



THE THEME OF THE “ΣΕΠΤ ΟΝΕ” IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

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One of the most underappreciated parts of John’s Gospel is his portrayal of Jesus as the “Sent One.” It is more a description of Jesus than a title, but it is loaded with significance for the portrait of the Savior by the fourth evangelist. Our goal is to survey the many texts that refer to Jesus as the “Sent One,” or variations of it, to grasp John’s focus on this key aspect of Jesus’s identity.

SURVEY OF TEXTS

John 4:34

This initial text rings the mission call of Jesus. In a context where Jesus is speaking to the disciples about food he has that they do not know, the disciples respond, thinking Jesus is speaking literally about physical food. This is one of the many such misunderstandings in John (e.g., John 2:20; 3:4). This leads into the missional statement. Jesus has come to do God’s will and complete the work that he was sent to accomplish. It is in this context Jesus speaks of being sent for such a purpose. In the larger context, Jesus has just completed a conversation with the Samaritan woman about the kind of worship the Father seeks. It is an interesting juxtaposition. For while the woman is worried about true worship and the possibility of Messiah, Jesus speaks of the Father. John has used this term to refer to God only four times before this, in John 1:14 and 18 (“as the only begotten from the Father,” “the one in the bosom of the Father has explained

him”),¹ 2:16 (“the house of my Father”), and 3:35 (“the Father loves the Son”). So there is an echo that one who is more than Messiah is sent.

John 5:23, 24, 30, 36–38

Again, the Sent One is placed in a context of the Father sending the Son. The Son has received judgment authority and also is to receive honor. To fail to honor the Son is to fail to honor the Father who sent him (v. 23). The one who hears Jesus’s word honors the one who sent Jesus (v. 24). Jesus executes judgment, not from his own will, but from a desire to do the will of the Father who sent him (v. 30). More than this, Jesus does not bear witness to himself. Rather, the works that he performs and that the Father has granted him to accomplish bear witness that the Father has sent him (v. 36). So the Father bears witness to having sent him, and those who refuse to hear him lack God’s word in them and do not believe the one whom the Father sent (v. 38). It is emerging that this expression reflects a high Christology and is part of how John connects Jesus intimately with the Father. That relationship is not only relational but functional and supportive of the mission Jesus performs.

John 6:29, 38–39, 44, 57

In a discussion asking what is the work of God that is required, Jesus replies, “This is the deed God requires—to believe in the one whom he sent” (John 6:29 NET). Faith is the one response that matters. Jesus is inseparably linked to God.

In the bread of life discourse, again it is the Father-Son relationship that is in the background of the theme of being sent. All who the Father gives to him come, and none of them are going to be cast out (vv. 35–37). Jesus has come to do the will of the one who sent him (v. 38). The will of the one who sent him is that none of those given to him will be lost (v. 39). This becomes another missional note of the Father’s and Son’s commitment to those who become God’s redeemed children. A few verses later, Jesus notes that no one is able to come to him “unless the Father who sent me draws him” (v. 44). In verse 57 this bread that is Jesus is to be consumed: the Father sent Jesus and Jesus lives because of the Father, and those who consume Jesus will live because of Jesus. What for Paul is being “in Christ,” for John is the Sent One being in us. Jesus is commis-

1. Translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

sioned by the Father and carries out that commission to draw a people to the Father and Son.

John 7:16, 18, 28–29, 33

The context for this set of passages is *controversy*. Was Jesus good, or leading people astray (7:12)? As others reflect on Jesus having had no formal instruction, the Sent One notes, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me” (7:16).² Jesus speaks not out of his own authority but from God.³ Jesus seeks the glory of the one who sent him, not his own glory. Jesus functions as a man of truth (of integrity), so what is spoken is true (7:18). A little later in the passage, a dispute about healing on the Sabbath is met with Jesus observing that circumcision also is performed on the Sabbath. Then Jesus responds to speculation about where he is from by noting he has “not come of his own accord, but the one who sent him is true and him you do not know” (7:28). Here the reference again goes back to issues raised in John’s Prologue in terms of where Jesus came from. Jesus’s origins are not about the locale in which he was born; he is from heaven and the one who sent him to earth. There is a deep connection here with other texts that highlight that the Sent One is also the Son. *This* is the one God sent. And God sent him as one who knows the sender (7:29). This close connection to God at the divine level leads to a desire to arrest Jesus, but it is not yet time for that. That event comes later, and when it does Jesus will “go to the one who sent me and there you cannot come” (7:33–34). The Sent One lives in, comes from, and was sent from the one above.

John 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4, 25

Once again the context is one of controversy as Jesus claims to be the light of the world, something the Pharisees reject (8:12–13). Jesus responds that he knows where he came from, so even if he is witnessing to himself, the testimony is true. Jesus’s judgment is true because it comes from “I and the one who sent me” (8:16). The deep connection between Father

2. Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 223, makes it clear Jesus sees his authority as rooted in his heavenly origins.

3. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Leicester, UK; Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press; Eerdmans, 1991), 312, says this is a claim that goes beyond the way the prophets represented God. Prophets pointed to truth with “thus says the Lord,” but Jesus’s words are true because of his direct heavenly connection to the Father.

and Son is what follows. It is the Father “who sent me” who bears witness to Jesus (8:18). When they ask where Jesus’s Father is, Jesus responds, “You know neither me nor my Father,” for if they knew him they would also know the Father (8:19). This phrase clearly says that Jesus is sent from the Father who is in heaven. Jesus’s origin, home, and authority are being emphasized in the phrase. Jesus reiterates that he is going to a place they cannot come. He is from above, and they are from below. Jesus observes he has much to say and judge, but the one who sent him is true, and Jesus is declaring to the world what he has heard from him (8:26). So now it is the message from above that is being affirmed. John issues a side comment at this point that they did not understand that Jesus spoke to them about the Father. It is an interesting remark, for they probably did grasp the meaning of the words, but did not receive it as true and so did not understand.

Jesus then switches gears to discuss the lifting up of the Son of Man in a death to come, which they will not understand, probably because that death will be followed by a vindicating resurrection that will demonstrate Jesus did nothing by his own authority but spoke as the Father taught him. Again with a touch of irony, Jesus will be lifted up in death on a cross, but he will simply be in transit to heaven through that death to return to the one who sent him. This is because “he who sent me is with me” (8:29). Jesus is not left alone as he does what pleases him. In 8:42, we get the full reveal on this phrase amid this dispute. Jesus says, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.” Jesus was sent from God, his Father, to do the Father’s will and reveal the way to God that leads to a path of love for God.

After Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath, he links what he is doing with what he is saying and teaching. It is important to note that there are no miracles involving healing of the blind in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is a new level of healing introduced on a most holy day. Jesus issues one word of commentary about it in 9:4: “We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work.” Once again there is a juxtaposition of Jesus’s connection to God as Jesus does what God is doing. They work together—this kind of healing cannot take place unless God is behind it. There also is the sense of approaching death that is not an end but a transition. Interestingly, he closes that remark with the observation again that he is the light of the world. The Sent One

from heaven is vindicated by this healing that takes place on this holy day. When later Jesus's opponents say to the healed man that the healer is a sinner, he responds, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see" (9:25). Later the man adds, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (vv. 30–33 RSV). The formerly blind man now sees things quite clearly.

John 10:36

In this passage, we again witness disagreement. Jesus declares in 10:30 that he and the Father are one. The reaction is that some in the crowd take up stones as they believe Jesus has committed blasphemy (10:31, 33). Jesus has already contrasted the good works he had done from the Father with their judgment. Jesus also cites Psalm 82:6, where people are called gods, to raise the question of whether making oneself a god is an issue. He then uses a "how much more" argument that Jewish teachers would be familiar with: "If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said 'I am the Son of God'?" (John 10:35–36 ESV). He then backs up the remark by claiming if he is doing the works of the Father, they should believe the works and understand who he is. This echoes earlier texts that tied the one sent to the Father doing the sending. As we move through these texts, the link between Father and Son tightens, with this text putting the two more explicitly together.

John 11:42, 44

In one of the few asides that John presents, Jesus says that his remarks tied to the raising of Lazarus were uttered "for the sake of the crowd standing around here, that they may believe that you sent me" (John 11:42).⁴ The miracle is tied to the glory of God, so it is seen as an act of God (11:40).

4. Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 292, says, "The Father as the sender is primary. Jesus is not a wonderworker who is able to get God to do what he wants him to do. He is the obedient Son sent by the Father to do the Father's will."

Jesus is tying together his work as being a part of what God is doing through him, recalling what was said in John 5 and 9, which we examined earlier.

John 12:44–45, 49

In what is Jesus’s final public word in John’s Gospel, he repeats his claim that he was sent by the Father. The one who believes in him believes not him, but in the one who sent him (12:44). The one who sees him sees the one who sent him (12:45). Jesus has come as light in the world so the one who believes in him does not remain in darkness. The one who does not believe is not judged by Jesus, for he came to save people. The one rejecting Jesus is rejected by the word Jesus speaks on the last day. This is because Jesus does not speak of his own authority but from “the Father who sent him.” The Father has given him commandment about what to say and speak (12:49). Jesus speaks of the commandment of eternal life as the Father has given it to him. Here he links his message of eternal life as the way to the Father to the belief in the one sent.

John 13:20

The motif tied to the Sent One receives an expansion in this passage. Now the focus is not on the Father as the one sending the Son, but on those the Sent One now sends. John 13:20 reads, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me” (RSV). Jesus is completing the link here between the Father himself and his own who have received his call and taken it into the world. He has also noted the slave is not greater than the master nor is the one sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him (13:16). Notice Jesus says this during the Last Supper with his disciples after he has washed their feet and announced he would be betrayed. One of them is not clean, but the rest are commissioned to take the message out. The authority the believing disciples bear is from the Father and through the Son.

John 14:24

Jesus returns to the sourcing of his message as he announces the coming of the Spirit. Jesus is leaving but he is not going to leave the disciples isolated. He will send the Paraclete to them (14:26). Jesus tells them this after having noted the connection between love and keeping his word. John 14:24 declares, “He who does not love me does not keep my words;

and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (RSV). It is this divine sourcing of the word Jesus mediates that gives the message its gravitas and has inherent within it the need to be heeded. The Sent One is connected to the Father and brings a word from him that not only shows its authority and his own authority but also reveals who loves God by their response to it.

John 15:21

This passage discusses persecution and the rejection of Jesus that causes his death. After warning that a slave is not greater than the master (cf. John 13:16), Jesus says, "But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me" (John 15:21). The link is that those who reject Jesus and his message do not know the Father, though they claim to know the one true God.

John 16:5

Jesus hints about his resurrection and makes clear his origins at the same time. John 16:5 reads, "But now I am going to the one who sent me, and not one of you is asking me, 'Where are you going?'" Jesus's heavenly origin is again the point. He is going back to where he came from, the Word that was with God before he took on flesh (John 1:1, 14). The commissioned one has his calling from above.

John 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25

Here is Jesus's prayer before he faces his death. He prays for the unity and protection of the community he has formed. The prayer is framed by the remark that eternal life is to know the "only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you [the Father] have sent" (John 17:3 ESV). The remark links Jesus Christ directly to this intimate relationship with God that is unlike earlier "sent" expressions where Son and Father are the dominant referents.⁵

The disciples' reception of Jesus's message is the point in 17:8. The word Jesus brought has been received by them, "for I have given them the words which you gave me, and they have received them and know in truth I came from you; and they have believed that you did send me."

5. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 329, says, "The Father and the Son know each other in a mutuality of love, and by the knowledge of God men and women are admitted into the mystery of this divine love, being loved by God and loving him—and one another—in return. This is the basis of the unity for which Jesus prays in verses 20–23 below."

This has marked them as a group distinct from the world as those given to Jesus by God. So Jesus asks that they be kept in God’s name as he comes back to the Father (see v. 11).

These disciples are now sent into the world just as the Father sent Jesus (v. 18). Jesus’s coming consecration in death and resurrection will consecrate them in truth (v. 19). He prays as well for those who believe through their word, which means all disciples of the future. This oneness is a distinct witness to the world. John 17:21 says, “that they may be one, even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” He has shared the glory of the Father and the Son with them (v. 22). The goal of forming this oneness is to make them “perfectly one, so that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23). So now evidence for Jesus being the Sent One is tied up in the oneness of identification and love that God has for his own. Jesus wants these believers to sense his raised glory and be connected to him, to “be with me where I am” (v. 24). The oneness is seen in part in their shared recognition that God has sent Jesus. In John 17:25 Jesus prays, “O righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and these know that you have sent me.” These disciples have come to know God’s name, and Jesus will continue to make it known to them, with Jesus in them as well, that they may experience the love of God that God has shown to Jesus (v. 26). That ending point on love and oneness with God concludes the prayer.

The Sent One has come to make the love of the Father known and to also show that to know the Father, one must know the one sent by him, Jesus Christ. This forms a bond between God and those who know Jesus as the Sent One, much like the bond Jesus has with the Father. This knowledge of the one sent and the sender, both as a concept and as an experience, is eternal life. Sharing the message with the world about the possibility of knowing God in this intimate way is the calling of these disciples. In his prayer, Jesus almost issues a Johannine form of the Great Commission, only here he also prays for it. What Jesus prays for is a testimony of life that points to the oneness disciples have with the Sent One and, by extension, with the Sender (17:21: “that they may be in us”).

John 20:21

Now Jesus carries out the commission he prayed for in John 17. In John 20:21, Jesus says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so

I send you.” This hearkens all the way back to John 4:38, as Köstenberger notes.⁶ John has been building to this moment and this calling. Jesus’s disciples are commissioned with a message and a call to a certain type of life that reflects love for God. The Sent One sends out others who also are sent with the same message and commission Jesus had. That message bears authority from God and points the way to life. The link in it all is the Son whom the Father sent, Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

The Sent One is no mere sidebar for John. The sending motif connects a series of core themes in his Gospel. In terms of origins, it points to Jesus as the incarnate Word and as Son to the Father, sent from heaven to earth. In terms of relationship, it depicts the inseverable link between the Father and Son. Regarding Jesus’s message, it argues that what Jesus teaches is from the Father. In terms of authority, it shows that Jesus shares all the authority that comes from above and the judgment he gives is true. As to Jesus’s works, the miracles attest to the fact that Jesus is sent. As to one’s faith, it is the Sent One who is to be believed. In terms of life, it shows that what God offers, he offers through the Sent One. Regarding community, it argues that those who receive the message of the Sent One come into this intimate link to God and the Son, forming a community distinct from the world. As to our calling, the Sent One has now sent out the sent to bring that message with all its inherent authority to a needy world. Finally, in terms of experience, to know the Sent One is to know the one who did the sending in a way that shares in the experience of God’s love for the one sent. Those who receive the message of the sent ones receive the message of the Sent One as well, connecting them to that very fullness of life and love as well as to the Father who sent the Son for that very purpose.

6. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 163.