

RBL 02/2005



Brown, Tricia Gates

***Spirit in the Writings of John: Johannine
Pneumatology in Social-Scientific Perspective***

Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement
Series 253

London: T&T Clark, 2003. Pp. viii + 307. Paper.
\$55.00. ISBN 0567084426.

Ron Fay
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, IL 60015

Spirit in the Writings of John is a revision of Tricia Gates Brown's dissertation written under Ron Piper from the University of St. Andrews. The subtitle, *Johannine Pneumatology in Social-Scientific Perspective*, reveals more of what the study discusses. There are five chapters in addition to the separate introduction and conclusion. The book looks at all the uses of *spirit* in John and 1 John in order to argue that the term is being used to convey a sense of brokerage for Christians to Jesus.

The introduction begins with a brief statement of the problem, namely, that the debate of the historicity of John has often overshadowed some of the themes of this Gospel. Brown's goal is to define the role established for *spirit* in John, and she works toward this end by using the social-scientific model of the patron-client relationship. The author gives a list of questions about pneumatology and sociocultural issues in John and 1 John (10). Brown responds to the critique of Bauckham and others that John was not written only for his community but that the Gospel was written with the community in mind first. She goes on to articulate a community essentially similar to Malina and Rohrbaugh, upon whom she heavily relies. The purpose of the dissertation is to illuminate John's theology, most importantly his Christology, by way of pneumatology (21–22).

The first chapter discusses how John's Gospel uses patron-client metaphors as a model for the theology of the book. Brown discusses the various types of patron-client models along with the social dimensions that cause these models to be active within a given cultural setting. She then details the various historical arguments for her understanding as found in Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor, with the move to Greece and Asia Minor being something that the author admits is difficult to make, especially due to the lack of specialized terms that occurred in Latin. However, she proposes two pieces of evidence to support her: nucleation (movement of the population into the cities) and friendship relationships. She turns to Palestine, detailing different arguments for finding these relationships there during the first century (47–51). Brown then points out how the conditions in Palestine at the time fit those that tend to foster patron-client relationships. The last section of the chapter, which details much of what the book contains, argues for God being the patron par excellence to a Jewish mind and Jesus being the perfect broker. Included in this discussion is a very helpful chart listing the major parallels between the Christology of John and the patron-client relationship (60–61).

The second chapter details different approaches to Johannine pneumatology defended by C. H. Dodd, George Johnston, Felix Porsch, and Gary Burge. By covering these four scholars, Brown wants to “survey their approaches in the hope of gaining a representative picture of the scholarship on Johannine pneumatology, for these scholars demonstrate the wide range of perspectives from which it can be viewed” (62). Dodd spends his time concentrating on the meaning of the various terms used for *spirit* in Hebrew and Greek. Dodd thinks that John uses spirit to mean wind, life, or power; he combines it with truth; and he uses it to connote rebirth. Spirit is not the third person of the Trinity, but it does seem to be the essence of deity. George Johnston spends the majority of his time looking specifically at the Paraclete. Johnston sees a strong parallel between the Qumran uses of the “Spirit of Truth” along with John's, though Johnston thinks there is a common tradition instead of dependence either way. Johnston argues that John is pushing against a heretical angelology, which is why the Paraclete is cast in terms of the spirit of God and Christ. Johnston's major area of significance, however, comes from his interpretation that the Paraclete is experienced through outstanding Christians who become “paracletes” for the community. Felix Porsch works to connect the Paraclete sections with the rest of the passages about spirit by positing that the theme is the “spirit as revelation” (69). The term *paraclete* becomes a forensic term based upon both the trial motif throughout John and the Synoptic tradition that the spirit empowers speakers who are testifying. Gary Burge combines his study of pneumatology in John with a study of 1 John. He considers the paraclete in John to be the very presence of Christ found in his absence. Burge agrees with Porsch that John's use of *spirit* stems from a forensic concept as found in the Synoptics. Brown considers each of these four understandings of the spirit in John as

coming up short generally due to their lack of interaction with the idea of patron-client relationships, yet she also concludes her review of each scholar with solid critiques based upon the work of the individual.

The third chapter is the pivotal chapter in that it includes the exegesis and theological exposition of every spirit passage in John that does not include a reference to the Paraclete. The first mention of the spirit is at the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (1:31–34). The spirit in this passage, according to Brown, “*does indeed function as a legitimation of Jesus*” (92, emphasis original). This moves directly into a discussion of Jesus as true kin of God, showing the superior type of broker he is. In the death of Jesus (19:30–34), Brown argues that John is being ironic in that the giving up of the spirit refers not to Jesus’ death but rather to the availability of his spirit to all people. Brown’s exegesis of 20:22–23 begins with a brief summary of the relationship between God and Jesus in John; namely, it is dominated by father-son along with patron-broker concepts. Taking these three passages together, Brown argues that the disciples “have the spirit,” which “legitimizes them as children of God and subordinate brokers to Jesus” (113). Brown next discusses the use of spirit in the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. She first argues for caution about coming to a conclusion about what group Nicodemus is supposed to represent, finally settling on a fair assessment of him as some type of outsider as compared to the Johannine community. The author rejects “water and spirit” as being a single unit, propounding the idea that they refer to physical and spiritual birth respectively (121). The end of the chapter once again displays Jesus as the greatest broker to the Father by the unlimited giving of the spirit. Brown turns to John 4, arguing that it demonstrates that God’s patronage is available to all but only through the brokerage of Jesus. The Bread of Life discourse displays Jesus’ words as spirit and life, thus legitimating Jesus’ “claims to be God’s broker” (152). She sees 7:37–39 as explaining the benefits offered to God’s clients brokered through Jesus: spiritual birth and eternal life. Brown then notes the interweaving of the themes of baptism, spirit, and water in John. In an attempt to overcome objections concerning the silence of John about the spirit in 8–13, Brown deftly argues that the Gospel splits between 1–7 (Jesus winning followers) and 8–13 (his movement toward the cross and the burgeoning rejection he experiences). Brown concludes the chapter by noting that the spirit is not Jesus’ own spirit but rather a divine spirit that allows Jesus to broker benefits from God to his clients.

The fourth chapter deals exclusively with the Paraclete in the farewell discourses in John. Brown begins the chapter by arguing from lexical evidence that the primary use of *paraclete* in all literature prior to John refers to the function of a mediator or broker in a nonforensic sense (also note her discussion of how *logos* and *paraclete* interact in Philo [177–78]). She continues this idea by pointing out how this understanding fits the content of the first Farewell Discourse (14:1–27) with respect to the “Paraclete/Spirit of

Truth/Holy Spirit” (211). Remarkably, Brown concludes that the Paraclete is called “another” because Jesus continues to be a paraclete (212). The other passages that describe the Paraclete are dealt with together, as they both convey the idea that the Paraclete is a prophet who depends on Jesus for information and therefore is a prophet “in a limited sense” (232). The Farewell Discourses, according to the author, give comfort to the community by revealing the Paraclete as the one who continues the earthly presence of Jesus by functioning in a complementary way to him. The Paraclete is not Jesus but rather a broker who enables access to Jesus, who in turn enables access to God. Thus, the spirit and the Paraclete have exactly the same function in John, allowing one to connect them.

The fifth chapter looks at 1 John in the light of the work done in John. The author begins by noting that the passages about spirit are those that scholars understand as polemical. She avers that the opponents in 1 John claim to abide in God yet hate their brothers, claim the mediation of the spirit, and hold to a “false Christology” (237). Combined with the probable emphasis on the baptism of Jesus and lack of emphasis on his death, it is likely that the opponents saw the spirit as the real broker between God and humans, whereas Jesus’ ministry was about him coming in order to give the spirit and nothing more (249). She concludes, then, that “1 John’s perspective on the spirit varies substantially from that of John” (257). Both understand the spirit as a divine gift, but 1 John does not include the spirit until the latter half. There is no mention in 1 John of the spirit as a broker. While 1 John considers Jesus a broker, it does so in a different way than the Gospel. While there are points of contact (e.g., spirit as legitimation), the distinct understanding of the spirit in each shows differing authorship. The conclusion of the book predictably stresses the spirit as a broker of Jesus.

Tricia Gates Brown makes some very strong points. First, her careful attention to detail stands out, especially in her research about the usage of the term *paraclete* prior to John. Second, she tends to make well-informed decisions in each step of her arguments. Third, she has no problem disagreeing with scholarship when it does not fit what she believes the text is saying.

There are, at the same time, some noted weaknesses in Brown’s work. She makes reference only to the Synoptics when it helps her case (e.g., the Parable of the Wicked Tenants on 110) but never when it weakens it (e.g., the story of the rich man who hoards his wealth in contradiction to patron-client behavior). Another issue is the predominance of christological interpretation and the paucity of descriptions dealing only with the spirit. Brown spends so much time describing the Christology of John in patron-client terms that the focus of the book seems to be lost in certain sections, especially the third chapter. Too often Brown relies on Malina’s ideas instead of careful exegesis. One must also be

cautious of her misunderstanding of Trinitarian theology in that she confuses ontology with function (191–92), concluding that John “does not evince a Trinitarian theology.” The biggest weakness in the book is the stress on patron-client relationships with little to no tolerance of any other viewpoint.

Tricia Gates Brown’s volume is a strong piece of scholarship that is written to a niche audience. Johannine scholars will appreciate the arguments and logic within the study. For those who have worked in John without considering patron-client issues, this book will open new doors. For those who have read and rejected such arguments, however, this work will not overcome any objections.