

Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000. Xv+527pp. \$29.95, Hardcover.

Note: This volume was published in 2000, but I was not invited to review it until December of 2005. Among the other reviews, for one that takes a very positive stance toward this volume, see Andreas J. Köstenberger's review in Trinity Journal 22 (2001), 269–72.

Andrew T. Lincoln brings his considerable expertise to bear in this exploration of the lawsuit motif in the Fourth Gospel. We can learn much from Lincoln's careful reading of the text. It is invigorating to have an author forcefully advance a thesis and carry it through the whole narrative, challenging readers to deal with the evidence presented. Lincoln explores the lawsuit motif on literary, historical, and theological grounds, then considers what the results contribute to the contemporary scene. Narrative critical and reader-response approaches are used to introduce the lawsuit motif in the Fourth Gospel in chapter 1. Chapter 2 then examines the lawsuit motif in the Jewish Scriptures. The lawsuit motif is treated more fully in key Johannine texts in chapter 3, and then literary issues are revisited in chapter 4. Chapter 5 takes up the lawsuit and Johannine theology; the sections of the chapter will give a taste of the discussion: "The God of the Trial," "The Witness of Jesus," "The Trial's Outcome," "The Opposition and Its Case," "The Witness of Jesus' Followers and the Spirit as Another Advocate," and "The Cosmic Setting of the Trial." What the lawsuit motif tells us about the social setting of the Johannine community is taken up in chapter 6. Beginning with chapter 7, the focus shifts to how the lawsuit motif communicates to the contemporary scene. Chapter 7 highlights the abiding significance of the lawsuit motif, discussing aspects of Paul Ricoeur's thought. Chapter 8 explores four objections, and then the volume closes with four reflections in chapter 9.

Lincoln sees the lawsuit motif as a major force in John's Gospel. He writes, "second only to the narrative's unique Christology, this metaphor of a lawsuit on a cosmic scale is the most distinctive characteristic holding many of the elements of its plot and discourse together" (13). Lincoln reads the whole narrative in terms of a trial. For instance, he writes, "Jesus has come as the chief witness and judge in God's lawsuit with the world" (30), "the cosmic lawsuit exposes whether one's deeds are in conformity to its true judgment" (71), "the positive verdict of life [5:19–47] is then seen as part of the whole process of judgment" (75) "the two sections [12:37–43 and 12:44–50] sum up the trial of the public ministry. In the first, the narrator acts as counsel for the defense as he provides an apology for the response to Jesus' deeds; in the second, the person who is on trial is allowed to give a final statement about his teaching and its significance" (105), "the term *Paraclete* has primarily, though not exclusively, forensic connotations, though not one clear-cut forensic role" (111). All of this is meant to substantiate what Lincoln states in chapter 1: "Both the pervasiveness and the positioning of the motif encourage readers to view the narrative, as a whole, from the perspective of a trial" (22).

I am not convinced that the author of the Fourth Gospel was encouraging his readers to view the narrative from the perspective of a trial. The Gospel according to John is

presented as a faithful account of the things Jesus said and did during the last climactic years of his life, and this forms an extended argument that Jesus is the Messiah. A lawsuit may be a helpful metaphor for thinking about the “case” John makes for Jesus, but it may also connote too many foreign notions in the minds of modern readers. Reading Johannine imagery through the lawsuit lens runs the risk of sapping its evocative power. New birth, living water, bread of life, light of the world, sight for the blind, good shepherd, resurrection and life—John shows Jesus offering abundant life, and this life, in the time that is coming and now is, is more than a lawsuit.

The Paraclete’s role also extends well beyond legal categories. He is the comforting divine presence with the disciples when Jesus goes away (14:15–17); he teaches and reminds what Jesus said (14:26; 16:13). The Paraclete testifies to Jesus (15:26) and convicts concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:7–11), but this goes beyond the juridical. For instance, Jesus prays that his disciples will be unified (17:21). As the Spirit testifies concerning what Jesus said, he will remind the disciples that Jesus prayed for their unity, and when they are divided the Spirit will convict them and lead them to renewed accord. The interpersonal relationships that result in unity, and the conviction that comes when unity is lost, these are not the stuff of lawsuits.

Lincoln critically engages the evidence of the text. He writes, “it is perfectly possible for Christians to distance themselves from some aspects of a text’s ideology while affirming others, to wish to engage both in criticism and appropriation” (3). When describing the eyewitness testimony of the Baptist that he saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus, Lincoln writes, “Whatever phenomenon the reader is meant to have in mind at this point (perhaps a vision), John hardly saw the actual Spirit” (64). Lincoln maintains that the Baptist’s testimony is true since it “involves the insight of belief” and “is dependent on the implied author’s belief system for its meaning” (64). This raises a key issue for contemporary readers of the text: do we read the Bible through our understanding of the world, or does reading the Bible sympathetically, as its authors intended it to be read, demand adopting “the implied author’s belief system”? Whichever stance we take, and there may be other options, we can thank Lincoln for raising the question, for his careful reading of the text, and for his forceful articulation of a thesis.

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