumatology, eschatology, soteriology and theology are interwoven; it is an integral part of the Fourth Gospel and therefore no other theme or theological affirmation can be discussed in isolation without giving consideration to the descent-ascent schema and the 'agency concept' (cf Loader 1984:192). The conclusion would be that discipleship as a theological concept in the Fourth Gospel must also be seen and interpreted from the perspective of Jesus' 'agency'. In fact, it would be more correct to view discipleship as an integral part of the agency of Jesus.

The diagram below (Figure 1; adapted from Van der Watt 1986), indicates the 'agency' of the Son of God and the place of discipleship in the divine mission.

Finally, the descent-ascent schema describes the setting of Jesus' mission and the concept of agency, the how of the mission. These two complimentary motifs contribute to our understanding of the respective missions of Jesus and the disciples (discipleship).

WORKS CONSULTED


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