

**A REVIEW OF PETER M. PHILLIPS'S
*THE PROLOGUE OF
THE FOURTH GOSPEL*¹**

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This is a book that Free Grace readers should take a look at for more than one reason. First, and just as the title states, it contains an interpretation of crucial subject matter – the first eighteen verses of John's Gospel known as the Prologue. If truly a "threshold" through which Phillips draws readers from divergent backgrounds into the world of the "Johannine community" (p. 2), it will orient his readership to the point of view he wishes them to come to and to remain with. It provides interpretive direction for the narratives and the discourses which speak of eternal life more frequently and clearly than any other book in the Bible. Second, Phillips employs a reading strategy which he terms "sequential disclosure" (p. xi). Rarely does there come a "reading strategy" out of academia that is equally useful to both pastors and scholars. "Sequential disclosure" could be such a methodology. But more on this below.

The book is essentially Phillips' doctoral thesis from Sheffield. It is well organized in seven chapters, clearly written, and interacts with what seems to be the whole spectrum of relevant literature, be it ancient or modern. Bibliography is extensive, footnotes numerous and appropriate to the subjects under discussion. The preface, introduction (chapter one), and chapter two define the methodology and interact with the literary theorists (Wolfgang Iser, Catherine Emmot, Umberto Eco) upon whose ideas the methodology draws most heavily.

¹Peter M. Phillips, *The Prologue of the John's Gospel: A Sequential Reading*, (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 258 pp., hardcover.

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Chapter three elucidates the role of “rhetoric” (i.e., the artful use of persuasion) in the Prologue of John’s Gospel with special attention given to repetition and irony. Phillips views these as the two key rhetorical devices employed by John to engage and then educate the reader into acceptance of his presentation of the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, John’s purpose in writing is evangelistic above all else (preface, p.xii, p.156, et al.). “Mission is an integral focus of this Gospel.” (p. 226, with references on this same page to the different communities associated with this Mission). Repetition serves to give the Prologue its movement of thought structured in a “spiral” or “concentric” pattern (pp 47-51). Irony serves as the technique through which the author initiates the reader into his perspectival realm. When irony has completed its work, the reader will share the “lofty perch” of the author. That is, the proper viewpoint from which to understand the development of the characters and the progress of events in the story to follow (pp. 51-55). The forthcoming story will teach him to side with a *logos-theos-zoe-phos* (Word-God-Life-Light) “matrix” of concepts while discouraging him from remaining under the influence of darkness, ignorance, and death.

The fourth chapter is devoted to “sociolinguistics.” That is, the role of language as it interacts between author, audience, and the various “ingroups” and “outgroups” of a society. Ultimately, the readers are invited to join the Johannine “ingroup” and experience the above matrix of benefits. Detailed analysis of “sociolinguistics” is beyond the scope of this brief review, but any reader will certainly note the centrality of these concepts to Phillips’ methodology. With the conclusion of chapter four, most, if not all, of the concepts and terminology of “sequential disclosure” are defined and defended.

The next two chapters of the book are the application of this “reading strategy” to the interpretation of the Prologue. Chapter five explores the “intertextuality”³ of the key lexeme⁴

³Relating to or deriving meaning from the interdependent ways in which texts stand in relation to each other. Thefreedictionary.com, s.v. “intertextuality,” <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/intertextuality> (accessed March 28, 2010).

⁴The fundamental unit of the lexicon of a language. Thefreedictionary.com, s.v. “lexeme,” <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/lexeme> (accessed March 28, 2010).

logos. Phillips provides a fresh, in depth, and detailed look at the usage of this term in both the Biblical and extra-biblical sources. His conclusions are surprising, and in my view, almost certainly correct. Phillips' conclusion (pp. 138-41) concisely summarizes his view. His final paragraph of the chapter (pp. 140-41) states:

After the Prologue, the Logos disappears because the historic individual known as Jesus has replaced the concept. The concept is no longer important – it has done its work and so the author discards it. However, it seems to have done its job too well. Now, whenever scholars look back and find the lexeme in a text, they immediately begin to focus on hypostatic beings rather than concepts. There seems little evidence that this focus pre-dates John. Like tailors fashioning the Emperor's New Clothes, scholars have dreamt up so many different sources for logos, so many different possibilities clamouring to be *the* answer to the logos problem. In fact, just like Heraclitus, the gospel has no logos-doctrine. The Gospel only has Christology. The use of the lexeme is just a way of getting as many readers as possible into the story, a path towards understanding that the focus is on Jesus not actually on logos at all.

Chapter six is a verse by verse, phrase by phrase interpretation of the entire Prologue using his reading strategy of “sequential disclosure”, to which (before some highlights from chapter six), I turn next. In his preface (p. xi) Phillips says:

Basically ‘sequential disclosure’ is about allowing the text to speak for itself - exploring the ambiguities, the gaps, the unresolved issues relating to the reading process, allowing these features to have their full effect upon the reader without bringing in a host of other information to short-circuit the subsequent lack of clarity.

In his conclusion (p. 227) he says:

The importance of sequential reading, though, is not the unearthing of (real) readers, but the engagement with the text at its own level, allowing

the text to unfold its rhetorical strategy and to see it in action.

To “allow the text to speak for itself” requires, says Phillips, a linear, sequential, reading strategy. That is, the text is interpreted as it is encountered, word by word, phrase by phrase, clause by clause, sentence by sentence. And, at times, ambiguity may be as essential to an author’s purpose as is clarity. It keeps the reader from drawing firm conclusions until the writer wishes him to do so. “Ambiguation” may serve to suspend the reader’s ability or willingness to conclude a matter. With the reader thus suspended, the writer may ironically “destabilize” any or all previous conclusions or assumptions that the reader brought to the text. As these “gaps” in a reader’s comprehension arise, they should be allowed to persist, per Phillips, until the author supplies subsequent clarity, “disambiguation.”

When this happens, the reader finds his original understanding about a term or a “lexeme” to be “resemanticized.”⁵ Its signification in the context either expanded or contracted to the author’s now unambiguous viewpoint. The reader, of course, may reject this viewpoint, or he may accept the new understanding, the “antilanguage” of the Johannine community, and join the community of those who share this understanding of Jesus Christ. This is precisely what Phillips demonstrates in his fifth chapter treatment of *logos*. It is an attempt at the outset of the Gospel to provide an opening to converge with other traditions and bring them into the Johannine fold by the deliberate use of a multivalent term, *logos*, the true authorial meaning of which is not revealed until vv 17-18. There is no “*logos* being”, there is only the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ.

...there seems to be an attempt, at least in the Prologue, to offer an opening to other traditions, to other readers. In other words, a superficial veneer has been laid over a deeply Jewish foundation. ...

⁵ Editor’s note: Phillips has used a variation of the word *semantics* as a way of explanation. Though not a commonly recognized word, “resemanticized” has become more and more popular in scholarly circles to refer to moving a reader away from traditionally accepted ways of understanding words.

an author whose work naturally shows a deep understanding and perception of the Jewish scriptural traditions, ...has apparently made a decision to ambiguate his text and to converge with those who do not share that heritage. Rather than assume that readers have had a basic course in Johannine theology, or even in Hebrew Bible or Septuagint Studies, the author makes his text accessible to a wider audience. He lowers the threshold, widens participation, throws wide the gates (p. 225, and similarly, p. 224, first paragraph):

Any reader, whatever his background (traditional Judaism, Rabbinical Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, Greek philosophical, Stoic, pagan, or even Christian), will by vv 17-18 have a new idea of what the Gospel author means by *logos*. John has re-educated them within the brief span of his Prologue by "resemanticizing" this multivalent, polysemic⁶ lexeme. Once his readers have converged upon this understanding, John discards the term and never again uses it in this sense. Note also Phillips' concluding remarks, p. 224, (first paragraph).

Finally, before leaving this extended discussion of the nature of "sequential disclosure" as a "reading strategy", I should note one of Phillips' most strident points: The danger of metatextual⁷/paragrammatic⁸ incursions into the domain of sequential disclosure. His own words say it best (pp. 27-28).

In a field of study dominated by critical readings, it is important to remember that texts are experienced sequentially. Most commentaries seem to deal with texts sequentially, since they work through the texts verse-by-verse, sometimes even word-by-word. However, even though they follow the sequence of the text, commentators constantly introduce interpretative elements from the rest of the text or

⁶ Having more than one meaning; having multiple meanings; also called polysemous. [Thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/polysemic), s.v. "polysemic," <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/polysemic> (accessed March 28, 2010).

⁷ Of or pertaining to a form of intertextual discourse in which one text makes critical commentary on another. [Wiktionary.com](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/metatextuality) s.v. "metatextual," <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/metatextuality> (accessed March 28, 2010).

⁸ From "*para*," meaning beyond; incorrect; abnormal and "grammatic," meaning conforming to the rules of grammar, [Thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/para), s.v. "*para*" and "grammatic," <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/para> and <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/grammatic> (accessed March 28, 2010).

from other associated texts or from other general sources. This process of metatextual gap-filling disables sequential disclosure in much the same way that authors can disrupt the flow of discourse-time. In other words, just as an author can introduce a flash-back or flash-forward into a text, or can pause the action by moving into descriptive mode, so the sequential flow of the reading process can also be influenced by the introduction of material that has not yet been provided for the reader by the author. This process short-circuits or bypasses the affective quality of the narrative by filling in gaps inappropriately. In other words, the metatextual process disambiguates the text prematurely and so removes the power of any rhetorical or stylistic effect that the text is meant to achieve. Indeed, by revealing information too soon, or by providing information from another source, metatextuality can completely change the affective quality of the text by creating what is, in effect, a new text. ...

Metatextuality inhibits the process of reading a text *per se*. By approaching a text 'from above', paragrammatically, critics can too easily move from analysing the effects of *a text on a reader* to analysing the effects of Biblical Literature in general upon readers in general, a move from sequential reading of a narrative to a paragrammatic reading of Biblical Literature.

This thesis seeks to look at the effect of the Prologue upon its reader and so attempts to reverse the tendency to provide metatextual readings by focusing on the effect of sequential disclosure. Such a reading is important because it unmask the primary nature of this text as a narrative unveiling its information gradually or sequentially. This act of revelation provides a rhetorical effect upon its reader and it is this effect which we are aiming to explore. Sequential disclosure, to adapt Staley's terminology, reveals the affective quality of the text.

The above is just as relevant to the preacher and Bible teacher as it is to the scholar. To stay within the bounds of what the biblical writer gives is sound methodological advice. Do not be over anxious to supply from a theological, philosophical, literary, or any other methodological grid what the

writer has not yet given permission to supply. To do so is to rewrite, not to interpret, a text. And, most of the time, we do not even realize we are rewriting rather than exegeting or expounding. In fact, if “sequential disclosure” is valid, the author may be in the very process of deconstructing (or at least suspending) any or all of the reader’s existing “grids.” He does this with unresolved ambiguities introduced and maintained until the author himself supplies the needed clarity in subsequent text. At that point and not before, reader and writer share a new “grid”, now common to both writer and audience. This new understanding has gradually arisen out of the convergence of the reader’s original ideas with the new insights sequentially given by the author. To prematurely introduce material outside of this process “short-circuits” the writer’s strategy of ambiguation, followed by disambiguation, followed by resemanticization of terms with the now uniquely Johannine content. In my view this is a very valuable insight which safeguards exegesis against a subtle form of eisegesis—the surreptitious importation of outside-of-the-context ideas because we have been unwilling to wait for the author to supply final, definitive clarity.

And so having captured the essentials of “sequential disclosure”, it remains to examine Phillips’ application of this “reading strategy” to the interpretation of the Prologue. This is the subject of his sixth chapter.

He begins chapter six with a disclaimer:

...this is a partial exegesis in that it fails to deal comprehensively with issues of text, source, form, redaction, structuralism, deconstruction, and so on.

His treatment, however, is much more thorough than most, if not all, commentaries (recent or otherwise), devoting 86 pages to the exegesis of these eighteen verses. All of the traditional “crux” passages are dealt with, most in depth and with careful attention given to letting the text “speak for itself” sequentially, often pointing out the errors of commentators, journals, monograph writers, and even the lexicographers who slip prematurely into the metatextual/paragrammatic trap.

Hence, the burning question—how consistent is Phillips’ exegesis with his thesis? Does he provide a cogent example

of the “sequential disclosure” reading strategy and does it unfold accurately the meaning of John’s Prologue? In my opinion, he substantially succeeds. The Prologue begins with a multivalent, polysemic lexeme, *logos*, a cosmic but *conceptual* assertion of what has always been from the beginning. It then moves from the conceptual to the *personal* as the author associates *logos*, *theos*, *zōe*, *phōs* in a “matrix” of ideas that he distills climactically into a single persona—Jesus Christ the unique Son of God. He is God incarnate, gracious and truthful revelator of His Father’s full glory. Look for this Person to be made manifest in the story to come.

His treatment of v 1 (pp. 143-55) is a good example of “sequential disclosure” in action. In the exposition of the key lexemes *logos*, *archē* (the beginning), and *theos* the viability of this “reading strategy” shines. Even where most Free Grace readers might disagree with his conclusions, they will probably appreciate at least the full discussions and honest attempts to tackle the exegetical problems the text presents. Two brief examples will suffice.

Following many modern textual critics, Phillips punctuates 1:3c with a full stop after *oude hen*. He thus joins *ho gegonen* with the first clause of v 4, reading *ho gegonen en autō zoē en* (was in Him life). While well aware of the interpretative difficulties (or absurdities?) this option continues to generate, he feels that an objective look at the evidence calls for this conclusion. Recent critical editions of the Greek text and many “modern” translations also concur. As with this particular “crux,” Phillips’s handling of the many other difficulties in the Prologue provides at the very least a good encyclopedic summary of the latest lexical, critical, and exegetical thinking on the point under discussion. As such, they are usually worth consulting before teaching or preaching.

An example of where he seems inconsistent with his own methodology is seen in his handling of the nature of faith in John. To Free Grace readers this will not be a minor point. In fact, Phillips actually becomes a textbook example of the “metatextual /paragrammatic” method he otherwise condemns. In discussing v 7 (pp. 177-78) he doesn’t even mention *pisteusōsin* other than to loosely characterize it as

“belief focused upon the witness [of John the Baptist] about the light.” He does no better in v 12 (p. 193) where he should make a definitive statement. There is simply no lexical, exegetical, or contextual examination of *pisteuō*. Without this he dogmatically, and without offering any evidence states, “... through *continuous belief* (italics mine)” one gains authority to be a child of God. He repeats the same uncritical assertion in connection with v 13, “Having expressed that those who *continue to believe* (italics mine) in the name of the Lord *will be given* (italics mine) authority to become children of God”, and (p. 194) “Entry into a kinship relationship with God is by *persistent belief* (italics mine) in the Logos.” Never mind that this violates the aorist of *edōken* in v 12 as well as the image of birth as an event (not a process!) clearly pictured in v 13. While this error is an egregious one, fortunately such dogmatism is rare elsewhere in this work.

One final point before concluding. Competent scholarly works have a way of unsettling long-settled opinions. In regard to a well known difficulty in v 16, Phillips offers one to try on for size. Many modern commentators view the preposition *anti* as indicating the general idea of accumulation and translate the phrase “*charin anti charitos*” something like “grace upon grace.” Phillips follows evidence put forth by Ruth Edwards in a 1988 *JSNT* article⁹ and concludes that this usage is unsupportable and is never found in the Greek language. Edwards carefully examines the only two or three claimed occurrences of this usage and finds them invalid. I must say I have been persuaded that Edwards’s objections are valid and that some other force must be given to the preposition in this context. Phillips opts for “an exchange relation” and seeks to interpret the phrase in relation to the contrast with the Mosaic Law in v 17. While not agreeing entirely with Phillips or Edwards in just how to translate the phrase, I have been persuaded that the above majority view of *anti* needs rethinking in context.

⁹Ruth Edwards, “Charin Anti Charitos (John 1:16) Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (1988), pp. 3-15.

As stated, I recommend this book to Free Grace readers for two primary reasons: There is a good, in-depth treatment of John's Prologue. It is worth consulting before you preach or teach this material. Second, "sequential disclosure" is a methodology from which much can be gained. Is it an item you'll want to purchase? The price tag (about \$142.00 new from T&T Clark) may discourage purchase; but even if you read a library copy, it is well worth the effort. I found a damaged copy for \$65 and snapped it up. I've not regretted it.