



**Phillips, Peter M.**

***The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel: A Sequential Reading***

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The book is a lightly revised version of the author's University of Sheffield Ph.D. thesis. It is a clearly planned and well-written piece of work building on clues gleaned from reader-response criticism and sociolinguistic scholarship. It eschews the question of sources and redaction in favor of a progressive and unified reading of the Prologue. It argues that the beginning of John is like the threshold of an ancient temple. Some temples are hidden away and hard to find, only likely to be entered by the initiated. Others are located in public places, are wide open and welcoming to strangers. The beginning of a book is like the entry to a temple, forbidding or welcoming and preparing the one who enters for the experience within. The beginning of a text is a threshold into a new dimension, an induction into a new world. In this respect the Prologue introduces the reader to the key categories of the Gospel. Because the language is undemanding and in some respects common to a wide range of readers, it is argued that John is directed broadly to a wide range of readers. Making use of Genette's understanding of a prefatorial paratext, the Prologue is made the key to understanding the world of the Gospel. Viewing the beginning of a text as a threshold, Phillips argues that, unlike the beginnings of some texts that present the reader with a high level of difficulty, the beginning of John has a low threshold of difficulty. John 1:1–5 contains no proper nouns but has a series of

propositions intelligible to various contemporary religious and philosophical schools of thought. He contends that John offers a text with a more accessible threshold than the other Gospels and that “the Prologue is a more open text” than their beginnings because it was “written for a more general audience” and is “a text in search of a new audience all together.”

The openness of the text to different readers is linked with the sequential disclosure of the text to the reader according to Uspensky’s internal perspective rather than the critic’s external perspective. The Prologue is thus read as part of the Gospel that focuses the reader’s attention on critical aspects of its narrative world. Phillips appeals to Elizabeth Malbon’s suggestion that the Gospel beginnings have three functions: interactional, intertextual, and intratextual. Like a number of scholars, she thinks that the Prologue situates the reading process by shaping the perspective from which the narrative is viewed and unlocking the text’s purpose and meaning. It invites the reader to take up an internal perspective. In an attempt to see how the Gospel does this, Phillips draws on “three specific fields—literary theory [ch. 2], rhetoric [ch. 3] and sociolinguistics [ch. 4].” Because the text reveals a level of ambiguity in the gaps that the reader needs to bridge and the ambiguity of the language used, Phillips appeals to the educative role of sequential reading. Attention to the role of rhetoric and insights from sociolinguistics are joined by recognition of the implications of intertextuality. All of this leads Phillips to the conclusion that the Gospel, when read sequentially, entering through the low and open threshold of the Prologue, invites a wide readership into this story of Jesus. In so doing, he notes Zumstein’s appeal to three levels of intertextuality in the Prologue: a clear reference to Gen 1:1, strong connections with the myth of Wisdom, and reference to Moses evokes the act of revelation par excellence through which God reveals his glory. If Phillips does not reject this intertextuality, he certainly aims to diminish its importance and broaden the scope of influence. This is clear in his questioning of the allusion to Gen 1:1 in John 1:1. He asks. “Indeed, how clear can a two-word allusion to a Greek translation of a Hebrew one-word original be?” (12). But it needs to be said that this one word (Hebrew or two in Greek) is a distinctive beginning of a book especially when each of these two books deals immediately with the creation. The allusion is much clearer than Phillips allows and would have been quite widely recognized.

The allusions to Wisdom in the Prologue are overshadowed by the use of *logos* as the key term even if the wisdom literature already identifies Wisdom and Word in some texts. Certainly the use of *logos* allows Phillips to argue for a much wider set of allusions than the Jewish wisdom literature might suggest. Clearly the use of *logos* opens up the possibility of multivalence and a variety of readings. But is this multivalence the purpose of the text, as is argued, or the consequence of its reception history? In my view, it is the latter. That is not to argue that there is no ambiguity in the text. Those ambiguities are the

raw materials with which the Gospel fashions the misunderstanding of characters in the story, which are then clarified *for the reader* in the ensuing narrative, but especially by the commentary of the narrator. Zumstein's reference to Moses in the Prologue is crucial. The giving of the law through Moses unmistakably marks the Jewish context of the Prologue. This context is reinforced in the body of the Gospel. It is underplayed by Phillips, who, though noting that (according to Malbon) intratextuality is the third function of Gospel beginnings, remarks that intratextuality "will not be the overriding focus of this thesis" (14). For this he refers the reader elsewhere. "This intratextual world and its interactive role on the reader is explored in Culpepper's groundbreaking work on John, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*." Had the conclusions of this work been adopted, Phillips might have come to different conclusions. From this reader's point of view, the allusions to Genesis (John 1:1) and Wisdom (throughout the Prologue) and the reference to the giving of the law through Moses identify the Jewish milieu of the Prologue, which is reinforced in the text of the Gospel as a whole. This is not to deny that the Gospel expresses a message that has the world in view. Rather, it is to suggest that the message is addressed to those who believe with view to generating the mission to the world. The Gospel embodies a theology of the mission of God revealed in the mission of Jesus and extended through Jesus to those who believe in him that the mission may continue. This is the central message of John 17. Thus the Gospel develops a theology of mission as a driving force for those who believe in order that the world may come to believe. The Gospel is not an evangelistic tract. While this is already implicit in the witness of the Prologue with its allusions to Gen 1, the wisdom literature, and the exodus tradition concerning Moses and the law, it is in the body of the Gospel that the Jewish milieu and the theology of mission become clear.

Phillips's thesis that the Prologue is the threshold through which the reader enters the text of the Gospel is both interesting and illuminating. But openness to a wide range of readers need not mean that such a range was the readership to which the Gospel was directed from the beginning. The readership that found the beginning of Genesis attractive goes way beyond the range of readers ever imagined in its composition, as the Poimandres Tractate of the Corpus Hermeticum illustrates. It is the unforeseen popular attraction that often turns a local composition into a human classic. Given this perspective, the book provides a persuasive account of factors leading to the reception history of the Gospel and of the Prologue in particular. This is done successively in chapters 2–5 using literary theory, rhetoric, sociolinguistics, and intertextuality focused on the use of *logos* in the Prologue. Chapter 6 then provides a detailed reading of the Prologue based on the findings of chapters 2–5. Chapter 7 provides a brief conclusion (221–28). Even readers who do not find all of the arguments persuasive will find this to be a timely reminder the nature of the Greco-Roman world into which the Gospel emerged

and the consequences of this for the way the Gospel was read and received. Perhaps not since C. H. Dodd has someone taken this context so seriously, but it is unlikely that this book will shake the now widely held conviction that the Gospel was shaped in a changing Jewish context between the time of Jesus' death and the last decade of the first century.

The book includes a twenty-four-page bibliography, a five-page index of references, and a two-page index of names, mainly of modern, but including a few ancient, authors. I commend it to readers interested in John and the role of the Prologue.