

A MASTER KEY TO UNLOCK YOUR BIBLE

“And Jesus cried aloud and said, ‘He who believes in me, does not believe in me, but in Him who sent me’ (John 12:44).

Observe that Jesus “cried aloud” these words, “He who believes in me, does not believe in me, but in Him who sent me.” The fact he spoke this at the top of his voice barely a week out from his own crucifixion, surely indicates this is significant and we better listen up!

Before proceeding to unpack these profound words from Jesus, I will make a guess that this is not one of your all-time favourite memory verses! Chances are you have not previously meditated on John 12:44 much (if at all?). Maybe if you are honest, you did not even realise it was in the Bible, much less from Jesus’ own lips. But I am going to prove to you that it is a master key to unlocking our understanding of Jesus, his relationship with God, and the significance of all he came to be and do for us. A big statement surely! So let’s investigate.

Jesus “cried aloud” these words after the nation had, through their official religious and political leaders, rejected his claims to being their

Messiah. They had not only witnessed his healing and teaching credentials fulfilling all that the prophets had previously announced, but in the immediate context, they had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. The Gospel writer John tells us that even Christ's enemies admitted Jesus was "performing many signs" (11:47). John himself says the raising of Lazarus was a "sign" (12:18). A sign is an attesting miracle. Jesus' mighty miracles were proof God had sent him. So, by rejecting Jesus, they were sinning against clear light and deadening their own consciences.

In this context Jesus "cried aloud". He wants them to hear he really has been "sent" by their God. Which is to say, Jesus is making the stupendous claim that he is the *bone fide* ambassador of the One God of Israel. His works and his words have been performed because he has been "commissioned", and is therefore God's true representative or agent.

The Principle of Agency in the Bible.

Because we come from another culture and another generation many times removed from Jesus, it's easy to miss the impact of Jesus' "loud" statement here. Indeed, few readers of the

Scriptures know the significance of the principle of agency that Jesus is appealing to. Therefore, to understand Jesus' claim, we first need to appreciate the culture and mindset of that day's original audience.

Simply stated, in Hebrew and ancient Middle Eastern thinking, one who is 'sent' (the agent) is treated as if he or she *were* the principal (the sender/commissioner) himself or herself.

Although the principal and the agent are two distinct persons, they are treated *as* 'one', not literally of course, but functionally. This is accurately stated in the words of the *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*,

Agent (Heb. *Shaliah*): The main point of the Jewish law of agency is expressed in the dictum, 'a person's agent is regarded as the person himself' [*Ned. 72B; Kidd, 41b*].

Therefore any act committed by a duly appointed agent is regarded as having been committed by the principal, who therefore bears full responsibility for it with consequent complete absence of liability on the part of the agent." (1)

Don't miss this vital fact: "A person's agent is regarded as the person himself." Furthermore,

"In Hebrew thought a patriarch's personality extended through his entire household [and] ... in a specialised sense when the patriarch as lord of his household deputed his trusted servant as his *malak* (his messenger or angel) the man was endowed with the authority and resources of his lord to represent him fully and transact business in his name. In Semitic thought this messenger-representative was conceived of as being personally --- and in his very words --- the presence of the sender." (2)

So, when the agent acts on behalf of the one who sends him, it is as though the principal, the master, the lord, is himself there in person speaking and acting. Understanding this principle will help us avoid what often appear to be contradictions in the Scriptures. Let me show you a simple instance or two where understanding this 'law of agency' will keep us from error and unlock new significance in understanding Jesus --- as agent --- and his relationship with his Father God --- as Principal.

The Centurion and Elders Illustrate Human Agency.

In Matthew's telling of the healing of the centurion's servant, it is the centurion who personally comes to Jesus and begs on behalf of his sick servant...

“And when he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him, and saying, “Sir, my servant is lying paralysed at home, suffering great pain. And he said to him, ‘I will come and heal him.’ But the centurion answered and said, ‘Sir, I am not qualified for you to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it...” (Matt. 8:5-9).

The modern reader is under no illusion that the centurion himself made this request while literally standing right in front of Jesus. The centurion “came to him” and spoke in the first

person throughout, “”My servant ... my roof ... I too ...me ... I say ...” Jesus also spoke directly to the centurion and “said to him”.

But when we turn to Luke’s parallel account of the same story, a problem presents itself to the modern reader...

“And a certain centurion’s slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. And when he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking him to come and save the life of his slave. And when they had come to Jesus, they earnestly entreated him, saying, ‘He is worthy for you to grant this to him; for he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue.’ Now Jesus started on his way with them; and when he was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, ‘Sir, do not trouble yourself further, for I am not fit for you to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed ...” (Luke 7: 1f).

Without the crucial knowledge of the Hebrew law of agency --- that the agent is as the principal himself --- the modern reader thinks s/he spots a contradiction. For in Luke's telling, the centurion does not literally stand before Jesus asking for his servant's healing. Instead, "he sent some Jewish elders" to do the asking. "They" made the centurion's request known to Jesus. Then Jesus "started on his way with them" to go to the centurion's home. When just about at the house, the centurion *from inside* his own house sends other servants outside to tell Jesus, "I did not consider myself worthy to come to you ..."

The Biblical way to reconcile these apparent contradictions between the two accounts is to know that the centurion (the principal) sends (commissions) certain Jewish elders to act on his behalf as his agents. There is no confusion in the mind of either Matthew or Luke, for in the Bible the one sent is "regarded as the principal himself". The principal and the agent are not always clearly distinguished, and can be treated as though they *were* one and the same person! Matthew's account only mentions the principal (the centurion)

without distinguishing his agents (the Jewish elders and house-servants). Luke mentions both the principal and the agents separately. To listen to the elders' was to listen to the centurion himself. Indeed, the agents even speak in the first person! (Is this starting to make sense of John 12:44 where Jesus says, "He who believes in me, does not believe in me, but in Him who sent me"?) (3.)

Moses' Rod Illustrates Divine and Human Agency.

This 'law of agency' is scattered right throughout the entire Bible. Let's take an OT example.

Yahweh God tells Moses, "See I make you as God (Heb. *Elohim*) to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet" (Ex. 7:1). When Moses stands before Pharaoh it is as if it God Himself is standing there speaking and acting. As the agent, Moses is sent to speak and to act, as if he *were* God Himself. The agent is regarded as the principal!

Later in the chapter, God says to Moses, "By this you will know that I am Yahweh: Behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile, with

the staff that is My hand, and it shall be turned to blood” (v. 17).

Next, God instructs Moses to tell Aaron, “Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the water of Egypt, over the rivers ... that they may become blood ... ” (v. 19). As God’s agent, Aaron at Moses’ command stretches out the staff in his hand before Pharaoh over the waters, but God says He is the One Who strikes the waters with the staff that is “in My Hand“. *Aaron’s hand is God’s Hand!* Aaron’s action is God’s action. Moses and Aaron are standing before Pharaoh in the very place of God Himself. In the Hebrew mind those men *are God* in Egypt! What they do is what God Himself does. But in the Hebrew mind there is no confusion as to the actual identity of Who the Principal is and who His agents are.

Angelic Agency.

This Hebrew “law of agency” also holds good when God commissions His angels. Angels can be spoken of as if they *were* God and can even speak in the first person as *though* they personally *are* God before whom they were speaking.

A classic example is the burning bush (that didn't burn!) in Exodus 3. Who is it who appears to Moses in the bush and talks to him in the first person, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3: 6)? The majority of evangelical commentators answer, "Why, this is Jehovah God of course." Even noting in verse 2 that the text specifically states, "the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush" they rush to the conclusion that this angel of the LORD must be God in Person, or even the pre-existent Son of God himself, because he speaks in the first person as if he *is* God.

Here is a clear case of a failure to enter the Hebrew mind and observe the 'law of agency' in full swing. For what is happening is that the angel in the bush has been sent as an agent by God to represent His Principal. Remember that the agent is regarded as the principal himself, so the commissioned angel is as God Himself before Moses.

When we turn to Stephen's inspired commentary on the burning bush any dispute that this is the case should end. Stephen is a

man “filled with the holy Spirit”, a man “full of wisdom”, and “a man full of faith” (Acts 6: 3,5). So I don’t want to disagree with this man! Listen to Stephen’s explanation,

“An angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush. And when Moses saw it, and he began to marvel at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the LORD; ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.’ And Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. But the LORD said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt, and have heard their groans, and I have come down to deliver them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt ... [Moses] is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush” (Acts 7: 30-35).

Who appeared in the burning bush? Who spoke in the first person as if he *were God*? Who said, “I am God” so “take off the sandals from your feet for this is holy ground”?

Stephen is a Hebrew-thinking Christian, steeped in that culture and his Scriptures, and he is convinced that the angel-agent is as the Principal-God Himself. In Hebrew thinking, to pay homage to the angel-agent commissioned by God is to give the ultimate honour to God. That sent angel speaks in the first person as if he really *was* God before Moses!

As the agent of the One Who sent him to Moses, the angel of the LORD is so identified with his Principal that we find it hard to distinguish him from God!

We could demonstrate this is the case with every angelic visitation in the Old Testament. (Even the occasion when Abraham had lunch with God in Genesis 18 fits this pattern. You can read my full exposition of this amazing story in my article, “Anyone Round here Seen God?”) We know this is the case because the Bible insists, “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18; I John 4:12; I Tim. 6:16). But men

have seen His angels, His agents, who acted and spoke as if they *were* God Himself. This is the “law of agency”, where the agent is as the principal himself. (4)

Jesus the Messiah is God’s Supreme Agent!

Now we are getting closer to understanding John 12:44 and Jesus’ claim to being the agent of the One God of Israel.

One of the arguments for the popular notion that Jesus is God Himself is that texts attributed to God Almighty in the OT are in the NT attributed to him, so therefore Jesus has to be God, right? If God alone is the Saviour (Is. 43:11) and Jesus is our Saviour, then Jesus must be God, right? If God is the Shepherd (Ps. 23; Ez. 34:11f) and Jesus is “the good Shepherd”, then Jesus must be the God of Israel, right? If every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Yahweh is God, and since every knee and tongue will do this before Jesus, then surely Jesus is Himself God, right? If God is the Judge of all the earth (Gen. 18:25) and everybody will one day stand before Jesus as Judge (2 Cor. 5:10), then surely Jesus is God, right?

And what about all the OT passages that tell us that God Himself is coming in “that Day” to reign over all the earth, but when we come to the NT, those passages are now applied to Jesus at his Second Coming? For instance, the prophet Zechariah announces,

“In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle ...” (14:4).

Surely, if “His feet” in Zechariah 14 are the LORD’s feet, then Jesus must be God, right? Well, before jumping to that conclusion, how about we compare Scripture with Scripture and apply the law of agency? Remember how Aaron’s hand is spoken of as the LORD’s Hand (Ex. 7:17-19)? We are to understand that in exactly the same way Jesus’ feet are said to be God’s feet, for he too has been “sent” as the ultimate agent of the one God. The “law of agency” provides a very reasonable and satisfying answer to the whole question.

The same applies in the matter of Jesus being our Saviour. Moses also is called ‘saviour’, and Joshua is ‘saviour’ and all the judges of

Israel are each called 'saviour' (Acts 7:35; Jud. 3:9,15; Neh. 9:27, etc.). When God sends somebody to deliver His people that agent is called 'saviour' (often translated as 'deliverer'). The fact Jesus is called 'Saviour' does not prove he is God anymore than Moses who is called 'saviour' proves he is God.

This principle is very clear when Jesus is spoken of as the judge of the world. Jesus clearly claims agency when he says his Father God has "given" him all authority to judge. Paul also says that God,

"Has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a man whom He has appointed [commissioned, sent, as His agent], having furnished proof to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

Of course there is only One ultimate Saviour of all men, One ultimate Judge of all men, One ultimate Authority over all the Universe --- the God and Father of Jesus (Eph. 4: 6). And Jesus is His perfect agent who will do the judging on behalf of the One God Who has

appointed him for this work. Or, to put it in the words of Jesus who shouted it out,

“He who believes in me does not believe in me, but in Him who sent me” (John 8:44).

The King of Israel is Called ‘God’.

Psalm 45 is considered to be a Messianic Psalm. It is headed as “A Song Celebrating the King’s Marriage” (NASB), and is a “A Wedding Song” for the king of Israel (NIV). In it, the king of Israel is addressed *as* “God” in verse 6,

“Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.”

Is the king of Israel suddenly the Almighty because he is called “God”? Not at all, for in the very next verse this king who is “God” has a God above him who is called, “God, your God” (v.7). The NAB translation captures the thought accurately by translating the king’s title ‘God’ with a small ‘g’,

“Thy throne O god, is forever and ever.”

Here then is a “god” who has a God over him! The God of Heaven thus confers on the king of Israel the title “god” and he is given “a sceptre of righteousness” to rule the kingdom (v. 6).

Thus, as God's agent, the king of Israel represents God in his judgments before the people. The agent is as the principal himself.

According to the New Testament this psalm finds its prophetic fulfilment in the person and ministry of Jesus (Hebrews 1: 8-9). As the now exalted Son, Jesus functions as God to his people, but it is never forgotten that he has a God above him. God has given "god" the task of establishing the new heavens and the new earth. Unlike the old sin-cursed heavens and earth which will pass away, this Son's Kingdom is eternal (v. 10-12). Hallelujah!

Jesus knew he was "sent" to stand in the very place before us as *though he were* God, but never claimed himself to be that One God, and never imagined his followers would confuse his identity as none other than that God's anointed agent. Yes, Jesus is functionally God to us. So, when he speaks, God speaks to us. When he acts, God acts for us. Although perfectly one in mission the Bible never confuses their personal identities. Nobody in Bible times for a moment imagined Jesus *was* Yahweh God Himself. Certainly Jesus never

did! Remember. Repeat: The agent is as the principal himself.

John 10:30

Which by the way brings us to the oft-quoted words of Jesus, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). (5) If I have heard it once, I have heard it dozens of times quoted as a sure-fire proof-text that, Jesus is God. Well, hold your horses a minute! Has anybody stopped to consider the context of this statement?

The subject under discussion is whether Jesus really is the Messiah who has been sent by God. The Jews say to Jesus, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly” (v. 24). Jesus replies by claiming to do his work by the Name or under the authority of his Father God, i.e. his Principal.

Jesus further explains that all the sheep who trust in him will not perish because they are held safe in his hand. Jesus explains the reason for their absolute safety is that the Father “has given them to me” and that because He is “greater than all, no one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (v.

28-29) ... and so, in this way, “I and my Father are one”.

‘Blind Freddy’ can see the obvious context concerns “the works” of Jesus in his mission to care for God’s people. It is an unwarranted imposition on the text to make Jesus talk about “essence” or “being” (i.e. a question of ontology). Not at all! The subject is oneness of ministry, that is, unity of mission between the Father who “sent” His Messiah to be His agent in this work. This is a classic case of the law of agency, for Jesus’ power to keep the sheep is derived from the commission given him by his Father.

Ah, it will be objected, that the Jews then want to stone Jesus “for blasphemy, and because you, being a man, make yourself out *to be* God” (v. 33). But please don’t stop reading there. Jesus once again corrects their erroneous and misguided allegations. (How often do the Jews misunderstand Jesus?) He explains that even the magistrates and judges in the OT who were appointed by God were called “gods” (just as Moses was called God in Ex. 7:1, and just as the king was in Psalm 45!), so it is only reasonable that Jesus should be

called “the Son of God” [i.e. the Messiah] for he reflects like no other before him the Principal-God who “sent” him.

No other agent sent by God before him, comes near to the superior status of Jesus as God’s Son. He is fully authorised, fully empowered to do God’s work and accomplish his God-given mission to the sheep of his Father. This passage is another classic instance of the principal/agent law we have noted. (6)

Which brings us full circle to John 12:44. Jesus’ own “loud” testimony is that if we believe in him, we do not ultimately believe in him, but in the One God Who sent him as His perfect agent.

As God’s appointed Messiah, Jesus supersedes all other agents who came before him. He is greater than Moses, greater than any angel. As God’s model agent Jesus is the perfect reflection of his Principal-God. To hear and to see Jesus is indeed to see His Father. This is Jesus’ own “loud” claim. Surely the “law of agency” is a master key to understanding the One God who sent His Son. And now we are Jesus’ agents before the world. Wow!

1. Werblowsky, R.J.Z., Wigoder, G. *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*. New York: Adama Books, 1986, p. 15.
2. Johnson, R.A. *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*. (As quoted in my book *They Never Told Me This in Church!* with permission by Juan Baixeras, p. 65).
3. You may like to see how this key unlocks other apparent contradictions between two accounts of the same incident, such as Matthew 20: 21 and Mark 10:35-37. Who literally comes to make request of Jesus, the sons of Zebedee, or their mother? You now have the key!
4. In Genesis 32 Jacob wrestles with “a man” and reports, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved”. Rather than jump to the conclusion of many commentators and say Jacob physically wrestled with God Himself (an impossibility for Jesus says “God is Spirit” in John 4: 24, and besides God Himself is All-powerful), or even with “God the Son” before he became incarnate as Jesus, why not accept the inspired prophet’s explanation that Jacob wrestled with

God's angelic agent ... "he contended with God, yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed" (Hosea 12: 3-4)? If you are interested, here is a sample of other Scriptures that demonstrate the Bible's ubiquitous testimony to the "law of agency" ... Judges 4: 15-16; Ex. 13: 21 with Ex. 14: 19; Ex. 23:21-23, 30-31; I Sam. 13: 3 & 4 where Jonathan as Saul's son and agent does the actual killing, but king Saul as the principal is the one ultimately attributed with the victory. 2 Sam. 3:18; 2 Kings 14:27; 1 Chron. 11:14. Also compare 2 Chronicles 4:11 where Hiram finished the work king Solomon commissioned him to do, but in verses 18-19 the work is actually attributed to Solomon as though the king himself literally did all the work! Etc., etc.

5. My NASB transgresses the bounds of translation and ventures into overt commentary by its note in the margin which reads... "Lit., neuter, *a unity, or, one essence.*" As the NASB states, the adjective "one" is indeed neuter in the Greek (*hen*), but it is wrong to lead the reader to think Jesus is referring to oneness of "essence"

or “being”, which of course, is what Trinitarian doctrine believes. The masculine (*heis*) is always the Greek word employed for the Personal God, as for instance Jesus’ own creedal statement about God in Mark 12: 29f.

6. In describing the unity of his ministry with Apollos, Paul says, “he who plants and he who waters are one (Neuter, *hen*) (I Cor. 3: 8). Paul says his ministry is in perfect harmony with the ministry of Apollos, because they are “fellow-workers”, commissioned by God Who gives their whole missionary endeavour growth and increase. There is no suggestion from my Trinitarian friends that Paul and Apollos are “one in essence”, of the “same substance”, or of the “one being” when it says they “are one” (*hen*)! Yet this is a clear parallel to Jesus’ own mission statement in John 10:30!!!

