

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

Following the standard of excellence established by his earlier commentary work, this professor of NT at Cheltenham and Gloucester College has produced a very significant monograph that should be the standard work on this topic for many years to come. Surveying Johannine scholarship on the trial motif in the fourth gospel, Lincoln concludes that the trial motif is particularly appropriate as a meeting place of all three main types of investigation, namely literary, historical, and theological or ideological (p. 7). However, Lincoln distances himself at the very outset from an approach that treats the gospel narrative as, first of all, a window onto the events in the life of Jesus. The reason for this is that, according to Lincoln, "conclusions about the life of Jesus cannot be read off the surface of the narrative but can only be reached after rigorous historical analysis of the tradition that it incorporates" (p. 8 n. 25).

In the introduction to his first chapter, Lincoln notes that terms relating to witness as well as those pertaining to truth occur with remarkable frequency in the fourth gospel. Lincoln notes that not only does the lawsuit motif occur in each of the five main sections of John's narrative (prologue, 1:19–12:50, 13–17, 18–20, epilogue), it does so in highly significant ways (p. 21). He particularly notes 5:19–47; 8:12–59; 14:16, 26; 15:26–27; 16:7–11; and 18:28–19:16a. Unlike the Synoptics, John has no account of a Jewish trial before the Sanhedrin. Instead, Jesus is shown as on trial before Israel and its leaders throughout his public ministry (p. 23).

Lincoln also notes that, just as there are seven signs and seven discourses in John's gospel, there are seven witnesses: John the Baptist (1:19, 32, 34; 3:26, 28; 5:33); Jesus himself (8:14; note also the twenty-five instances of the double *amen*); Jesus' works (5:36); God the Father (5:36); the Scriptures (5:39); the Samaritan woman (4:39); and the crowd (12:17). The main question to decide is whether Jesus is the true prophet, the Messiah, or a false prophet who deceives and leads the people astray (7:47–52). This follows the procedures laid out in Deut 13:1–5 and 18:15–22. The Jewish charges against Jesus boil down to three: violating Sabbath laws (5:16; 7:2 9:16, 24); blasphemy (5:17–18; 10:30–39); and being an enemy of the Jewish nation (11:46–53).

Jesus, for his part, is not only the chief witness in the trial but also the judge (5:22, 27–30; 9:39; 12:47–48). Not to receive his witness is to pass judgment on oneself (3:19–21). Thus Jesus' mission inevitably involves judgment (18:37). The present crisis calling for decision (5:24–29) has as its critical moment Jesus' being lifted up from the earth (12:31–32). By the end of the first major section of John's gospel, the Sanhedrin has rendered its verdict (11:47–53), and Jesus has accepted it (12:27–33). Soon he is put on trial as king of the Jews, royal Messiah, and Son of God (d. 20:31). Yet the narrative is also interested in the would-be judges of Jesus-Pilate and "the Jews" — who, it turns out, are the ones actually on trial. Three times Pilate avows that he finds no case against Jesus (18:38; 19:4, 6); nonetheless he has Jesus crucified. "The Jews" are even more culpable; in 19:15, they aver that they have no king but the emperor.

Yet the trial motif and the need to witness are not rendered obsolete subsequent to the crucifixion. The fourth evangelist testifies by writing his gospel (19:35). The disciples must go and testify in the power of the Spirit (15:26–27; 20:21–22), who is repeatedly called the Advocate (*parakletos*) by John. In 3:11, Jesus asserts (in the plural) that,

"Truly, truly, I tell you, we . . . testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony." Moreover, the mission of Jesus' followers, too, involves judgment (16:8–11; 20:23).

In chap. 2, Lincoln deals with the question of why the lawsuit motif is so prominent in the fourth gospel. He points to Isaiah 40–55 and notes how John adapts the model of the "covenant lawsuit" (*rib*; see esp. Isa 42:18–25; 43:22–28; 50:1–3). Isaiah, in turn, incorporates the Exodus motif. According to Isaiah, Yahweh engages in a cosmic lawsuit against both the nations and even his own people Israel. Isaianic influence on John is indicated by the quotations of 40:3 in John 1:23; of 53:1 in John 12:38; and 54:13 in John 6:45. Other points of contact between Isaiah and John's gospel are the imageries of light (e.g., Isa 42:6; 49:6; 51:4–5), water (Isa 43:20; 48:21), and shepherding (40:11; 43:13). Jesus is the Isaianic servant whose purpose is to bring salvation to the world.

Chapter 3 consists of studies of some key stages in the trial proceedings, from John the Baptist over Jesus and the interrogation of the man born blind to the preparation of the disciples for testifying in conjunction with the Paraclete and the trial before Pilate. Chapter 4 takes up various literary aspects related to the trial motif in John. According to Lincoln, the lawsuit motif provides "the interpretative framework through which the narrator assigns meaning and value to the Jesus story for himself and his readers" (p. 141). It is thus designed to foster "a new way of seeing" in order to evoke a desired faith response (p. 141). In this context, dealing with counterclaims becomes part of the evangelist's narrative strategy. Is Jesus a sinner (9:24)? Does he have a demon (8:48)? Examining these charges enables John to marshal his apologetic for Jesus.

The Johannine narrative is then analyzed along various lines of inquiry: first, in terms of *ethos* and *pathos*; second, with a view toward its narrative opening (the prologue), narrative middle (11:1–12:19), and narrative closure (21:24–25). Relating these literary units to the lawsuit motif, Lincoln points to John the Baptist as the witness identified in the prologue, while the narrative closure is taken up with the witness of the — "disciple Jesus loved," who occupies a bridge function between the trial of Jesus and his followers' participation in the lawsuit (19:35; d. 20:31; 21:24). The message of the middle section of John's gospel is that life for Lazarus means death for Jesus (11:4, 7–16). Third, Lincoln discusses the lawsuit motif in relation to plot, characterization, genre, and the reader. Lincoln contends that the gospel is itself a testimony that calls on its readers to act as judges who must render a verdict regarding the truthfulness of Jesus' claims.

Chapter 5 then takes up the relationship between the lawsuit motif and the theology of the fourth gospel. The discussion ensues under the headings: "The God of the Trial"; "The Witness of Jesus"; "The Trial's Outcome—Life or Condemnation?"; "The Truth at Issue"; "The Opposition and Its Case"; "The Witness of Jesus' Followers and the Spirit as Another Advocate"; and "The Trial's Cosmic Setting." Chapter 6 continues the discussion by exploring the fourth gospel's lawsuit in historical and social perspective. Lincoln eschews Bauckham's recent criticism of a "Johannine community hypothesis" but only cites as evidence certain "we" statements in the gospel and the phenomenon of the Johannine epistles (pp. 264–65).

According to Lincoln, the "Johannine community" was a "community under trial." Lincoln conjectures "that some of the Johannine community's Jewish members had found themselves examined, tried, and then excommunicated by the synagogue for the

apostasy and blasphemy of their confession about Jesus (d. 9:22; 12:42; 16:1–4)" (p. 278). However, Lincoln doubts that the famous Twelfth Benediction (pronouncing curses on Christians) is directly behind references to synagogue expulsion in the fourth gospel. Drawing on the work of B. Malina, Lincoln relates the question of truth in John's gospel to the issue of shame and honor which was paramount in many ancient cultures including first-century Graeco-Roman societies. In this context, Jesus receives honor from God the Father, even though he is rejected by the world (including official Judaism). Jesus' followers, in turn, receive honor from Jesus.

After Jesus' departure, two important figures remain: the Spirit and the "disciple Jesus loved." It is the task of both to honor Jesus and to prove the world wrong in its dishonoring of Jesus. Jesus himself is vindicated by the resurrection. The reversal of the roles of honor and humiliation is in clear view especially in the foot-washing scene where Jesus adopts the role of household slave, conveying to his followers a new perception of honor and glory and grounding their ministry in the necessity of love. Also taken up are the questions of the relationship between the trial motif and a possible Roman context and the reworking of gospel traditions.

Building on the previous lines of research, chap. 7 takes up the lawsuit metaphor in contemporary focus, including references to the work of F. Kafka, A. Camus, and P. Ricoeur. Chapters 8 and 9 jointly deal with the appropriation of the fourth gospel's lawsuit motif. Chapter 8 fields four objections, while chap. 9 engages in four reflections that are both profound and provocative.

This is a brilliant, unusually competent piece of work. It treats a significant Johannine topic that, despite several monographs, has still not been given its due among students of John's gospel. Lincoln excels in his methodology, following a logical and consistent path in analyzing the fourth gospel from the vantage points of history, literature, and theology as well as providing a suggestive treatment of contemporary appropriation. While I would differ with him on a few issues, such as the existence and possibility of reconstruction of a "Johannine community," the identity of the "disciple Jesus loved," his overall hermeneutic of a two-level reading of the Johannine narrative, and some other more minor issues, I highly commend Lincoln's work to all serious students of John's gospel. Johannine scholarship continues to be alive and well, and the forthcoming works on John's gospel by Craig Blomberg, Richard Bauckham, and others can be expected to raise scholarly work on John's gospel to a very high level indeed.

Andreas J. Köstenberger
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, NC

*This review first appeared in *Trinity Journal* 22 (2001): 269–72 and is posted with permission.