

Divine Agency in the Scriptures

By David Burge, New Zealand

NOTE: *Ministers of the New Covenant does not use the terms “God” and “Jesus” in the manner that the author of this article does. However, what he has written has been written well, and I feel that the intent of the article in explaining the principle of agency makes it worth reading for study. This does not mean that I endorse all the beliefs of this particular author.*

In Hebrew thought, the “first cause” is not always distinguished from “intermediate” or “secondary” causes. That is to say: The principal is not always clearly distinguished from the agent, the one commissioned to carry out an act on behalf of another. Sometimes the agent, standing for the principal, is treated as if he or she *were* the principal him or herself, though this is not literally so. Principal and agent remain two distinct persons but they act in complete harmony. The agent acts and speaks for his principal.

The Principle of Agency in Scripture

In the Bible there are examples of human principals using fellow humans for agents, of God as divine principal using angelic agents, and of God using human agents. This notion of principal and agent is the key to understanding the relationship between the one true God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Human Principal and Agency in the Gospels

The concept of principal and agency can actually help us to reconcile what appear otherwise to be contradictions in the parallel accounts found in the synoptic Gospels. So in the account of Jesus healing the centurion’s servant, Matthew speaks of a conversation between the centurion himself and Jesus (Mt. 8:5-13). Luke tells us that the centurion did not in fact come personally. He sent some “Jewish elders” and then some “friends” to Jesus with his requests (Luke 7:1-10). The centurion here is the principal; the Jewish elders and the centurion’s friends are his appointed, commissioned agents. Remembering that in Hebrew thought, the principal and the agent are not always clearly distinguished, Matthew mentions only the principal (the centurion) without distinguishing the agent (the Jewish elders and friends). Luke mentions both principal and agents. To put it another way, in Matthew’s account, the elders (agents) stand for and are treated as the centurion (principal), even though this is not literally true.

Similarly, when Jesus was questioned concerning who might sit next to him in his Kingdom, Mark gives us the impression that James and John themselves personally asked whether they might sit next to Jesus in places of royal authority (Mk. 10:35-40). Matthew tells us that in fact it was the mother of Zebedee’s children who actually made the request to Jesus (Mt. 20:20-23). In this case, Matthew gives the agency (the mother), whereas Mark does not. Again, putting it the other way around, in Matthew’s account the mother (as agent) stands for and is treated as James and John (the principal), even though this is not literally true.

Divine Principal and Human Agency

The LORD told Moses that he would be “*Elohim* [God] to Aaron” (Ex. 4:16). He says, “I have made you *Elohim* to Pharaoh and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Ex. 7:1). In Exodus 7:17-21 the LORD says: “By this you will know that I am the LORD: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.” The LORD then says to Moses, “Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt — over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs — and they will turn to blood.’” Moses and Aaron did as the LORD had commanded. Aaron raised his staff and struck the water of the Nile “and all the water was changed into blood.”

The LORD had said that He Himself would strike the waters with the staff in his own hand. Yet, it was Aaron’s hand that held the rod, and Aaron who struck the Nile. Clearly, Aaron is not God. Rather, Aaron stands as God’s agent, in the place of God. One might even say he *is* “God,” not literally, but in a manner of (Hebrew) speaking. One might even say in this case that God (as principal) was represented by Moses (the agent), who in turn was represented by Aaron!

Divine Principal and Angelic Agency

Genesis 18 begins by saying that “the LORD appeared to Abraham” (v. 1). We read that Abraham “looked up and saw three men” (v. 2). The implication is that *one* of the three is in a sense the LORD. Later it is the LORD who says, “I will surely return to you about this time next year” (vv. 10, 13). When the men get up to leave the LORD speaks yet again (v. 17). Finally, two of the angelic men turn away. As the NIV has it, “Abraham remained standing before the LORD” (v. 22). The alternative, given as a footnote, reads “but the LORD remained standing before Abraham.” It was not literally the LORD (the principal) who appeared to Abraham; it was an angel (His agent). As agent of the LORD, however, the angel is treated as the LORD. We know this must be so because the Bible is adamant: No one has seen God (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12; 1 Tim. 6:16). Note too that the one angel who directly represents God is *worshipped* as God’s agent.

When Jacob wrestled with a heavenly being, he is said to have “seen God face to face.” So Jacob is said to have wrestled with “God” (Gen. 32:24-30). However, we know from the word of the LORD to the prophet Hosea that Jacob in struggling against God actually wrestled with an angel (Hos. 12:3-4). Jacob did not literally wrestle with the LORD (the principal); it was with an angel (His agent) that he wrestled. However as the agent of the LORD the angel is treated as the LORD. Again, we know this is so because the Bible insists: No one has ever seen God (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12; 1 Tim. 6:16). So too, when Jacob, as an old man, blessed Joseph’s children he said, “May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm — may he bless these boys” (Gen. 48:15-16). Surely, God Himself is not an angel, but the angel as His agent represented Him.

Another very clear example of this type of thinking is as follows. According to Deuteronomy 4:12 it was the LORD who spoke to Israel “out of the fire” to give them His Law at Sinai. It is said to be the LORD’s own voice that they heard. Yet several Scriptures reveal the speaker to have been an angel. Stephen says that “he [Moses] was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai” (Acts 7:38). He told the Jews, “You have received the law that was put into effect through angels, and have not obeyed it” (v. 53). Paul also says, “The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator [Moses]” (Gal. 3:19). Hebrews 2:2 only serves to confirm this point, saying that the message (the law) was “spoken by angels.” This is no contradiction. The LORD did not literally speak “out of the fire.” An angel spoke. However as the agent of the LORD the angel is treated as the LORD. It is as if the LORD actually spoke.

Scripture affirms that it was God who “opened the doors of the heavens” and “rained down manna” for the people of Israel to eat during their wilderness wanderings. He gave them “the grain of heaven” to eat (Ps. 78:23-24). The manna did not literally come down from heaven, the throne of God. It was “from heaven” in that it was a gracious gift of God. So too, the manna is called “the bread of angels” (Ps. 78:25). This is probably not because angels actually have manna for breakfast. God himself provided the food, but he did it through the agency of His angels.

“The Angel of the Lord”

When Hagar saw the angel of the LORD she said, “I have now seen the one who sees me” (Gen. 16:7-14), referring to God. The angel of God said to Jacob, “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar” (Gen 31:11-13; cf. 28:16). While it is said that “the angel of the LORD” appeared to Moses from within the burning bush, it was God who called to him “from within the bush” (Ex. 3:1-5). Manoah, realizing he had seen “the angel of the LORD,” said to his wife, “We have seen God!” (Jud. 13:20). So too, works attributed to the “angel of the Lord” are attributed to the LORD himself. The angel is said to have brought Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 3:7-8, Jud. 2:1). He is said to have sworn to give the land to the seed of Abraham (Gen. 15:18; Jud. 2:1). It was he who is said to have “cut a covenant” with Israel (Gen. 15:18; Jud. 2:1).

Many suggest that the angel of the LORD is a manifestation of the LORD Himself. Some even suggest that the angel of the Lord is a pre-incarnate (pre-human) form of Jesus Christ. If you believe this—Scripture is clear on this point—we suggest that you are mistaken. The book of Hebrews makes much of the supremacy of the Son and the superiority of his ministry over that of God’s servants, the angels (1:5-14). It is because the ministry of the word in the Son is superior to theirs that it must not be neglected. If the message “spoken by angels” (see the previous section) was binding, the saving Gospel message that comes by the Son is more so (2:1-4). While the Son was “made a little lower than the heavenly beings” (Heb. 2:7, 9), the “angels” of the LXX (Gk version of the OT) (Ps. 8:4-5), he has been exalted far above them by God the Father. He who is so superior to the angels cannot himself be an angel. One of the greatest truths revealed by Hebrews (1:1-2) is that God expressly did *not* speak through His Son in the Old Testament times. That is because the Son was not yet living. He had not yet been brought

into existence (begotten) in Mary's womb (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35).

To say that the angel of the LORD *is* the LORD Himself is inaccurate and imprecise. The angel of the LORD is the *agent* of the Lord and thus stands for the LORD Himself. Exodus 23:20-21 makes this clear: The LORD says, "See, I am sending an angel ahead of you, to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, **since my name is in him.**" As the LORD's chosen representative, the angel speaks whatever he is told to speak by the LORD. The people are to obey the angel's voice because "my [God's] name is in him." That is, the angel represents God when he is sent on a mission from God.

Has Anyone Ever Seen God?

When God confirmed His covenant with Israel, it is said of Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the 70 elders that they "saw the God of Israel" (Ex. 24:9-11). So too, in Exodus 33:17-23, Moses is said to have seen God's "back." God would not allow Moses to see His face when He passed because "no man can see Me and live." Note, in verse 20, in God's own words, "seeing God's face" and "seeing God" are synonymous. Seeing God's "back" is akin to seeing "God's glory" (Ex. 33:18, 22), which Moses did indeed see. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, Moses "saw Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). How is it then that the Bible is so clear: "No one has ever seen God"? (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). He "lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). The only explanation available to us is that none of these worthies ever literally saw God. Rather they saw God's agent, His chosen representative, who spoke with the authority of the LORD as though he were the LORD. They saw the angel of the LORD. In exactly the same manner Jesus said "He who has seen me has seen my Father" (John 14:9).

The Messiah as God's Agent

There are a number of texts where titles explicitly referring to God in the Jewish Scriptures are referred to Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. Many take this as proof positive that the two are One in a Trinitarian sense, that is, two Persons in the One Essence of God. Comparing Scripture with Scripture, in line with all that has gone before, it can easily be shown that these verses teach the vital truth that the LORD is the principal and the Messiah is His agent. As His appointed representative Messiah stands in the place of God, but is not literally God any more than Moses, Aaron or any of the angels who stand in the place of God are literally God.

Jesus as Savior

The Jewish Scriptures are clear on this point: God is the *sole* Savior of Israel. The LORD says, "I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Is. 43:3); "apart from Me there is no savior" (Is. 43:11; cf. 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8). Nevertheless, Moses, as God's agent, is called a savior (Acts 7:35; cp. 27 and Ex. 2:14; 18:13). The judges, as God's appointed agents, are also called saviors (Jud. 3:9, 15; Neh. 9:27; Ex. 2:14; 18:13, Acts 7:27, 35). The prophets speak of other human agents, yet future, who will save Israel (Is. 19:20, Obad. 21).

Of course the Apostles acknowledge God as their Savior also. They speak of God as “our Savior” (1 Tim. 1:1; Tit. 1:4) and as “the Savior of all men” (1 Tim. 4:10). For them “the grace of God [the Father] brings salvation” (Tit. 2:10). But in true Biblical fashion, they also refer to Jesus, God’s ultimate agent, as Savior. He was born a Savior (Luke 2:10-11) and not just the Savior of Israel but “the world” (John 4:42). “Salvation is found in no one else.” There is “no other name” than that of Jesus “by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). They were eagerly awaiting that Savior, Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20). This does not however prove that Jesus is the LORD God any more than the fact that Moses and the judges of Israel are called savior, makes them literally Divine. There is indeed only one *ultimate* Savior who is the God and Father of Jesus. Jesus is also savior as the perfect agent of the One supreme Savior. Salvation derives as Jude 25 says from “the only God” who is our principal savior “through” His agent Jesus Christ.

Jesus as Shepherd

Without doubt God is the principal “shepherd” over Israel (Gen. 49:24; 80:1; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:11-16). David said, “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23). “We are His people, the sheep of His pasture” (Ps. 100). The prophet Isaiah agrees, saying, “He [the LORD] tends His flock like a shepherd” (Is. 40:11). However He shepherds His people Israel through His agents. Thus the elders of Israel were God’s appointed shepherds (2 Sam. 7:7). David himself was appointed by God to shepherd Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-3; 1 Chr. 11:1-3; Ps. 78:71). Then also a future greater “David,” the Messiah, was predicted to be God’s appointed shepherd over Israel (Ezek. 34:23-24).

Is it any wonder that Jesus, God’s ultimate agent, should refer to himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14) or that his Apostles refer to “our Lord Jesus” as “that great shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20) and “the shepherd and overseer [bishop]” of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25). Nevertheless, this does not prove that Jesus is literally the LORD transmuted into flesh, any more than the fact that the elders of Israel and King David being styled shepherds of Israel proves them to be God incarnate.

Jesus as Judge

God is the principal judge of the whole earth (Gen. 18:25; 1 Sam. 2:10; 1 Chr. 16:33; Ps. 50:3-4; 67:4; 94:1-2; 96:13; 98:9); yet though it is said that God Himself is judge (Ps. 50:6) and that God Himself will bring every deed into judgment, “including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Ecc. 12:14), God has chosen and commissioned human agents as judges to execute God’s judgment throughout Israel’s history.

Comparing Scripture with Scripture we discover that Jesus, God’s ultimate agent, actually stands for God and will judge all things at the end. “He [Jesus] will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts” (1 Cor. 4:5). “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10) when he will judge “the living and the dead” (2 Tim. 4:1).

When the Son of Man comes “all the nations will be gathered before him” (Matt. 25:31-46). The Father will actually judge no one. He has “entrusted all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22-27). The Father “has set a day when He will judge the world with justice” but through the agency of “*the man* He has appointed” (Acts 17:31). Note that the Son does

not judge in his own right but only because the Father entrusts judgment to the Son (John 5:22-27). And the Son is styled man and not God. That of course is because there is only One God, and not two!

Jesus as the Rock or Stone of Stumbling

Peter applies to Jesus the text describing the Messiah as “a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (Is. 8:14; cp. 1 Pet. 2:8). Again, remember Jesus is God’s agent. Thus when Isaiah says, “The LORD will be a stumbling stone,” he allows for the fact that God causes Israel to stumble over Jesus His agent. “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Ps. 118:22, 23).

Jesus as the Coming One

In Isaiah 40:10 we read, “See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and His arm rules for Him. See, His reward is with Him, and His recompense accompanies Him.” Clearly, the Sovereign LORD is the Father. The phrase “His arm” may be taken to refer to Messiah (John 12:38), but “the Sovereign Lord” is the coming one; it is He who brings His reward with Him. Yet the Christian Scriptures repeatedly tell us that Jesus is the coming one (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20). Our reward is with him (Rev. 22:12). This is not because Jesus is God but because Jesus as His representative stands in place of Him.

Zechariah 14:4 should be seen in this light as well. “On that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.” In the Jewish Scriptures “His feet” are the LORD’s feet. Christians believe it is Jesus who is returning to set up his Kingdom upon earth. But rather than jumping to the erroneous conclusion that Jesus *is* the LORD we should understand that, as the LORD’s agent, Jesus’ feet are spoken of as God’s feet in exactly the same way as Aaron’s hand is spoken of as the LORD’s hand (remember Ex. 7:17-19).

All the Second Coming passages in the OT are referred to God, but in the NT to Jesus. Since there is only one God, we know that Jesus cannot be God (which would make two!). The principle of agency steps in to provide a wonderfully satisfying solution to the apparent puzzle. God acts through and in His beloved Son and also in His sons.

Jesus as King of Kings, Lord of Lords, etc.

Surely, the same reasoning applies to Jesus’ being called “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; Rev. 19:16), King or Lord of glory (Ps. 24:7, 10; 1 Cor. 2:8), the first and the last (Isa. 44:6; 48:12; Rev. 1:17; Rev. 22:13), the Rock (1 Sam. 2:2; Ps. 18:2; 31:2; 89:26; Is. 17:10-11; Mt. 16:16; 1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Pet. 2:4, 6) and so on. Jesus stands in this relationship to the LORD not because he is the LORD in a literal sense, but because as God’s ultimate agent he stands for the Lord in a way that supersedes the status of Moses and Aaron or any of the angels, even the angel of the LORD, who preceded the time of Jesus.

Zechariah and the “Thirty Pieces of Silver”

Perhaps one more example will drive the point home. The prophet Zechariah, speaking about himself and recording an event in his own life, pictures his prophetic ministry as the shepherding of sheep. When he challenged the leaders of Israel to give him the wages due him, they gave him instead the price of a slave (30 pieces of silver). This surely was an insult worse than if they had not paid him at all. So the LORD told the prophet to throw it to the potter.

“And the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter, the handsome price at which they priced Me!’ So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD to the potter” (11:13). It may be that the LORD Himself speaks of being priced at 30 pieces of silver, but it was Zechariah who was so paid. Are we to assume that Zechariah is Almighty God? Not at all! Rather, in so pricing Zechariah the LORD’s agent, they thus priced the LORD Himself. So when Jesus was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (Mt. 26:14-15; 27:3-10) they betrayed the LORD for 30 pieces of silver. We need no more conclude, therefore, that Jesus *is* the LORD in a Trinitarian sense, than we would conclude that Zechariah is the LORD. The Trinitarian idea of God in three Persons had not been imagined in NT times. A fine recent study by a German scholar, *One or Three?* by Karl-Heinz Ohlig, says, “The Trinity possesses no biblical foundation whatsoever” (p. 130).

Conclusion

A Jewish understanding of the law of agency is expressed in the dictum: “A person’s agent is regarded as the person himself.” God appointed Jesus the Messiah as His agent. As such anything he does is regarded as though the Almighty Himself did it. One trusts the principal in trusting the agent. This notion of principal and agency helps us to understand why if you do not honor the Son, you do not honor the Father (John 5:23; 15:23). By refusing to honor and love the agent you are refusing to honor and love the principal. We see in Jesus a perfect reflection of his principal. He who has seen and heard Jesus has seen and heard the Father (John 14:9, 10; 10:38). And remember that people should be able to see God and Jesus in you, since Christians are also God’s agents to bear the saving Gospel of the Kingdom to others.