

RBL 9/2002

**Asiedu-Peprah, Martin**

***Johannine Sabbath Conflicts as Juridical Controversy***

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/132

Tübingen: Mohr- Siebeck, 2000. Pp. xii + 280, Cloth, \$44.50, ISBN 3161475305.

Beth M Sheppard  
Southwestern College  
Winfield, KS 67156

Renewed interest in the legal motifs of the Fourth Gospel has been characteristic of recent years. Asiedu-Peprah's doctoral dissertation, completed at Australian Catholic University, marks a significant contribution to this dialogue and merits a place with Robert Gordon Maccini's *Her Testimony Is True: Women As Witnesses according to John* (JSNTSup125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) and Andrew T. Lincoln's *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000). Although not taking into account either of these works, the latter of which was released while Asiedu-Peprah's volume would have been at press, the author recognizes the juridical character of the confrontations between Jesus and his opponents as portrayed in the Gospel.

Focusing on John 5 and 9:1–10:21, Jesus' Sabbath healings, Asiedu-Peprah takes a narrative-critical approach in which he has three goals. He seeks to trace correspondences between the Johannine Sabbath conflicts and the genre of the Old Testament *controversy as a juridical procedure* (always rendered in italics in the text), to detail how the use of the genre functions to persuade the reader to accept claims regarding Jesus' christological identity, and to advance a theory that the adoption of the juridical controversy by the Gospel author might have held rhetorical appeal to non-Christian Jews within a post-70 C.E. setting.

In the initial two chapters, Asiedu-Peprah sets out the characteristics of the Old Testament juridical controversy and then, by attention to the narrative context, establishes the importance of the Sabbath motif for the pericopes of the healing of the lame man and the man born blind. Indeed, he maintains that the Sabbath motif provides a narrative framework in which 9:1–10:21 is essentially a continuation of the unresolved Sabbath conflict between Jesus and his accusers in John 5:1–47. One of the most helpful observations in these chapters appears in his treatment of the elements of the juridical controversy. Asiedu-Peprah insists on differentiating between a “juridical controversy” in which two opponents, an accuser and a defendant, attempt to convince each other of their positions without recourse to a third party’s intervention and a “trial” in which the complaint is unresolved and is taken for mediation by a third individual or judge. Careful attention to this distinction with regard to the Sabbath passages enables the exegete to avoid the trap of positing a “legal monstrosity” (22) in which one of the legal disputants also serves as judge. Relying quite heavily on P. Bovati’s *Re-establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 105; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), Asiedu-Peprah manages to set forth his exposition of the Old Testament *rīb* or controversy pattern with minimal references to Old Testament passages and examples, most of which are constrained to the footnotes.

The third and fourth chapters constitute exegetical readings of John 5:1–47 and 9:1–10:21, respectively. After establishing a narrative structure for each, Asiedu-Peprah examines each passage for its conformity, both in terms of content and form, to the elements of the juridical controversy as they were defined in chapter 1. Accused by “the Jews” in John 5 of unlawful Sabbath activity, Jesus’ defense in the two-party controversy (5:17–47) involves assertions concerning Jesus’ relationship with the Father, the invocation of witnesses whom the accusers would deem absolutely reliable, and accusations against the Jews (5:41–47). A weak point of this meticulously crafted argument involves verse 18, wherein the narrator interjects that the Jews were seeking to kill Jesus. Asiedu-Peprah reads this verse as indicating an

intended punitive action that would be taken should Jesus' defense fail to convince his accusers (79–80). Although Asiedu-Peprah may impute any response to his “implied” first-time reader, the expectation that such a reader would respond as Asiedu-Peprah projects is not necessarily convincing, especially when one reaches 7:14–24. These verses also mention the Sabbath healing and attempts to kill Jesus and presumably refer back to 5:18. This weakness, though, is negligible in the force of the larger argument, that Jesus and the Jews are engaged in controversy and that Jesus is seeking to persuade them to accept his position. The idea that “the Jews” do not react to Jesus' defense and the controversy remains unresolved, thus paving the way for a resumption of the Sabbath controversy in 9:1–10:21. The emphasis on the narrative link between both Sabbath passages is particularly well done.

An exegesis of 9:1–10:21 is undertaken in chapter 4. Interestingly, the witnesses in this exchange, unlike those of the previous Sabbath controversy, speak during the course of the dispute. According to Asiedu-Peprah, in juridical controversies “witnesses may be called upon by either side but very often they do not actually appear in the course of the controversy and do not play any active role in it” (19). Given this definition of a witness, Asiedu-Peprah must account for the witnessing activity of the formerly blind man and his parents. He does so by theorizing that this portion of the pericope constitutes a “defence controversy” (141), an additional feature sometimes found in a juridical controversy. One might wish at this point that Asiedu-Peprah provided parallels between 9:28–34 and Old Testament “defence controversy” texts to support his assertions a bit more strongly. Instead, the reader is referred back to page 21 and thence to note 46 for the citations to some general examples of the Old Testament “defence controversy.” The same difficulty is encountered with regard to identifying the parable of the Good Shepherd as a “juridical parable.” Asserting that the images Jesus draws for his opponents in 9:39–10:18 correspond in form and content to a “juridical parable” would be more convincing had he specific Old Testament examples in mind with which to draw out a comparison. Nevertheless, Asiedu-Peprah's contention that 10:1–19, the pericope

about the Good Shepherd, is part of an overarching narrative that includes 9:1–41 is persuasively argued.

Having completed his exposition of the two Sabbath passages and concluding that they do in fact conform to the genre of the *controversy as juridical procedure*, the author turns in chapter 5 to the task of determining how “the narrator uses this distinctive narrative genre for the purpose of presenting the Christology of the two narratives to the reader” (184), specifically, the “implied reader” (186 n. 8). In essence, Asiedu-Peprah reprises many of the exegetical observations from the previous two chapters to demonstrate that at every turn the narrator uses the rhetorical device of the juridical controversy. The narrator’s object is to present persuasive information that will move the implied reader to accept the christological assertions that Jesus is the unique Son of the Father, God’s divine agent as the Son of Man, and the mediator of salvation who establishes “a relationship of mutual knowledge and reciprocal love with those who come to faith in him” (210).

The final chapter shifts its focus from the narrator and implied reader to the author (211) and intended audiences (213). In a mere twenty-two pages, Asiedu-Peprah attempts to “establish a plausible social function for the use of the controversy pattern for a christological purpose within the historical context of the Johannine Christians” (212). He sketches a situation in post-70s Judaism where the “juridical controversy Christology” would have served as an appeal to non-Christians within the Jewish community, persuading them to come to faith in Jesus. Due to the brevity of this chapter, presumably resulting from constraints imposed on the length of the dissertation, many assertions are advanced without substantial discussion. For instance, Asiedu-Peprah focuses on *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch* as representative of apocalyptic responses to the crisis of 70 C.E. without adequately sketching out the criteria as to why these two apocalypses were selected as representative of the period. He merely cites secondary literature as an authority for his assertions without engaging the secondary literature critically (218). Likewise, he mentions three possible responses to the destruction of the temple—apocalypticism, popular

messianism, and early rabbinic Judaism—but offers no criteria for selecting those three in particular from “among the many responses of the various Jewish groups” (218) when he seeks to elucidate the Johannine context.

In the final conclusion (233–45), Asiedu-Peprah not only restates his findings but also offers up something new in terms of brief observations on 7:14–24; 8:12–20; and 10:22–39. These three pericopes are all also said to conform to the juridical controversy pattern. The remaining pages include a bibliography, an index of biblical and other ancient sources, an index of modern authors, and, finally, an index of selected Greek words. The last two, sadly, are marked by a number of omissions that detract from their usefulness. To cite two instances, the entry for K. H. Rengstrof lacks the reference on page 25 note 58, and the entry for μαρτυρία omits references to page 22 and page 133 note 67. Closer attention during the editorial process may have brought these indices to the high standards exhibited in the rest of the book.