

JESUS THE APOSTLE: "SENDING" AND THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN

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"Sending," expressed by the verbs *apostellein* and *pempein*, is a major motif in the fourth gospel and one that has been seriously neglected and somewhat misunderstood by Johannine scholars. The primary thrust of the motif is that God sends Jesus into the world with a special commission.¹ In the present paper I wish to (1) show how "sending" is integrated into the larger theology of John, (2) demonstrate how "sending" solves a theological problem of the gospel, and (3) argue that my analysis supports an incarnational view of John's message.²

The theme of God's sending Jesus on a special mission occurs throughout the fourth gospel and in various ways. The affirmation is made in the form of direct statements (John 8:42; 11:42) and indirectly via Jesus' references to his Father as the one who sent him (5:24, 30). The sending does not stop with Jesus, however. Both the Father and the Son send the Paraclete (14:26; 15:26). Additionally Jesus sends the disciples (13:20a) who, along with the Paraclete, continue the mission just as John the Baptist was sent to inaugurate it (3:28). 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.

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¹ The literature on "sending" includes J. Kuhl, *Die Sendung Jesu und der Kirche nach dem Johannes-Evangelium* (Studia Instituti Missiologici Societatis Verbi 11; St. Augustin: Steyler, 1967), who attempts to set "sending" in the context of other themes in John; K. H. Rengstorf, "apostellō (*pempō*), *exapostellō*, *apostolos*, *pseudapostolos*, *apostolē*," *TDNT* 1.398-447, whose conclusions stand in need of revision; E. Haenchen, "Der Vater, der mich gesandt hat," *NTS* 9 (1962-63) 208-216, esp. 210-212, who relates the phrase to the Johannine doctrine of revelation; J. P. Miranda, *Die Sendung Jesu im vierten Evangelium: Religions- und theologiegesechichtliche Untersuchungen zu den Sendungsformeln* (SBS 87; ed. H. Haag, R. Kilian and W. Pesch; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), who exhibits source and history-of-religion concerns. These and other less important contributions to the question, along with an analysis of all 59 occurrences of *apostellein* and *pempein* in John, are discussed in C. Mercer, "APOSTELLEIN and PEMPEIN in John," *NTS* 36 (1990) 619-624.

² "John" in this paper refers to the author of the fourth gospel or to that gospel as a whole. With each occurrence the meaning that applies can be determined by context. Additionally I use "John" and "(fourth) gospel" interchangeably when referring to the text. I am aware of the various theories about possible sources, redactions and schools that might have played a role in the growth of the text. In this study, however, I am following the approach of B. S. Childs and others who focus on the canonical form. Such a procedure is particularly appropriate in the case of "sending" since the motif occurs throughout the fourth gospel, with the exception of the passion and resurrection narratives.

When the act of sending includes a special commission, often the task to be performed is of a religious nature. The Baptist is sent to bear witness to the true light (1:6-7), Jesus is sent to bear witness to the true light (1:6-7), and the disciples and Paraclete are sent to perform tasks that continue the mission of Jesus (17:18; 15:26). These missions are often related to the revelation of the sender (3:34; 8:26) and the redemption of the ones to whom the agent is sent (3:17). Sometimes a dualistic view of the world serves as the context and makes the sending significant (10:36; 17:18a).

The relation of "sending" and belief (5:24, 38; 11:42) serves to correlate the "sending" theme with the purpose of the fourth gospel as a whole (20:31). The motive behind the sending of Jesus by Annas (18:24) provides an interesting contrast to the motives behind God's sending of Jesus into the world.

Sometimes, especially with regard to God and Jesus, the authority of the mission rests with the Father who sent the Son into the world (4:34; 14:24). At other times the stress is on the action of God through the one sent (3:17; 6:44). These emphases are related to the dual emphasis of subordination (6:57) and oneness (8:29). Together they accent the importance of God in his role as sender and the nature of Jesus as the one who is close to his Father and whose commission is to actualize God's purposes.

In general, the "sending" motif is best understood in connection with the vertical dualism of John. It is widely acknowledged that the message of the fourth gospel is largely couched in dualistic terminology. Furthermore, John's dualism is often distinguished from that of the synoptic gospels.³ The synoptic contrast is between the present age and the future age (e.g. Mark 10:15; Matt 7:21), and while John does not disregard this synoptic-like horizontal dualism his primary emphasis is on a dualistic framework vertically oriented, as seen in the eschatological pronouncements.⁴ In John one observes a "profuse appearance of opposites."⁵ The world below is constantly contrasted with the world above (3:31; 8:23). The world below is associated with sin (16:8), darkness (1:5) and an evil ruler (14:30); the world above is associated with righteousness (16:8), light (1:9) and the heavenly revealer (1:14). Other contrasts employed include flesh and spirit, truth and falsehood, life and death, children of God and children of the devil.⁶

³ E.g. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Scribner's, 1955) 2.15-32; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 28; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 1.cvx-cxxi; R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 215-221.

⁴ R. Bultmann (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971]), from the perspective of existentialism, and C. H. Dodd (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1953]), from the perspective of realized eschatology, see in John a present-tense eschatology. Most scholars, while emphasizing the present tense, see both fulfilled and future eschatological passages in the fourth gospel; cf. e.g. R. Schnackenburg, *New Testament Theology Today* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963) 105; Brown, *John* 1.cxviii; G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 302-308.

⁵ Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist* 215.

⁶ Numerous interpreters comment on the Johannine contrasts; cf. e.g. Ladd, *Theology* 223-236; Bultmann, *Theology* 2.15-32; Brown, *John* 1.cxv; J. N. Sanders, "John, Gospel of," *IDB* 2.938; H. Schneider, "The Word Was Made Flesh": An Analysis of the Theology of Revelation in the Fourth Gospel," *CBQ* 31 (1969) 344-345.

While much dualistic terminology is utilized by John, it should not be interpreted as reflecting an ontological dualism. Light and darkness are not two equal powers. The world, although associated with evil and darkness, is still the creation of God (1:10) and the object of his love (3:16) and salvation (3:17; 12:47).⁷ The striking contrasts between things above and things below, however, produce in John a tension that one commentator has termed a "theological problem."⁸

Ernst Haenchen begins to develop this "problem." God and his dealings, he says, are completely hidden from man (1:18; 5:37; 6:46). In fact the world, of which the Jews are representative, does not desire to know the truth. The Lazarus story, for example, testifies to their blindness and therefore their inability to reach God.⁹ The tension between the above and the below invites mediation by means of revelation from above. The world is the object of the revelation, and love is the motivation (3:16). The crucial factor, however, is the agent of the revelation. For John the figure of Christ becomes the primary agent of the revelation and therefore the answer to the theological problem or tension between God and the world.

The Christological basis of this revelation of God is expressed in several ways. The revelation in Christ is expressed in terms of *logos*, "word" (1:14), signs, and the "I am" sayings, all long recognized as important elements in John's theological vocabulary.¹⁰ A primary but heretofore for the most part unrecognized way in which revelation is expressed is through "sending": The God above is related to the world below through Christ as the one sent. Haenchen suggests a relationship between "sending" and the Johannine doctrine of revelation. According to John, Haenchen maintains, there is only one possible way to gain knowledge of the invisible Father: when the Father himself sends someone with the knowledge. Jesus is the emissary sent to reveal the Father and the things above. He stands for the Father in the world and is the visible expression of the invisible Father (cf. Col 1:15). In Jesus as the one sent the world hears God speaking and sees God working.¹¹

There are several occurrences of the "sending" verbs that are found in propinquity to John's dualistic expressions. The most notable instances

⁷ Sanders, "John" 938, points this out.

⁸ Schneider, "The Word" 344-346.

⁹ Haenchen, "Der Vater" 210.

¹⁰ Schneider, "The Word" 346; Sanders, "John" 939; H. Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1969) 346; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John 1: Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1-4* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 156.

¹¹ Haenchen, "Der Vater" 210-211. Despite the title of his article Haenchen does not focus on the "sending" motif per se. The article becomes, rather, a more generalized discussion of Johannine Christology. Cf. Haenchen, "Das Johannesevangelium und sein Kommentar," *TLZ* 89 (1964) 881-898, where he develops, contra Bultmann, his understanding of Johannine revelation. Cf. also Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium: Ein Kommentar* (ed. U. Busse; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1981; 2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Although I disagree with his statement (1.96) that there is no difference in meaning between *apostellein* and *pempein*, his discussion of "sending" in the context of the Christology of John (1.94-97) is most valuable. As will be seen later in this paper, I agree with the thrust of his comments on Christology.

are those occurrences where Jesus is said to be sent by God *eis ton kosmon*, "into the world" (3:17; 10:36; 17:18a). John 3:17 states that Jesus was sent into the world so that the world may not be condemned but, rather, saved through him. John 17:18 speaks of both Jesus and the disciples as being sent into the world. This text is in the context of Jesus' prayer for the disciples (17:9–19), which has a noticeable dualistic flavor (17:4–16). Other occurrences with an immediate dualistic context are 3:34; 5:24.

The fourth gospel does not attribute the title *apostolos*, "apostle," either to Jesus or to his disciples. Yet the evidence surveyed above strongly suggests the appropriateness of calling Jesus "the" apostle of this gospel. The noun *apostolos* occurs 79 times in the NT, with the vast majority of instances in the Pauline and Lukan material. In Paul an apostle is one sent to proclaim an authoritative message of salvation.¹² In Acts the title is usually applied to a select group of authorities in the early Church.¹³ The synoptic gospels relate the title *apostolos* to the twelve.¹⁴ In the NT outside John, "apostle," then, generally involves a person sent out on the authority of God to reveal truth about God in order that persons may be called to faith.¹⁵ In this sense Jesus is an apostle. He was sent by God. His authority was derived from the Father with whom he was identified and who acted through him. The sending of Jesus was for the revelation of God so that the world might believe.¹⁶

If Jesus functions like an apostle in the fourth gospel, why did John not utilize *apostolos*, a term that most likely was readily available to him, given the consensus that John dates after the synoptics and long after Paul?¹⁷ The most reasonable explanation is 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 demoting him to the level of hu-

¹² D. Müller, "Apostle," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 129–130; H. Mosbech, "Apostolos in the New Testament," *ST* 2 (1950) 187–200.

¹³ Müller, "Apostle" 128–129.

¹⁴ While the relationship between the twelve and the apostles and the related question of whether Jesus used the term are debated by some scholars, clearly *apostolos* at least connotes authority and mission. For general discussions of the issues see Müller, "Apostle" 131–133; Rengstorf, "*apostellō* (*pempō*)" 422–428; V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1955) 619–627.

¹⁵ Helpful discussions of the origin and development of the Christian apostle are found in B. Gerhardsson, "Die Boten Gottes und die Apostel Christi," *SEÅ* 27 (1962) 89–131; F. Hahn, "Der Apostolat im Urchristentum," *KD* 20 (1974) 54–77.

¹⁶ Rengstorf, "*apostellō* (*pempō*)" 443, suggests that Jesus as the one sent is in reality the *apostolos* of the fourth gospel; H. M. Albertz, *Die Botschaft des Neuen Testaments* (Zurich: Zollikon, 1952) 1/2.57–58, relates "sending" in John to the notion of an apostle as one sent; J. Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1975) 78, refers in passing to Jesus' mission as his "apostleship."

¹⁷ *Apostolos* is actually found once, in John 13:16, where interpreters generally agree it has the nontechnical sense of messenger. Cf. e.g. Kuhl, *Sendung Jesu* 148–149; Bultmann, *John* 447.

man apostles. Therefore to refer to God sending Jesus on a religious mission John used *apostellein* (as opposed to *pempein*), which was different from but related to the title *apostolos*. In this way John communicated the idea of Jesus as the apostle from God but in a manner that preserved Jesus' special status and was consistent with John's high Christology. Hebrews 3:1 is the only place in the NT where Jesus is called an apostle, and there it clearly expresses a high Christology by virtue of both the manner of rendering and the book in which it is located.

The "apostle" Christology embedded in the "sending" motif bears directly on what one Johannine scholar has called "the most fundamental and acute problem of Johannine theology"¹⁸—that is, whether the fourth gospel is more appropriately understood as espousing what has traditionally been called incarnation or whether it is at root docetic. "Sending," as I argue it should be understood, supports the incarnational view, especially when taking into account the motif's background.

"Sending" in John is best understood as having a background in the rabbinical concept of agency, as opposed to the gnostic redeemer myth or other background.¹⁹ 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 is a separate person who acts and speaks with the authority of the one who sent him. Legally he was identical to his master, and while rabbinical agency is essentially a legal principle, at times it appears to come close to what one interpreter has termed "juridical mysticism."²⁰ The oneness of the Father and Son is a definite theme in the fourth gospel (10:30 being an oft-quoted text), and the theme can be observed in many passages that refer to God's sending of Jesus. The oneness or closeness of the Father and Son is seen in terms of doing God's will and accomplishing God's work (4:34), honoring (5:23), judgment (8:16), bearing witness (8:18), believing (12:44; cf. 5:24 with 5:38), seeing (12:45) and receiving (13:20b). Both the Father and the Son will send the Paraclete (14:26; 15:26). Jesus says in 8:29 that the one who sent him is "with me" (*met' emou*) and has not left him "alone" (*monon*).

¹⁸ D. M. Smith, "Johannine Studies," *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. J. Epp and G. W. MacRae; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) 285.

¹⁹ The rabbinical concept of agency and the sending of the redeemer figure in gnosticism are the two leading candidates for the background of Johannine "sending." There are, however, other possibilities. I have completed the research on this matter and plan to ready it for publication in the near future. The literature on this question includes Miranda, *Sendung Jesu*, and *Der Vater, der mich gesandt hat* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1972) 130–307, which locates the background in Jewish sources, especially the call and sending of the OT prophets; E. Schweizer, "Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund der 'Sendungsformel,'" *ZNW* 57 (1966) 199–210, who gives evidence for an origin in Hellenistic Jewish wisdom speculation; P. Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (ed. J. Neuser; Leiden: Brill, 1968) 137–148, who suggests that rabbinical agency has been combined with the concept of a divine agent in Philo.

²⁰ Borgen, "God's Agent" 139–140, and *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (NovTSup 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965) 162, draw attention to the mysticism in agency.

The very idea that someone "sends" another can imply a certain subordination, and it in fact does so in rabbinical agency.²¹ In John the oneness of the sender and the one sent is balanced by an emphasis on the subordination of the one sent. This principle is stated in 13:16, where one who is sent²² is not greater than the one sending him: *Apostolos* parallels *doulos* ("slave"), while the sender (*ho pempsas auton*) parallels *ho kyrios* ("master"). Subordination is seen more specifically in other ways. Jesus seeks the will (5:30), accomplishes the work (5:36), and speaks the commandment (12:49) and the word (3:34; 14:24) of the one who sent him. His teaching is not his own but that of the Father (7:16), and so he declares what he has heard from the true sender (8:26). Furthermore the very life of the Son is dependent on the living Father who sent him (6:57). Jesus says the one who sent him is true (8:26) and accents the importance of seeking his glory (7:18). Jesus in 6:38–39 is said to have come to do the will of the sender, which in 6:39 is expressed as not losing that which the Father has given him. A similar (and perhaps more obvious) subordination via the "sending" verbs is found with John the Baptist, who came to bear witness to the light and is certainly subordinate to God who sent him (1:6). Likewise the officers (or, better, servants, helpers or assistants)²³ of 7:32 are subordinate to the chief priests and Pharisees who sent them.

Although "sending" is not the stockpole around which Johannine Christology or theology is built, the preceding discussion has shown that it is an integral part of the fourth gospel's view of Christ in particular and other theological affirmations in general. "Sending" can be integrated into the total message of John by relating it to the fourth gospel's vertically oriented dualism. In this context "sending" serves to correlate the Father above to the world below. The revelation of the things above occurs in the Son whose authority is in "the one who sent" him. As "the" apostle, Jesus reveals the truth, confronts the world, and leads to salvation those who respond. His mission is continued through the Paraclete and the disciples, both of whom are sent as Jesus was. The motif in John, through which Jesus is God's apostle (though never called by this term), not only argues against a docetic interpretation but also supports a reading of the fourth gospel's Christology that affirms the traditional Christian teaching about Jesus: that he was, paradoxically, both divine and human.

²¹ E.g. *Gen. Rab.* 78.1, which reads: "R. Simeon said: Who is greater: the sender or the sent? From the verse, *And he said: Let me go* [literally 'send me away'], it follows that the sender is greater than the sent" (*Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* [London: Soncino, 1951]).

²² Interpreters generally agree that this is the sense of *apostolos* here. See the earlier comment on this use.

²³ BAG 850.