

*Truth on Trial: the Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel.* By Andrew T. Lincoln. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000. ISBN 1-56563-282-6.

Truth on Trial is a major book which deals with a very important aspect of the gospel of John: the rhetorical features of testimony and conflict which pervade the book. In its attention to these rhetorical features, which Lincoln calls a “lawsuit motif,” this book is a significant contribution to Johannine scholarship. But the book attempts, at the same time, too much.

The book opens with a chapter which introduces the lawsuit language in the Fourth Gospel and shows how it pervades the structure of the gospel. This is followed in the second chapter with a brief summary of the “rib” lawsuit in the Old Testament, especially Isaiah 40-55, and this is connected to John’s lawsuit motif. In chapter 3, Lincoln traces more systematically the lawsuit motif in the narrative development of the Fourth Gospel. This is the close to a commentary on the gospel and allows the reader to really see how Lincoln is imagining the combination of a lawsuit motif and the “rib” pattern working in the narrative of John. Following this close reading of John, he then applies a more theoretical approach by analyzing the issue through the lens of literary-critical methodology. This is followed in chapter 5 by a theological analysis of John using the lawsuit theory as new perspective. Lincoln then turns in chapter 6 to the historical situation of the gospel’s composition, applying the lawsuit theory to support J. Louis Martyn’s approach to the gospel’s origins. In the final three chapters, Lincoln then turns to questions about the validity and applicability of this theory in approaching the Fourth Gospel today.

The central issue at stake is the often-observed use of language in John which seems linked to a highly charged rhetorical situation. The use of *martur*-stem words (witness, testify, evidence), the controversy with “the Jews,” and the developing rejection of Jesus that ends in a trial and death, all are strong evidence of this rhetorical situation. Lincoln calls this a “lawsuit motif.” Some of this has been noted before, notably by Alan Trites in *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, and A. E. Harvey in *Jesus on Trial*, but a more complete analysis of the motif has been needed for some time. In its attention to the motif, and the use of specific language and argumentation in support of the motif, as well as the importance of this rhetorical emphasis in the construction of the Fourth Gospel, this work is very helpful.

But Lincoln goes beyond simply a lawsuit motif and imports an idea of God’s lawsuit with humanity, a “rib” motif from Isaiah 40-55, as the dominant way of seeing the rhetoric of the Fourth Gospel. As Lincoln argues: “The lawsuit between God and the nations becomes that between God and the world and provides the overarching framework within which Israel’s controversy with God is now seen to be a part. In fact, Israel’s lawsuit with God not only forms the counterplot within the main plot; Israel also now becomes the representative of the world in the main plot” (p. 46). In other words, the Fourth Gospel according to Lincoln functions as an expanded trial in which God in the form of Jesus is both accused by Israel and he in turn accuses and judges Israel.

But while there is substantial material to support part of this – certainly the opposition by “the Jews” is a central motif in the Fourth Gospel – at its heart this added component of the “rib” seems to

overly complicate the task Lincoln has set for himself. An example of how the complexity seems to blunt the argumentation is in his conception of the *stasis* or central thrust of the rhetorical argument. It would seem that a “rib” approach is forensic in thrust – reviewing past events to demonstrate how and why a judgment has been made. But that seems not to be the case in Lincoln’s argument. Instead, the literary device is primarily seen as epideictic – to strengthen wavering faith and encourage readers to be witnesses (p. 142). But in this epideictic quality, the central role of the “rib” is removed. Moreover, one might ask whether Lincoln has adequately taken into account the Fourth Evangelist’s own stated purpose, which actually sounds more deliberative than either forensic or epideictic: “... but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31). In this difficulty with the main purpose of the trial motif, its *stasis*, the central argument loses much of its focus and force.

A central element in L.’s argumentation is based on a use of J. Louis Martyn’s view of the structure of the Fourth Gospel. In *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel*, Martyn argued that John is constructed on a two-level approach: the level of the narrative, and another level of events currently taking place. The events in the gospel actually represent, by analogy, events in the life of the community to which the gospel is addressed. In particular, Lincoln picks up the central element in Martyn’s argument, the synagogue expulsion which is dealt with in John 9, and suggests that this expulsion with its attendant trials and judgments, gives the motif a particular poignancy and validity that would speak to a community which has been expelled from the synagogue. Thus he also imagines a conflict situation as the proximate historical and social situation which gives rise to the trial motif. While not impossible, once again it seems that Lincoln is explaining too much, relying on a hypothetical construction to support his argument. While Martyn’s reading is possible, numerous objections have been raised to his two-level reading and the historical scenario upon which it is based. Lincoln seems unaware of the major critiques of Martyn’s approach to reading the gospel. If Martyn’s reading is not correct, would this invalidate Lincoln’s analysis of the Fourth Gospel?

Lincoln is perhaps at his strongest in some theoretical essays about how to understand the witness language in light of a historical critical methodology. Can a person who accepts the critiques of historical examination of the gospel find anything of value in the claims to authoritative witness in the Fourth Gospel? He rightly points out that much of the witness language is confessional rather than narrational. That is, the witness language serves more often to talk about the truth of Jesus’ identity than the truth of the narrated events. Thus the entire motif presents a truth claim that is quite distinct from the issue of whether an eyewitness actually wrote all these things down as a historically sound report. Lincoln grapples with this issue at length, in part to suggest a way of better understanding the claims to truth within the expanded metaphor of witness and opposition. In his engagement with Ricoeur and Derrida, he presents a cogent way of valuing the truth claims that serve as an effective argument to Casey’s rejection of John’s value.

Despite difficulties with Lincoln’s reading of a “rib” in the trial narrative, and his too-ready acceptance Martyn’s reconstruction of the historical and social situation as the basis for the trial motif, he nonetheless has focused attention on a central thematic feature of the Fourth Gospel. It is clear that the Fourth Gospel uses rhetorical language (whether it is “lawsuit” terminology is perhaps a leap) and

argumentation to present a compelling narrative. In drawing our attention to this feature, Lincoln has done a great service to Johannine scholarship. Moreover, his numerous insights into the gospel and its theology are very helpful. This is a book which all Johannine scholars and students should read. Whether the central thesis withstands criticism, however, is doubtful.