Per Jarle Bekken


In this impressive study, Per Jarle Bekken explores the forensic motif prevalent throughout the Gospel of John to be gleaned from a comparative survey of Jewish diasporic and Greco-Roman literature in antiquity. In terms of method, Bekken deftly utilizes historical, literary, and theological approaches to examine the intricacies of the lawsuit of Jesus as a colonized Jew under Roman reign. Through an in-depth survey of Jewish and Roman jurisdiction, he tellingly presents Jesus – the one crucified as a criminal – as an eschatological emperor ruling over all the nations by way of a parody or mimicry of the Roman emperor.

The book is divided into three main parts, besides an introduction and a summary. The introduction (Chapter One) deals with contemporary scholarship on the Johannine lawsuit motif, providing a succinct outline of the present study at the historical, literary, and theological levels. In addition, Bekken sets forth a historical approach as a central method (especially in Part 1) and Philonic and papyrological sources as primary data. What is striking, however, is that he makes use of literary and theological approaches as well (especially in Parts 2 and 3) without any mention of their relationships to a historical approach.

In Part 1, Bekken situates the historicity of Jesus’ trial within the Jewish and Roman legal systems. Beginning with Chapter Two, Bekken suggests that the cases of vigilant execution sporadically illustrated in Philo’s writings (*Mos.* 2:213–220; *Spec.* 1:315–318; 2:250–251) would account for the Jews’ attempts to put Jesus to death on the charges of Sabbath violation, blasphemy, and seduction within the legitimate system of Jewish law. Chapter Three extends the lawsuit against Jesus to the Roman judicial system by drawing on *P. Oslo II* 17, a papyrus found in Roman Egypt. In *P. Oslo II* 17, the local police authority (*stratêgos*) proscribes those Egyptian accused who were summoned and hunted as fugitive criminals and, consequently, apprehended, eventually transferring them to a Roman procurator (*epistratêgos*). By analogy, this papyrus enables us to view Jesus’ trial before the Jewish high priest and the Roman governor within the system of Roman law. Thus, Bekken sheds fresh light on the Johannine lawsuit motif in its broader Jewish and Roman contexts.

Bekken in Part 2 delves into the literary dimension of the trial narrative by taking on a dual perspective based on J. Louis Martyn’s attempt to construe John’s Gospel in both an earthly and heavenly dimension as a two-level drama. Chapter Four resorts to Philo’s *Leg.* 3:205–208 to look into the controversy over
valid testimony embedded within the narratives of John 5:31–40 and 8:12–20. When read in such a dual perspective, Philo’s insistence upon God’s self-validating testimony implies that John’s Jesus can also have his own self-validating testimony due to his divine origin, which stands in compliance with the Jewish custom of requiring at least two witnesses (cf. Deut. 19:15). Chapter Five reinterprets the charges leveled against Jesus in the new light of heavenly *Halakha*: “as the heavenly agent of God, he [Jesus] could perform the divine activities on the Sabbath and claim the status of being the Son of God without being charged with such crimes as breaking the Sabbath and blasphemy” (p. 173). A comparative look at Philo’s (*Leg.* 1:5–18; *Migr.* 89–93) and John’s (5:1–18) reception of Gen. 2:2–3 reveals the prerogative of Jesus as the Son of God to continue to work on the Sabbath. In similar fashion, a Jewish exposition of Ps. 82:6 in John 10:34–36 also demonstrates that Jesus is the Logos incarnate as God’s heavenly agent. Throughout, a dual identity of Jesus – as both human and divine – turns out to fit in well with a deepened understanding of the lawsuit against Jesus within the Jewish cultural milieu.

In Part 3, Bekken casts theological (or more precisely, christological) light on the trial narrative in the Gospel of John by calling attention to the theme of Jesus’ kingship in a colonial and imperial context. Clearly, John’s Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah under colonial rule, navigates between Jewish eschatological hopes and Roman imperial agendas. Chapter Six discovers analogies between Philo’s treatise *De Iosepho* and John’s Gospel in terms closely related to the ideology of Hellenistic kingship. It shows that both stories embody the literary genre called political *bios* insofar as they both dramatize the plot of conspiracy to murder the protagonist who is ultimately destined to become an ideal king in accordance with God’s plan. Chapter Seven analyzes Philo’s appropriation of Num. 24:7 (LXX) in his works *Mos.* 1:288–291 and *Praem.* 93–97 to interpret the meaning of ὁ ἄνθρωπος, the term Pilate uses to describe Jesus in John 19:5. According to Bekken, the term signifies Jesus as a Jewish eschatological “rival king or ‘world Emperor’ over against the Roman Emperor” (p. 211). In this way, Bekken brings to the fore John’s Jesus as a messianic ruler who runs counterparallel to Caesar.

This work is valuable in demonstrating the marvelous complexity of John’s forensic motif from historical, narratological, and ideological perspectives. Nevertheless, Bekken’s book still leaves much to be desired in terms of method and data. In the first place, it is fairly unclear how Bekken uses a set of methodological and theoretical parameters in the present study. He rarely, if ever, addresses the correlations between historical, literary, and theological approaches even though, for the most part, he employs them in a combined manner. In other words, one cannot find a comprehensive interpretive framework