

## THE FATHER AND SON IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL: JOHANNINE SUBORDINATION REVISITED

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Thematic tension is a concept by no means foreign to the Fourth Gospel. The apparent presence of contending themes such as divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, and future and realized eschatology has been a frequent topic of discussion in Johannine scholarship.<sup>1</sup> It would not necessarily be surprising, then, to find similar tension in the Gospel's presentation of the relationship between God and Jesus, or, using the predominant Johannine terminology, between the "Father" and the "Son."<sup>2</sup>

Numerous modern commentators understand John to ascribe deity to Jesus, though not as a challenge to Jewish monotheism. Rather, they interpret the Evangelist as portraying the Father and Son, who are distinct, as having the same divine "nature," "essence," or "being." Commenting on John 1:1, Barrett writes, "θεός . . . is predicative and describes the nature of the Word. The absence of the article indicates that the Word is God, but is not the only being of whom this is true . . . The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God; if this be not true the book is blasphemous."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 125–98; Rudolph Schnackenburg, "Excursus VII: The Notion of Faith in the Fourth Gospel," in *The Gospel According to St. John* (trans. Cecily Hastings, Francis McDonagh, David Smith, and Richard Foley; 3 vols.; Crossroad: New York, 1990) esp. 1.573–75; *idem*, "Excursus II: Personal Commitment, Personal Responsibility, Predestination and Hardening," in *ibid.* 2.259–74; Raymond E. Brown, "Appendix IV: ΕΓΩ ΕΙΜΙ—'I AM,'" in *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29–29A; New York: Doubleday, 1966–70) 1.533–38; B. A. Mastin, "A Neglected Feature of the Christology of the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 22 (1976) 32–51; David Fennema, "John 1:18: 'God the Only Son,'" *NTS* 31 (1985) 124–35; Salvatore Alberto Panimolle, *L'evangelista Giovanni: pensiero e opera letteraria del quarto evangelista* (Rome: Borla, 1985) 100–118; Marianne Meyer Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Rudolf Bultmann, "Die Eschatologie des Johannes-Evangeliums," in *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1933) 134–52; Marie-Émile Boismard, "L'évolution du thème eschatologique dans les traditions johanniques," *RB* 68 (1961) 507–24; Robert Kysar, "The Eschatology of the Fourth Gospel. A Correction of Bultmann's Redactional Hypothesis," *Perspective* 13 (1972) 23–33; Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie* (3 vols.; WUNT 96; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1997, 1998, 1999) 110, 117.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus calls God "Father" 100 times in John, compared to 46 in the Synoptics (O. Michel, "πατήρ," in *EDNT* 3.53). Besides the designations "Son of God" and "Son of Man," the absolute ὁ υἱός occurs thirteen times in John, compared to nine in the Synoptics (see Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* [rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 277; and Monika Rutenfranz, "υἱός," *EDNT* 3.382).

<sup>3</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 156.

According to Schnackenburg, Jesus “is the only true Son of God, one with the Father not only in what he does, but also in his being.”<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere he avers that the Son “in origin and essence is equal to the Father.”<sup>5</sup> Beasley-Murray contends that the predication of θεός for the Logos “denotes *God in his nature*, as truly God as he with whom he ‘was,’ yet without exhausting the being of God.”<sup>6</sup> For Bruce, “What is meant is that the Word shared the nature and being of God.”<sup>7</sup> Also referring to John 1:1, Westcott asserts, “No idea of inferiority of nature is suggested by the form of expression, which simply affirms the true deity of the Word. . . . Thus we are led to conceive that the divine nature is essentially in the Son, and . . . that the Son can be regarded, according to that which is his peculiar characteristic, in relation to God as God.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet, this equality of divine nature between Father and Son is held in tension with John’s depiction in numerous texts of a hierarchal relationship between the two, in which the Son is perfectly obedient to his Father. While the former aspect of the relationship has often been contested, the latter seems to have been readily observed by most interpreters. Recently, however, some scholars have questioned the legitimacy of seeing the Son in a subordinate role to the Father in the Fourth Gospel, or they have offered alternative interpretations so that the concept no longer applies. One is led to wonder, then, whether the majority of Johannine scholarship has misread the Gospel. Do assertions of Jesus’ unilateral obedience to and dependence on the Father and assumptions of a patriarchal hierarchy misunderstand the fourth evangelist’s intent?

This article offers a reexamination of the Fourth Gospel in light of these recent suggestions. I will attempt to demonstrate the existence of the Son’s subordination to the Father as a major theme in John by addressing three interrelated Johannine concepts: (1) the Son as “sent” from the Father; (2) the Son’s apparent unilateral dependence on and obedience to the Father; and (3) John’s recurrent use of “Father” and “Son” terminology for God and Jesus. The discussion of each concept will include a brief presentation of the Johannine data and how it contributes to the overall picture of the Son’s subordination to his Father. This will be followed by interaction with some who have understood the data differently from traditional scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> Schnackenburg, *John* 3.333.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 2.177.

<sup>6</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco: Word, 1987) 11 (emphasis original).

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 31.

<sup>8</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 3. For additional commentators who may not use the terminology “nature,” “essence,” or “being,” but who nonetheless appear to interpret the texts in a similar manner, see J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928) 1.cxliv, 2; G. H. C. Macgregor, *The Gospel of John* (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928) 4; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1972) 84; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 117; Leon Morris, *John* 68–69; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003); Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 27–29.

## I. THE SON AS "SENT" FROM THE FATHER

The first idea that contributes to the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus as fulfilling a subordinate role to God is John's use of "sending" language: the Son has been "sent" by the Father. John uses two words for sending, ἀποστέλλω and πέμπω, but with no apparent semantic distinction.<sup>9</sup> The initial reference to this sending identifies God's purpose in doing so: he has sent the Son so that the world might be saved through him (3:17). Jesus repeatedly describes God as "the Father who sent me" or "him who sent me" (e.g. 4:34; 5:23; 6:38; 7:28; 8:29; 12:44; 14:24). His testimony to the Jews is "I have not come of myself," but the Father "sent me" (7:28–29; 8:42). In this way, the Evangelist presents the Son as being sent on a mission initiated by the Father (3:16–17; 7:28–29; 8:42; 17:3).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, he is accountable to him for all he does. As the "sent Son," Jesus seeks the will and glory of the one who sent him, not his own (5:30; 6:38; 7:18). He speaks only the words and teaching that he has received from his Father (7:16; 8:26; 12:49; 14:24). One's response to the Son is considered his response to the Father who sent him, since the Son is the Father's representative (5:23; 12:44–45; 13:20; 15:23). An individual must honor, receive, and believe in the Son, for the very reason that he has been sent from the Father (5:23; 6:29; 13:20). Then when his mission is complete, the Son returns to his sender (7:33; 16:5).

Many have attempted to identify the background to this sending concept. Bultmann found it in pre-Christian Gnosticism.<sup>11</sup> Dodd points to the language of the OT prophets who are those "sent by Jehovah."<sup>12</sup> Others have interpreted John against a background of religious and cultural messenger practices, particularly the Jewish institution of "agency" (*shaliach*).<sup>13</sup> The basic principle of agency is found in the rabbinical statement, "A man's agent

<sup>9</sup> Contra Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "ἀποστέλλω," *TDNT* 1.404–6. See C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953) 254; Barrett, *John* 569; Carson, *John* 648; Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 293–319; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 97–106.

<sup>10</sup> H. Ritt comments, "The initiative for this sending comes from the Father and remains present in the Son's work" ("πέμπω," *EDNT* 3.68; emphasis original). Cf. Leon Morris: "The very concept of mission, of being 'sent,' contains within it the thought of doing what the Sender wills" (*New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1986] 251).

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 8.

<sup>12</sup> See Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* 254–55.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Peder Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) 137–48; Jan Adolph Böhner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im 4. Evangelium* (WUNT 2/2; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1977); Anthony E. Harvey, "Christ as Agent," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 239–50; Helen S. Friend, "Like Father, Like Son: A Discussion of the Concept of Agency in Halakah and John," *Ashland Theological Journal* 21 (1990) 18–28; John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 312–17; Calvin Mercer, "Jesus the Apostle: 'Sending' and the Theology of John," *JETS* 35 (1992) 457–62.

is like the man himself.”<sup>14</sup> Dealing with the agent was considered the same as dealing with the sender, since he was like his sender in juridical function and effects. The agent would carry out his mission in obedience to the sender and return to the sender when complete.<sup>15</sup> Mercer notes that the sending in rabbinical agency implies subordination.<sup>16</sup> According to Jewish midrash, “the sender is greater than the sent.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Jesus affirms the subordination of the sent one to the sender, telling his disciples, “A slave is not greater than his master, nor is one sent greater than the one who sent him” (13:16).<sup>18</sup> But, as John makes clear, and as Harvey has observed, the Father has not sent just any agent in the Fourth Gospel, but his only Son. He alone could be relied on absolutely to promote his Father’s interests (cf. Mark 12:6).<sup>19</sup> The obvious parallels with John make the Jewish concept of agency an appealing choice as background, though one must be cautious since parallels do not necessarily imply dependence and the rabbinic sources in their final written form postdate the Gospel.<sup>20</sup>

Asserting “the limited usefulness and final inadequacy” of the *shaliach* figure to explain certain aspects of the Father-Son relationship in John, Marianne Meye Thompson insists that “one must turn to other categories and figures to help illumine the presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.”<sup>21</sup> She admits that the Evangelist’s use of the institution of agency “would go a long way towards explaining the following features of Johannine Christology: the unity of the work of the Father and Son . . . ; the obedience, and even ‘subordination,’ of the agent to the sender, or of the Son to the Father; the call to honor the Son as one would honor the Father . . . ; and the language of sending.”<sup>22</sup> However, Thompson follows James D. G. Dunn and others who have turned to the figures of Wisdom and Word to account for features of the Johannine Jesus for which the Jewish agency concept does not. Dunn finds that John’s emphases on Jesus’ pre-existence and the unity between Father and Son go “far beyond the identity of sender and sent” present in the *shaliach* model.<sup>23</sup> Thompson agrees, observing that

<sup>14</sup> *m. Ber.* 5:5; *b. Hag.* 10b; *b. Naz.* 12b; *b. Qid.* 42b, 43a; *b. B. Meš.* 96a; *b. Men.* 93b; *Mekhilta* on Exod 12:3, 6 (*Pisha* 3:46–47, 5:92).

<sup>15</sup> Borgen, “God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel” 138–44.

<sup>16</sup> Mercer, “Jesus the Apostle” 462. According to Keener, “[T]he concept of agency implies subordination” (*John* 1.316).

<sup>17</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 78:1.

<sup>18</sup> Due to the parallelism in the verse, A. E. Harvey argues that ἀπόστολος (“one sent”) “should refer to an institution as familiar as slavery.” Therefore he translates it “agent,” claiming that the primary reference is to the Jewish institution of agency. Both Origen and Chrysostom took the word this way (Harvey, “Christ as Agent” 242).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 243.

<sup>20</sup> Though Keener observes, “While we cannot determine the date at which some aspects of the custom of agency became law, the custom’s practice in other cultures suggests that the Jewish custom is older than the rabbinic sources which comment on it” (*John* 1.311).

<sup>21</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 127.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 126.

<sup>23</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “Let John be John: A Gospel for its Time,” in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (ed. Peter Stuhlmacher; WUNT 28; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983) 330.

the *shaliach* figure does not fully explicate themes such as Jesus' heavenly origins, his heavenly descent and ascent, the use of "Logos," and others.<sup>24</sup> In dealing with the question of how knowledge of God is made available through Jesus in John, Thompson emphasizes that the figures that "prove most illuminating" in interpreting John's Christology are

. . . those figures that unite agent (Jesus) and sender (God) most closely. The more a term or figure presses towards unity of the Son with the Father, and the more it allows for the exercise of divine functions, the more it elucidates how John understands knowledge of God to be available or appropriated through Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

Wisdom and Word, she concludes, allow for this unity. Wisdom is not exactly an "agent" of God, since it "is not a separable being or entity that must be 'related' to God but is in fact the expression of God's mind, will, or ways. . . . Wisdom and Word refer to something that belongs to and comes from God."<sup>26</sup> While agents such as prophets or angels have "a separate existence and even a will distinct from God, and could be said to obey or disobey God, such predications are not possible of Wisdom." Thus, "Wisdom is a category of agency that allows for the closest possible unity between the 'agent' . . . and God."<sup>27</sup> Though Thompson believes that the *shaliach* figure in many ways accounts for key aspects of Johannine Christology, it "has been subordinated to and incorporated into" the superior Wisdom/Word categories which "subsume into themselves" elements of the *shaliach* figure. Thus, it is "not just a combination of 'equal' figures, as it were."<sup>28</sup> It is the "complete unity" of Father and Son in John which underlies the Evangelist's understanding of knowing God and which also entails the superiority of "agency" figures such as Wisdom and Word that most closely unite Jesus and God. These entities allow for the embodiment of divine attributes or characteristics in Jesus' person—he is no mere intermediary figure.<sup>29</sup>

Thompson's thesis suggests some helpful possibilities to account for aspects of Johannine Christology. Nevertheless, in the end her proposal appears to result in loss as well as potential gain. In response to the observations that the Jewish *shaliach* concept is lacking since it only accounts for some aspects of Johannine Christology but not others, one is led to ask why this one category is expected to accomplish more than it does. Thompson admits that the *shaliach* figure accounts well for various facets of John's portrait of Jesus (e.g. "subordination," obedience, sending language). But since it does not account well for others (e.g. heavenly origins, heavenly ascent/descent, "Logos" language), this model is deemed inadequate. It may be true that it is inadequate by itself to give an all-encompassing picture of Jesus in

<sup>24</sup> See Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* 125–29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 124–25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 134–35.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 135.

<sup>28</sup> Personal e-mail correspondence from Marianne Meye Thompson to the author, January 14, 2004. Quoted with permission.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* 141–42.

John, but is this not what we might expect? It seems unwarranted to identify Wisdom/Word as the “superior” categories into which the *shaliach* figure has been subordinated and incorporated. While such a proposal is certainly not improper in principle, is it necessary? Given the multi-faceted nature of the Evangelist’s presentation of Jesus, such attempts to explain everything through a blending and subordinating of competing background concepts run the risk of flattening certain aspects of Jesus’ person as displayed in the Gospel that do not fit the suggested mold.

This appears to be the result of Thompson’s insistence that Wisdom better explains the “agency” concept in John. Though she argues that the *shaliach* concept has been subsumed into the “agent” figures of Wisdom and Word (and not merely dismissed), one wonders what distinct contribution the former actually supplies in the end. Since the emphasis, as Thompson understands it, is on the “complete unity” of Jesus and God as agent and sender, the subsuming of the *shaliach* model into these categories would, presumably, negate any aspect of subordination. This seems a valid conclusion given her insistence that Wisdom could not be said to “obey or disobey” God as would be possible for other agent figures. But while Thompson’s proposal can account for the “complete unity” of Jesus and God as agent and sender, can it account for the distinction between them? The Johannine Jesus can do nothing on his own initiative, but seeks the will of the one who sent him (5:30; cf. 6:38). His food is to do the will of and accomplish the work of his sender (4:34). Though John clearly emphasizes the unity of Jesus and God, these texts and others also appear to render him as a distinct figure sent on a mission from a higher authority. Assuming a Wisdom influence on John’s Gospel,<sup>30</sup> could one not argue similarly from the opposite direction? What if one contended, based on the abundance of sending language and apparent subordination of the Son, for the distinction between Father and Son at the expense of their unity? An emphasis on the *shaliach* as the “superior” model for understanding Jesus (with elements of Word/Wisdom incorporated into and subordinated to it) would seem to diminish the complementary picture of Jesus as the pre-existent divine Word who is “one” with the Father. As with the author’s other thematic tensions, so here—the text should be allowed to stand as it is without attempts to reconcile two competing thoughts in a way that discounts their unique contributions. Fennema appears to acknowledge this in finding a “dual picture” of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel as both prophetic agent and heavenly agent: “On the one hand, he is a prophet; on the other, he is the very personification of God’s activity.”<sup>31</sup> He argues that John maintains Jesus’ firm distinction from the

<sup>30</sup> Though the scope of this article does not permit an evaluation of the potential use of Wisdom notions in the Fourth Gospel, it is arguable that Wisdom does not hold as prominent a place in John as some think. As Carson observes, there is a lack of actual Wisdom *terminology* in John, and this “suggests that the parallels between Wisdom and John’s *Logos* may stem less from direct dependence than from common dependence on Old Testament uses of ‘word’ and *Torah* from which both have borrowed” (*John* 115–16).

<sup>31</sup> David A. Fennema, “Jesus and God according to John: An Analysis of the Fourth Gospel’s Father/Son Christology” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1979) 31–35.

Father “by blending the imagery of prophetic agency with that of heavenly agency—which by itself would have compromised it.”<sup>32</sup>

Thompson’s proposal appears to be an example of a frequent deficiency in Johannine studies—“the improper blending of distinct elements” in the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus’ mission.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, Köstenberger’s recent work, published just prior to Thompson’s, is an important contribution to the present discussion. Focusing on John’s presentation of the missions of Jesus and his disciples, Köstenberger examines the various “modes of movement” in the Fourth Gospel describing Jesus’ mission.<sup>34</sup> Though these terms and concepts are related, they are nevertheless distinct. “One . . . finds one cluster of references to the Son sent by the Father and another strand of motifs referring to Jesus’ coming into the world and returning to the Father which is also described metaphorically in terms of descent and ascent.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, through the modes of movement terminology, John presents Jesus in the roles of “Jesus as the sent Son” and “Jesus as the Coming and Returning One (Descent-Ascent).”<sup>36</sup> To blend the two concepts together is to distort the evangelist’s multifaceted picture of Jesus. The vast majority of instances where “Son” language (or where “Son” terminology is implied by the use of the term “Father”) is combined with a term denoting movement, the terminology used is “sending” (see 3:16–17; 5:23, 36; 8:16, 18, 28–29; 10:36; 12:49; 14:24; 17:3, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21) rather than “coming” or “going.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the Gospel never applies “sending” language to the Logos (though John’s prologue does employ “sending” language for John the Baptist); instead, “coming” terminology is used (1:9, 11).<sup>38</sup> Köstenberger concludes that the sending of the Son focuses on the “human” side of Jesus’ mission, which includes the sent one’s obedience to and dependence on the sender. This is balanced by the “coming-going” and “descending-ascending” terminology which puts the sending concept in the context of one who is “heaven-sent” and who displays his divine glory.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the Fourth Gospel presents the nature of Jesus’ relationship to his sender (i.e. obedience and dependence)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 296, n. 2 (emphasis added). While examining the motif of agency, Keener observes that the Fourth Gospel highlights both Jesus’ deity and his subordination to the Father more than the other Gospels and remarks, “John’s christological emphasis allows him to explore *both* Jesus’ unity with the Father *and* the distinction between them” (*John* 1.310; emphasis added).

<sup>33</sup> See Köstenberger, *Missions of Jesus and the Disciples* 123–24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 81–140.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 124.

<sup>36</sup> A third role Köstenberger identifies is “Jesus as the Eschatological Shepherd-Teacher” (ibid. 138).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 96; see also 120. Note Paul W. Meyer, who observes, “[W]hile ‘the Father’ and ‘God’ easily and frequently alternate with each other, the formulaic epithet of sending, ‘the Father who has sent me’ or simply ‘the one who has sent me,’ belongs strictly to the ‘Father’-language of the Gospel and with only two exceptions is not even associated with ‘God’ (ὁ θεός)” (“The Father”: The Presentation of God in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* [ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996] 264).

<sup>38</sup> Köstenberger, *Missions of Jesus and the Disciples* 88.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 121.

as the model for his disciples' mission (20:21). The language of "coming into the world," "descending," and "ascending," however, is uniquely reserved for Jesus to accentuate his divine origins.<sup>40</sup>

Such evidence would seem to indicate that one ought not to appeal to categories that attempt to explain the divine origin themes (heavenly descent/ascent, exercising of divine attributes, "Logos" language) at the expense of the unique contribution of the sending theme. In fact, such a proposal distorts the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus. Thompson rightly views the *shaliach* background as insufficient in and of itself to account for John's Christology, "especially in light of assertions such as those found in 1:1 and 1:18 regarding the Word who was with God and the Son who is 'ever at the Father's side.'"<sup>41</sup> But her proposal would seem to lead to an equal insufficiency that leans too far toward the other end of the Johannine tension. An effort to highlight the real unity of Father and Son in the Gospel should not result in a conflating of this and other distinct aspects of their relationship in John. Responding to earlier similar attempts to identify the background of the Johannine sending concept in wisdom speculation, Juan Peter Miranda contends,

[T]he historical background of the Johannine sending concept is to be found neither in the gnostic redeemer myth nor in wisdom speculation, but in the ancient Semitic messenger concept and later Jewish messenger law in a prophetic context; the view that the gnostic redeemer myth or wisdom are the background for the Johannine sending concept were largely conditioned by the presupposition that it functioned to support the (ontological) unity of Father and Son.<sup>42</sup>

Whether or not the Jewish concept of agency (*shaliach*) forms the background for the sending of the Son, the Gospel's language of sending and the accompanying actions of the one sent seem to imply that the Son is subordinate to his Father who sent him.<sup>43</sup> A comparison to others who were "sent," in which John uses the same terminology, reveals their obvious subordination to their sender(s): John the Baptist who was sent by God (1:6, 33), the priests and Levites who were sent by the Jews/Pharisees to question John (1:19, 22, 24), and the officers who were sent by the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Jesus (7:32; cf. 7:45). So, it seems only natural to see Jesus' relationship to his sender in the same way.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 216–17.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* 127.

<sup>42</sup> Translated in Köstenberger, *Missions of Jesus and the Disciples* 11. See Juan Peter Miranda, *Die Sendung Jesu im vierten Evangelium: Religions- und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den Sendungsformeln* (SBS 87; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977) 90–91. See also Miranda's earlier work, *Der Vater, der mich gesandt hat. Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den johanneischen Sendungsformeln: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur johanneischen Christologie und Ekklesiologie* (EHS 23/7; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1972).

<sup>43</sup> "This 'sending' Christology emphasizes the subordinationist aspect (the Son subordinate to the Father) of John's Christology" (Keener, *John* 1.317).



## II. THE SON'S DEPENDENCE ON AND OBEDIENCE TO THE FATHER

A second way that the Fourth Gospel highlights the Son's subordination to his Father is by portraying him as dependent on and obedient to him.<sup>44</sup> In numerous ways, the Johannine Jesus acknowledges his total dependence on his Father. This is expressed through what the Father "gives" (δίδωμι) to him. The Father has given him the Spirit (3:34); to have life in himself (5:26); authority to judge (5:22, 27); works to accomplish (5:36; 17:4); words to speak (12:49; 17:8); and a cup to drink (18:11). Because of man's moral inability to come to Jesus (6:44, 65), he is dependent on the Father to give people to him (6:37, 39; cf. 10:29; 17:2). The Son acknowledges to the Father that his disciples "were yours, and you gave them to me" (17:6; cf. 17:9). Indeed, because of his love for his Son, the Father has given "all things into his hand" (3:35; cf. 13:3). Moreover, Jesus repeatedly tells the Jews that he can do nothing on his own initiative (ποιεῖν ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ [or ἀπ' ἑμαυτοῦ] οὐδέν)<sup>45</sup> but only as directed by the Father (5:19, 30; cf. 8:28). Neither his coming (7:28; 8:42) nor his speaking (8:28; 12:49; 14:10) is at his own initiative. Rather, Jesus speaks only those things which he has heard from (8:26; cf. 8:40), seen with (8:38), or been taught by (8:28) the Father.

A passage which places particular emphasis on the Son's dependence on his Father is 5:19–30. Here, Jesus elaborates on his statement in 5:17 in which he justifies his healing of a man on the Sabbath: "My Father is working until now, and I am working." For this claim, the Jews sought all the more to kill him "since he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but also calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" (5:18). But far from implying any independence from the Father, Jesus insists that, "The Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing"; for (γάρ) the Son does whatever the Father does (5:19). Out of his love for the Son, the Father "shows him all things he himself is doing" (5:20). The Son will execute judgment and grant life to others, because the Father has given him authority to judge and to have life in himself (5:21–29). As a result, the Son does nothing of himself but judges as he hears from the Father, because he does not seek his own will but that of his sender (5:30).

In contrast to this interpretation, Royce Gruenler argues for a mutual deference and subordination between Father and Son in John's Gospel. He repeatedly points to texts that speak of the Father "giving" to the Son and explains them as clear instances of the Father's "deference" to him. Whether the Father gives the Son believers (6:37), disciples (17:6), or "all things" (3:35), Gruenler sees these as examples of the loving "deference" of the Father

<sup>44</sup> While this is clearly tied to his being sent, it warrants a separate evaluation. Köstenberger writes, "The sending Christology of John's Gospel appears to center around the themes of obedience and dependence" (*Missions of Jesus and the Disciples* 107).

<sup>45</sup> A common Johannine idiom. See Barrett, *John* 259 ("without prompting"); Brown, *John* 1.218; and Beasley-Murray, *John* 68 ("by himself"); Bultmann, *John* 249 ("on his own authority"); Schnackenburg, *John* 2.103 ("of his own accord"); Carson, *John* 250 ("on his own initiative").

to the Son.<sup>46</sup> With regard to 5:19–30, he argues that the Father “defers to the Son in giving him all authority to judge. The Father submits to the good judgment of the Son and trusts his judgment completely. . . . Father and Son are mutually at one another’s service in the work of salvation.”<sup>47</sup> That the Father has granted the Son to have life in himself (5:26) further demonstrates “[t]he mutual interdependence of Father and Son.”<sup>48</sup> The Son is “worthy of executing divine judgment, hence the Father willingly subordinates himself to [him].”<sup>49</sup>

It is difficult, however, to see how Gruenler reaches such conclusions given the context of the passage and of the Gospel itself. No other major Johannine commentator of whom I am aware has interpreted this text to say that the Father “defers to” or “subordinates himself to” the authority of the Son.<sup>50</sup> The text allows no “interdependence.” Contrasted with Gruenler, Barrett’s comments regarding John’s repetition in the text are striking: “In vv. 19–30 the main theme is solemnly, constantly, almost wearisomely, repeated. As v. 17 foreshadowed, there is complete unity of action between the Father and the Son, and complete dependence of the Son on the Father.”<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, he writes, “If [the Son] executes judgment and gives life to the dead, this is because these privileges have been granted him by the Father.”<sup>52</sup> Beasley-Murray observes, “[T]he Father has committed the responsibility of judgment to the Son”;<sup>53</sup> Bernard speaks of the Father’s “delegation of judgment to the Son”;<sup>54</sup> and Keener claims that Jesus acts “on delegated authority.”<sup>55</sup> Commenting on 5:19, Carson insists that though Jesus is the unique Son who may truly be called God, yet he always submits to the Father and does only what he sees his Father doing. “In this sense

<sup>46</sup> Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 45 (6:37), 124 (17:6), 33 (3:35).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 38.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Gruenler cites no scholars in agreement.

<sup>51</sup> Barrett, *John* 257.

<sup>52</sup> C. K. Barrett, “Christocentric or Theocentric? Observations on the Theocentric Method of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 7. See also idem, “The Father is Greater than I’ John 14:28: Subordinationist Christology in the New Testament,” in *Essays on John* 19–36. After citing Gruenler’s work with apparent endorsement, Kevin Giles quotes Barrett as saying that John “more than any other writer in the New Testament lays the foundation for a doctrine of a co-equal Trinity” (*The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002] 34, n. 4; see Barrett, *John* 92). While Barrett clearly affirms the equality of Father and Son in John (see note 3 above), when one considers the rest of Barrett’s commentary and his other writings on the Father and Son in John cited above, it seems equally clear that Barrett affirms the Son’s functional subordination to the Father—a point one would not realize based on Giles one-sided quotation. Giles engages in little to no interaction of his own with the text of John. See the review by Peter R. Schemm, Jr., “Kevin Giles’s *The Trinity and Subordinationism: A Review Article*,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7/2 (2002) 67–78.

<sup>53</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John* 76.

<sup>54</sup> Bernard, *John* 241.

<sup>55</sup> Keener, *John* 1.648 (see further 1.652).

the relationship between the Father and the Son is not reciprocal. It is inconceivable that John could say that the Father does only what he sees the Son doing."<sup>56</sup> Gruenler seems to have inappropriately substituted the concept of "deference" for John's description of the Father unilaterally "giving" the Son authority to judge (5:22, 27). There is no indication in this or any other passages on which Gruenler comments that by giving "all things," "authority to judge," "works to accomplish," "people," or "disciples" to the Son, the Father is somehow subordinating himself to the Son's authority. One cannot equate "giving" with "deferring" without some clear indication from the context.

The same problem emerges when Gruenler speaks of the Father placing himself "at the disposal" of the Son by bearing witness to him (8:18), seeking his glory (8:54), and answering his prayers (14:16).<sup>57</sup> If answering Jesus' prayers is an example of the Father's "disposability" to the Son, it would seem that he could equally place himself "at the disposal" of believers by answering *their* prayers. This, in fact, turns out to be the case when Gruenler affirms the disposability of the Father and Son to the world through their radical humility (10:17) and their divine selfless generosity (17:1–2).<sup>58</sup> But is it appropriate to speak of this in terms of "disposability"? Is this the Evangelist's intent? In doing this, Gruenler seems to have blurred the semantic lines between the concepts of serving others in humility and submitting to a higher authority. To claim that the Father "defers to," puts himself "at the disposal of," and "subordinates himself to" the Son in the Fourth Gospel appears to demonstrate a misunderstanding of the very concepts of subordination and delegated authority. The comments of Davey present a stark contrast: "There is no more remarkable element in the Fourth Gospel than the consistent and universal presentation of Christ . . . as dependent upon the Father at every point."<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Carson, *John* 250–51. See also Dodd, *Fourth Gospel* 255–57; Brown, *John* 1.218. Critiquing Gruenler's denial of any functional subordination of the Son to the Father in John on the ground that one "defers" to the other, D. A. Carson describes this as a "vain attempt to bury under the banner of deference the massive differences in the descriptions of the roles of the Father and the Son as depicted in the Fourth Gospel." He adds, "Because I 'defer' to my son's request to pick him up at the soccer pitch does not mean he commands me in the way I command him or that my love for him is displayed in obedience to him" (*The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2000] 86).

<sup>57</sup> For each, see Gruenler, *Trinity* 59 (8:18), 64 (8:54), 100 (14:16).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 73 (10:17), 122–23 (17:1–2).

<sup>59</sup> J. Ernest Davey, *The Jesus of St. John: Historical and Christological Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (London: Lutterworth, 1958) 90. See pp. 91–157 for a lengthy discussion of all the ways Davey identifies in John in which Christ is dependent upon his Father. Others who remark on the significance of this theme in John include T. E. Pollard, who writes, "Again and again St. John emphasises the Son's total dependence on the Father" (*Johannine Christology and the Early Church* [SNTS 13; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970] 18); and Leon Morris: "[T]here can be no doubt but that John does stress the dependence of Jesus on the Father in a way the Synoptists do not. This is a major theme" (*Studies in the Fourth Gospel* 115). For further on Gruenler, see the review by Randy Stinson, "Does the Father Submit to the Son? A Critique of Royce Gruenler," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6/2 (2001) 12–17.

Not only is the Son dependent on his Father, but also he demonstrates total obedience. The Son has not come to do his own will, but the will of the one who sent him (5:30; 6:38). To do the Father's will and accomplish his work is the Son's food (4:35). During a confrontation with the Jews, Jesus repeatedly tells them that he speaks what he has heard from the Father (8:26, 38, 40) and also that he always does the things that are pleasing to him (8:29). He has received commandments from the Father regarding what to speak (12:49) and the laying down of his life (10:18). According to Jesus, he does just as the Father has commanded as an expression of his love for him (14:31), and, by keeping his commandments, he also abides in the Father's love (15:10). As the hour for his glorification arrives, the Son declares to his Father, "I glorified you on the earth, accomplishing the work which you have given me to do" (17:4). Then, when his work on the cross is done, his last words before his death in the Fourth Gospel are, "It is accomplished!" (19:30), signifying the completion of his mission which he has carried out in perfect obedience to the Father.<sup>60</sup>

Some, though, have offered correctives to interpreting these actions of the Son as "obedience." Noting the use of the term "commandment" (ἐντολή) in John, Paul Meyer argues that it is a crucial aspect of the "unity in action" of Father and Son. He writes,

Because of this term, the correspondence of action between Son and Father has been misunderstood as obedience within a patriarchally structured relationship. But this ἐντολή, in its first appearance in the Gospel (10:18), is the Good Shepherd's act of laying down his life for the sheep, not the surrender of Jesus' own will to yield to God's, as in the Synoptic Gethsemane scene . . . but the willing act of Jesus' own initiative and authority (ἐξουσία; cf. John 12:27), which is grounded in the relationship of mutual knowledge and love between Jesus and his Father.<sup>61</sup>

Meyer then quotes Ernst Käsemann, who, commenting on Jesus' "obedience," notes that "John himself uses neither the noun 'obedience' nor the verb 'to obey'. Instead, he has the formula, 'to do the will.'"<sup>62</sup> Ernst Haenchen concurs, "With Käsemann, one could conceive this as the obedience of Jesus. But 'to obey, obedience' (ὕπακούω, ὑπακοή, and ὑπήκοος) do not appear in the Gospel of John. These words do not have the right ring in this context."<sup>63</sup> According to Meyer, the constancy with which Jesus does the Father's will and works "does not *produce* unity with the Father—as would be the case if it were understood as obedience—but is grounded in, and springs from, the prior unity of Jesus with the Father."<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> On Jesus accomplishing his mission in obedience to the Father in 19:30, see Bultmann, *John* 674–75; Schnackenburg, *John* 3.284; Carson, *John* 621; Beasley-Murray, *John* 352.

<sup>61</sup> Meyer, "The Father" 260–61.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 261. Meyer quotes from Käsemann's *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (trans. Gerhard Krodel; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 18.

<sup>63</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (trans. J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]; 2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 1.250.

<sup>64</sup> Meyer, "The Father" 261 (emphasis original).

Acknowledging that the Son is often said to “do the will” or to “do the works” of the Father, Marianne Meye Thompson nevertheless also calls attention to the absence of the word “obey,” remarking that John “stresses rather dramatically the harmony of the Son’s will with the Father’s, interpreting the Son’s obedience as an *enactment* or *expression* of the Father’s will, rather than as submission or acquiescence to it.”<sup>65</sup> This does not imply, however, “that the Johannine Jesus has no will, rather, that Jesus’ will is fully in harmony with that of the Father.”<sup>66</sup> Like Meyer, Thompson calls attention to 10:18, finding that not only does the passage speak of the “charge” Jesus has received from his Father, but it also simultaneously stresses his sovereignty over his life. “The climactic statement, ‘This charge I have received from my Father,’ stands out almost as a surd element, for now Jesus’ sovereignty over his own life, death, and resurrection is attributed to the *command* of the Father.” She continues,

However, the dialectic is resolved in the peculiarity of the Father-Son relationship in John, in which the Father not only gives the Son his life but grants it to him to dispose of it as he will—or, as the Father wills. . . . The Son’s obedience to the Father does not establish their unity, nor is it an obedience construed in terms of submission to an alien command. Rather, the Son’s “obedience” is the expression of the will of the One who sent him.<sup>67</sup>

Several responses are necessary. First, granting the absence of the actual *words* “to obey,” “obedience,” and “obedient” (ὕπακούω, ὑπακοή, and ὑπήκοος) in John’s Gospel, it is hard to see the relevance of this in light of the clear evidence for the presence of the *concept*.<sup>68</sup> Both Meyer and Thompson acknowledge that John speaks of Jesus “doing the will” (ποιεῖν τὸ θέλημα) of the one who sent him (4:34; 6:38). Yet the same phrase is used with respect

<sup>65</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, “The Living Father,” *Semeia* 85 (1999) 28 (emphasis original). See also the chapters by the same title in Thompson’s *The God of the Gospel of John* 57–100; and *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 133–54.

<sup>66</sup> Thompson, “The Living Father” 28.

<sup>67</sup> Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* 95 (emphasis original).

<sup>68</sup> Käsemann’s emphasis on the lack of Johannine terms meaning “obedience, to obey” is consistent with his rejection of any moralistic understanding of Jesus’ “obedience.” Arguing for a docetic Christology in the Fourth Gospel, he believes that such “features of his lowliness . . . represent the absolute minimum of the costume designed for the one who dwelt for a little while among men, appearing to be one of them, yet without himself being subjected to earthly conditions. . . . Obedience is the form and concretion of Jesus’ glory during the period of his incarnation” (Käsemann, *Testament of Jesus* 10–11). Thus, for Käsemann, the lack of “obedience” by Jesus in any moral sense in John (and the corresponding terms) is tied to the fact that he is not truly human. For helpful critiques of Käsemann’s denial of the true humanity of the Johannine Jesus, see Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*; and Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 43–67. In critiquing Käsemann for too easily dismissing any evidence that contradicts his proposal of naive docetism, Robert Kysar writes, “None of these critics seems to have come to grips with the evidence for the subordination of the revealer to God” (*The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975] 190–91). See also Werner Georg Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 269.

to others “doing God’s will” (7:17; 9:31; cf. 1 John 2:17) and is clearly intended to refer to their *obedience* to God.<sup>69</sup> Jesus also “keeps” (τηρέω) his Father’s word and commandments (8:55; 15:10). This word occurs often in the NT with the meaning “to obey” and, moreover, is commonly used in the Johannine literature in this manner.<sup>70</sup> Christians are to “keep (τηρέω) God’s word/commandments” (John 14:23–24; 15:10; 1 John 2:3ff.; 3:22, 24; 5:3). Particularly illuminating is 15:10, in which Jesus compares his disciples’ behavior to his own: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” Here, the obedience of the disciples is to be patterned off of the *obedience* of Jesus.<sup>71</sup> In actuality, one does not find ὑπακούω, ὑπακοή, or ὑπήκοος in any Johannine writings, even with respect to believers. Thus, arguments that point to the lack of these words in the Fourth Gospel to describe Jesus’ actions hardly seem persuasive when one realizes that they are not even a part of the Evangelist’s vocabulary. To “do God’s will” and “keep God’s word/commandments” are simply the Johannine formulas for expressing obedience to God.<sup>72</sup>

Second, the fact that Jesus speaks of the authority and sovereignty he has over his own life in 10:18 is not inconsistent with the commandment he has received from his Father to lay it down. The Son willingly submits to the Father’s will and lays down his life. In declaring that no one takes his life from him but that he lays it down of his own accord, Jesus’ point is that the cross is not a tragic accident of fate or merely a scheme concocted by wicked men—it is the Father’s plan.<sup>73</sup> John wants his readers to know ahead of time that, while the perpetrators are morally culpable, what is about to happen is directed by divine sovereignty (cf. 13:18–19; 18:8–9; 19:11, 24).<sup>74</sup>

Third, it is a false dichotomy to set Jesus’ unity of will with the Father in opposition to his obedience to his Father’s commands in John. According to Meyer, obedience so understood would produce unity, but, instead, Jesus’

<sup>69</sup> Note under the entry for “ποιέω” in BDAG: “[T]o carry out an obligation of a moral or social nature . . . do, keep the will or law obediently τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ.”

<sup>70</sup> John 8:51, 52; 14:15, 21, 23, 24; 15:10, 20; 17:6; 1 John 2:3–4; 3:24; 5:3; Rev 3:8; 12:17; 14:12. Louw and Nida place this usage of τηρέω in the same semantic domain as (among other words) ὑπακούω, ὑπακοή, and ὑπήκοος, under the heading “Obey, Disobey.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2d ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), s.v. “τηρέω.” See also BDAG, s.v. “τηρέω.”

<sup>71</sup> See Westcott, *John* 219; Barrett, *John* 475–76; Carson, *John* 520; Morris, *John* 597; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 519. Note also their comments on the preceding texts leading up to 15:10 (14:15, 21, 23, 24).

<sup>72</sup> In her own commentary on the Johannine Epistles, Thompson interprets both phrases in terms of “obedience.” See Marianne Meye Thompson, *1–3 John* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 51–57, 68. Commenting on 1 John 2:6, she writes, “All of Jesus’ life demonstrated obedience to God, and that obedience was manifested above all in his death on the cross.” She then cites, among other texts, 10:18 as evidence (ibid. 56). In light of this, it seems that Thompson has changed her position prior to her most recent work on John’s Gospel.

<sup>73</sup> See Carson, *John* 389.

<sup>74</sup> For these themes in John, see Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, esp. 125–98.

constancy in doing the Father's will is grounded in their unity.<sup>75</sup> Thompson insists that Jesus' actions are not the acquiescence of his own will to yield to the Father's or submission to an alien command, but rather an expression of the will of his sender.<sup>76</sup> However, to speak of one's "obedience" or "submission" to God's command does not imply any necessary lack of unity of will between the two, as if the one obeying God does so only under protest. The OT describes the psalmist whose "delight is in the law of Yahweh" (Ps 1:2; cf. 119:14, 16, 24, 35, 70, 77) and who recognizes God's testimonies as the "joy of [his] heart" (119:111). Psalm 40:8 testifies, "I delight to do your will, O my God." Submission to God's will on the part of the OT saint is described in terms of delight and, thus, harmony of will—not mere acquiescence of his will to yield to God's. If such could be said by the faithful OT believer, how much more is this true of the Son who considers it his very food "to do the will" of his Father who sent him (4:34)? According to Thompson, John interprets the Son's "obedience" as "an *enactment or expression* of the Father's will."<sup>77</sup> But while this is certainly true, it is not *merely* that. Such emphasis on their unity runs the risk of swallowing up any distinction between the two. Jesus' will is in harmony with the Father's, but he obeys him nonetheless. The oneness of their wills should not be used to trump John's presentation of the Son's loving, willing obedience to his Father's commands (14:31). Though they are at one, "it is the oneness of command and obedience."<sup>78</sup>

### III. "FATHER" AND "SON" TERMINOLOGY

A third and final issue I will consider that seems to imply the Son's subordination to his Father in John involves the very use of "Father-Son" terminology. The scope of this article limits the extent to which the "Father" and "Son" terminology will be explored in John. The question of concern here is, "What does the 'Father-Son' language in the Fourth Gospel imply regarding the relationship between Jesus and God?" More specifically, "Do these terms necessarily imply a hierarchical relationship between the two?" It would seem to be no coincidence that the Gospel in which Jesus characteristically and frequently calls God his Father and himself the Son is the same Gospel in which Jesus emphasizes his submission to God.

Jesus consistently calls God "Father" when speaking of his actions of dependence and obedience in the relationship. The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; as the Father does, so the Son does (5:19). The Father taught the Son (8:28), whose obedience is evident because he always does what pleases the Father (8:29) and speaks what he has heard from him (8:38). Jesus honors his Father (8:49, cf. Exod 20:12) and keeps his word (8:55). When his hour draws near, he tells his disciples that he is going to the Father, "for the Father is greater than I" (14:28).

<sup>75</sup> Meyer, "The Father" 261.

<sup>76</sup> Thompson, "The Living Father" 29.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>78</sup> Carson, *John* 389.

Thompson argues that “there are distinct patterns of usage that illumine the meaning of ‘Father’ in the Gospel” and which suggest why it is such an important term for God. She asserts, “The primary understanding of God as Father in John comes to expression in John 5:26: ‘Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.’” Thus, what shapes understanding of God as Father is “the fundamental reality that a father’s relationship to his children consists first in terms simply of giving them life. What it means to be a father is to be the origin or source of the life of one’s children.”<sup>79</sup> “[A] son by definition is one who has life from his father.”<sup>80</sup> For Thompson, John 6:57, which speaks of God as “the living Father,” and the above statement from 5:26 “are essential to understanding John’s delineation of God as Father and Jesus as Son.”<sup>81</sup> So, she argues, “When Jesus calls God ‘Father,’ he points first to the Father as the source or origin of life, and to the relationship established through the life-giving activity of the Father.”<sup>82</sup> “[T]he primary characteristic of the Father-Son relationship is the life that constitutes their relationship.”<sup>83</sup> So, to label Jesus’ words in John 14:28 (“The Father is greater than I”) as an example of John’s “subordinationism” is misleading, “inasmuch as it conceives of the relationship of Father and Son primarily in hierarchical terms.” Thompson insists,

Since John stresses the function of the Father as the one who gives life to his offspring, rather than the role of the Father as the one who instructs or disciplines, statements such as “The Father is greater than I” ought not to be read against a backdrop of patriarchal hierarchy. The Father is the source of the Son’s life; it is as the origin of the Son’s very being that “the Father is greater than I.”<sup>84</sup>

Pointing to the OT and to Jewish literature in support of her thesis, she finds three characteristic descriptions of a father’s attributes or activities that figure prominently in John, the first of which involves the father being the origin or source of life.<sup>85</sup> The second description she lists is that the father is an authority figure worthy of obedience and honor. However, Thompson interprets Jesus’ “obedience” in light of the harmony of his will with the Father’s will, and thus, as an enactment of it (see critique above). A father as the origin or source of life characterizes not only human fathers, but God as Father as well. “God is the Father of Israel as its founder, the ancestor of the ‘clan’ of the Israelite nation insofar as he called it into being.”<sup>86</sup> In addition, the OT phrase “the living God” stands as an affirmation of God as creator of all that is and the source of all life.<sup>87</sup> So, when we come to John, “Precisely in holding together the affirmation that the Son has ‘life in

<sup>79</sup> Thompson, “The Living Father” 20.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>81</sup> Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* 72.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 59.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 73.



himself' with the affirmation that he has 'been *given*' such life by the Father, we find the uniquely Johannine characterization of the relationship of the Father and the Son."<sup>88</sup> While the characterization of God as "the living God" does not occur in John, the variant "the living Father" does. Thompson contends,

The affirmation that God is "Father" cannot be separated from the affirmation that God is the source of life, nor from the conviction that the life of the Father has been given to, and comes to human beings through, the Son. Consequently, within the Gospel of John, the commonplace that God is the living God appears within polemic contexts (chs. 5 and 6) precisely as the warrant for the claims about the life-giving work of Jesus, the Son.<sup>89</sup>

This understanding of the Father-Son relationship in John, however, is perhaps somewhat forced in light of the Gospel as a whole. Let us consider four responses. First, two texts (5:26; 6:57) seem to have become the hermeneutical grid by which the relationship is interpreted. In context, that the Father has given the Son to have life in himself (5:26) serves as the ground for how the Son is able to grant eternal life to others (which Thompson affirms)—but it does not appear to follow that it also serves to express the "primary understanding of God as Father in John." Note the emphasis on life and judgment in the passage. Jesus tells the Jews that those who hear his word and believe the one who sent him have eternal *life* and do not enter into *judgment* (5:24). An hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear his voice and live (5:25). The ground (*γάρ*) for this assertion is that (1) the Father has given to the Son to have *life* in himself just as the Father has life in himself (5:26); and (*καί*) (2) he gave him authority to execute *judgment* (5:27). Thus, those in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth to either a resurrection of *life* or *judgment* (5:28–29). Life and judgment are in the Son's hands to render to others, because the Father has given both to him. In 6:57, the Son lives because of the "living Father," and those who "eat" the Son will live because of him. Here also, the point of asserting that the Son lives because of the Father is to show that individuals can only have life through feeding on the Son.

These texts serve to justify Jesus' ability to mediate eternal life to others. While Thompson clearly views the Father's granting to the Son to have "life in himself" as the ground for the Son's life-giving work, what appears unjustified is her assertion that such giving of life represents "the uniquely Johannine characterization" of the relationship of the Father and the Son. As the foregoing discussion has attempted to demonstrate, John repeatedly and in numerous texts describes Jesus as the dependent and obedient Son who has been sent on a mission from the Father. How is it that two verses pertaining to Jesus having life because of the Father stand as "essential to understanding John's delineation of God as Father and Jesus as Son"? To conclude from these texts that the primary reason Jesus calls God "Father"

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 79 (emphasis original).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 76.

throughout the Gospel is to point to him as his source of life seems to call for an interpretive jump that is not intended.<sup>90</sup>

Second, in interpreting 14:28, Thompson asserts that “it is as the origin of the Son’s very being that ‘the Father is greater than I.’” As evidence, she points to the context, “in which Jesus asserts that he *returns* to the Father, because the Father is greater; that is, he has his origins in the Father.”<sup>91</sup> However, this has not been established from the context, but assumed. She has not explained *why* the Father being greater means that he is the origin of the Son’s being. Jesus does speak of “going” to the Father in the context (14:12, 28; 16:5), but he is going back to “him who sent me” (16:5), drawing on the “sending” language. So if Jesus speaks of the Father as his “source” or “origin” in this discourse, it seems best to see the Father as the authority that is the source or origin of his mission to whom he returns. While contextual clues are lacking for Thompson’s view, Jesus’ statement in 14:28 is certainly consistent with the evidence cited thus far supporting the subordination theme.<sup>92</sup>

Third, it is also hard to reconcile Thompson’s view of the Father-Son relationship with other passages in John. In 8:38–44, Jesus compares his actions to those of the Jews in terms of their respective “fathers.” Jesus speaks what he has heard from his Father, and they from their father (8:38). When they claim Abraham as their father, Jesus tells them to “do the deeds of Abraham” (8:39). When they claim God as their Father, he tells them that if this were so, they should recognize that he was sent from God and love him (8:41–42). Rather, he claims, they are of their father the devil because they want to do his desires (8:44). Surely, Jesus is not speaking of these three “fathers” as origins or sources of life. The obvious implication is that a child imitates his father from whom he has learned (cf. 5:19; 8:26, 28). Jesus is speaking of these father-son relationships in terms of moral behavior.

Commenting on the same passage, Thompson acknowledges that Jesus emphasizes conduct, not physical descent, as the ultimate criterion in determining the Jews’ true relationship to their “father.” But she continues,

At first glance, this treatment of the Father-Son imagery seems to tend in a rather different direction from that previously delineated, for here sonship is determined not by kinship or descent but by obedience. This argument, however, is set in a discourse that begins with the assertion that Jesus is the free

<sup>90</sup> This is not to say that “life” is not a major theme in John. The programmatic statement of the Gospel exhorts belief in Jesus as the Christ so that one may have “life in his name” (20:31). For John, “eternal life” appears to be synonymous with the proclamation of the “kingdom of God” found in the Synoptics (see Mark 9:43, 47 and Mark 10:17, 23). See the discussion in Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* 214–20.

<sup>91</sup> Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* 94 (emphasis original).

<sup>92</sup> Most major commentators interpret the Father’s being “greater” than Jesus either as referring to the Father as the Son’s sender or as describing the difference between the Father in his glory and the Son in his present humiliation. See Brown, *John* 2.654–55; Schnackenburg, *John* 3.86; Haenchen, *John* 2.128; Beasley-Murray, *John* 262; Carson, *John* 507–8; Morris, *John* 584–85; and Keener, *John* 2.983. Barrett states that “[t]he Father is *fons divinitatis* in which the being of the Son has its source” and then adds, “the Father is God sending and commanding, the Son is God sent and obedient” (*John* 468).

Son of the house, the only rightful heir of the Father's inheritance, the one who is not destined for death (8:31–36). As the "Son of the house" (8:35), Jesus is the heir of the Father; he has life from the Father and can bestow it on others; he alone is obedient to the Father. All the elements of genuine sonship are embodied in him, but his mission is to set others free so that they can enter into the Father's inheritance through him.<sup>93</sup>

However, in speaking of his peculiar sonship in 8:31–36, Jesus is not saying explicitly or implicitly that he "is not destined for death" or that "he has life from the Father." He is contrasting the one who is a "slave of sin" (8:35) with the free Son who is able to make others free (8:32, 36). The emphasis in the text is not on the Son as an heir who can bestow life and make others free, so that they "may enter into the Father's inheritance." Rather, the emphasis is on the Son who makes slaves of sin free—a freedom which Jesus characterizes as "continu[ing] in my word" and "know[ing] the truth" as true disciples (8:31–32). In other words, Jesus' sonship is the ground for freeing others to exhibit faithful moral conduct before God. This is something for which the Jews' deny their need (8:33) and sets up the ensuing discussion regarding father-son relationships based on similar behavior.<sup>94</sup>

Fourth, when John's readers thought of a father-son relationship, what would have come to mind? Thompson's survey of the OT and Judaism seeks to address this. As already noted, she does identify obedience and honor as expressions that sons owe to their fathers. If one grants the earlier critique of Thompson's view of Jesus' "obedience" so that it is not explained away, Jesus can be understood as obeying and honoring his Father in John. As a son obeys and honors his father, so Jesus responds to his Father. However, it seems possible to push further. While one can hardly deny that Scripture and Judaism recognize a father as the source or origin of his children, would this have been the primary characteristic of a father in the minds of John's readers? At the very least, this would seem highly debatable. In its OT secular sense, Hofius identifies the father as the head of his family and an authority to be respected.<sup>95</sup> Quell writes, "From the official and semi-official secular modes of expression one may indirectly draw the conclusion that predominantly, and sometimes even exclusively, Israel regarded the father relationship as one of authority."<sup>96</sup> Having discussed the man's position in the family as the *ba'al*, the "master of the house," Pedersen then explains,

When a man is called father, it really implies the same thing, kinship and authority also being expressed by the name of father. *To the Israelite the name father always spells authority.* Naaman is called father by his servants (2 Kings 5,13). The priest is called father of the cultic community, of which he is the head (Judg. 18,19), and Elijah is called father by his disciple (2 Kings 2,12).<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* 96.

<sup>94</sup> Note especially the discussion of Carson, *John* 346–53. See also Barrett, *John* 344–49; and Brown, *John* 1.361–65.

<sup>95</sup> O. Hofius, "πατήρ," *NIDNTT* 3.617.

<sup>96</sup> Gottlob Schrenk and Gottfried Quell, "πατήρ," *TDNT* 5.971.

<sup>97</sup> Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (4 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1926–40) 1.63 (emphasis added).

The Hebrews did not neglect the importance of the physical bond between father and son, Lofthouse argues,

But Father, to the Hebrew, suggests so much more than physical origin, that physical origin, when the word Father or Son was used, was apt to be neglected, and the word could equally well be used when physical origin was out of the question. Moreover, a father, though he might be less than the progenitor, was also much more. Like the Roman father, he was also the lifelong guardian and master of the boy, expecting obedience, cooperation, affection and confidence to the end. . . . The words "like father, like son" . . . [for the Hebrew] . . . would . . . express an ideal bond, in which the father lived and acted in his son, and the son carried out the father's aims and purposes in proud and joyous submission.<sup>98</sup>

Clearly, the Evangelist does not intend his readers to understand the Father's giving to the Son to have life in himself (5:26) in the same manner as God's giving life to human beings or as his creating Israel as a nation. Nor does he intend this to be understood in terms of the Father's superiority to the Son in his essential being.<sup>99</sup> If John intended the Father-Son relationship to be primarily understood in terms of the Father as the origin of the Son's life, this would seem to run, not just in tension with, but in sharp contrast to his description of the Son as not a created being, but himself God (1:1).

Thus, the very use of the Father-Son language in John seems to imply a hierarchical relationship.<sup>100</sup> Gruenler insists, "The dynamics of the divine Family are relational and symmetrical."<sup>101</sup> But if the relationship between Jesus and God is purely symmetrical, what is the Father-Son terminology intended to convey? Would not such language present serious confusion for John's readers? Would the first reader's of the Fourth Gospel have understood a father-son relationship as "symmetrical"? Could the Son have sent the Father into the world? Could the Father as equally have said, "I do exactly as the Son commanded me" (14:31)? It is extremely difficult to imagine John writing this. Instead it seems that the burden of proof lies with those who would deny that such language necessarily implies a hierarchical relationship in the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>98</sup> W. F. Lofthouse, *The Father and the Son: A Study in Johannine Thought* (London: SCM, 1934) 23–24. Having written this, Lofthouse later speaks of Jesus' obedience to the Father (p. 41), but then says, "Obedience . . . as we understand it, is transcended. If the Son was sent into the world, He came, equally, of His own accord" (p. 43). However, such an argument suffers from the same fault as those critiqued above. Obedience is no less obedience though it be done willingly and with joy. In addition, Lofthouse's comment runs contrary to Jesus' own language in the Fourth Gospel in which he claims the Son can do *nothing* "of His own accord" (5:19, 30; cf. 8:28).

<sup>99</sup> For this potential problem with Thompson's interpretation (the Father's ontological superiority), see the review of *The God of the Gospel of John* by Andreas Köstenberger in *JETS* 45 (2002) 522.

<sup>100</sup> Borgen argues that the idea of the Son-Father relationship in John "implies that the Son is subordinate to the Father" ("God's Agent" 139–40).

<sup>101</sup> Gruenler, *Trinity* 40. Note his comments elsewhere: "[S]ubmission within the divine Family does not run in one direction only, that is, only from Son to Father, but is reciprocal and symmetrical" (p. 33) and, commenting on 8:18, "[Jesus] says that the relationship is mutual and symmetrical" (p. 59).

## IV. CONCLUSION

In the same way that the Fourth Gospel presents other combinations of seemingly opposed themes, it also displays a tension in its portrayal of Jesus' relationship to God.<sup>102</sup> John not only depicts Jesus as equal to God in his essential nature, but also displays him as the Son who fulfills a subordinate role to his Father's authority. It is the challenging of this latter view in recent scholarship in particular with which this article has been concerned. Some have denied that the Son's submission to his Father in John is in any way unilateral. Such "deference" occurs from Father to Son in like manner. Others have reinterpreted the themes of the sending of the Son, the obedience of Jesus, and the Father-Son relationship in John to the extent that they no longer imply a subordination of the Son to the Father in the sense of a hierarchical relationship between the two.

I have attempted to argue, however, that these efforts have fallen short. Not only do they depart sharply from the majority of Johannine scholarship, but they do not provide an adequate explanation of John's portrayal of the Son's relationship to his Father based on the data of the Gospel. Given the Fourth Gospel's emphasis on such elements as the deity, pre-existence, and sovereignty of Jesus, combined with statements such as, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), one can perhaps sympathize with a reticence to understand this same Jesus as functionally subordinate to God. However, one need not, indeed must not, choose between the two, if evidence for both exists within the text.<sup>103</sup>

I have pointed to three pieces of evidence in John that imply the Son's subordination to his Father: (1) the Father's sending of the Son; (2) the Son's unilateral dependence on and obedience to the Father; and (3) the usage of Father-Son language to describe the relationship between the two. The reader of the Fourth Gospel can hardly miss the fact, though, that this relational hierarchy is set in the context of perfect divine love. For it is *because* the Father loves the Son that he shows him all that he is doing (5:20), and it is *so that* the world may know that the Son loves the Father, that he does as he is commanded (14:31). It is this divine love between Father and Son—expressed through the Father sending and the Son obeying—which makes possible the manifestation of the love of God for the world (3:16).

<sup>102</sup> Oscar Cullmann writes, "We must allow this paradox of all Christology to stand. The New Testament does not resolve it, but sets the two statements alongside each other: on the one hand the Logos *was* God; on the other hand, he was *with* God. The same paradox occurs again in the Gospel of John with regard to the 'Son of God' concept. We hear on the one hand, 'I and the Father are one' (John 10.30); and on the other hand, 'the Father is greater than I' (John 14.28)" (*The Christology of the New Testament* [trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963] 266).

<sup>103</sup> Donald Guthrie writes, "[I]t is worth noting that those books of the NT which have the most explicit teaching on the subordination of the Son (especially John and Hebrews), have the highest Christology" (*New Testament Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981] 314, n. 288). Similarly, Craig Keener: "Although the Fourth Gospel highlights Jesus' deity more than the other gospels, it also highlights Jesus' subordination to the Father more than the others" (*John* 1.310).