

BOOK REVIEW

Peter M. Phillips, *The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Sequential Reading* (LNTS [JSNTS], 294; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006); xvi + 258 pp. Hbk. US\$130.00.

There has been a considerable amount of attention devoted to literary criticism of the New Testament, and especially John's Gospel. These studies have typically focused on the vertical axis of the text. In his interdisciplinary analysis of the Johannine prologue, Peter Phillips argues that this has led to unconvincing and misguided literary analysis. Following Staley, he suggests that the usual 'paragrammatic' (pp. 22-25) literary readings do not respect the sequential nature of narrative texts. 'Sequential disclosure' is to be preferred—a reading strategy that involves the 'step-by-step unveiling of the narrative world...determined by the sequential nature of the reading process itself' (p. 27). 'Reading...is by nature a linear experience. We read by passing our eyes across a line of words printed across a page' (p. 27).

This sequential literary framework (outlined in Chapter 2 after a short introductory chapter), in conjunction with phenomenological and reader-response criticism, is supplemented with insights from ancient rhetoric (Chapter 3) and sociolinguistics (Chapter 4). For as much emphasis as Phillips places on the linear nature of text processing in the development of his literary-critical method, it is surprising that he does not attempt to explain how orality and auralness in the first century fit into his model, since this is the usual grounds for investigating the vertical literary dimension of ancient texts (e.g. John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* [ETS Studies; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 1998], pp. 1-60). He never raises the question whether the 'printed page' (p. 27) might not have been the primary medium of communication within the Johannine community, which comes as a shock given the emphasis on this theme in contemporary New Testament studies. The chapter on rhetoric is helpful and penetrating in its criticisms of previous attempts to

structure the prologue based on vertical literary features, but confusing in its exposition and application of rhetorical theory. Phillips rightly observes that if the author of the Johannine prologue was attempting to create the kind of complex chiasm suggested by many, ‘one wonders why...he did not do a better job’ (p. 49). Yet his attempt to incorporate ancient rhetoric into his development of a ‘sequential reading strategy’ is equally unconvincing. The climactic structure he posits based on *repetitio* (pp. 46-47), for example, is no clearer than the concentric structures he criticizes. It is also questionable whether such a stair-step structure is consistent with a strictly linear understanding of text processing—a notion open to question on linguistic grounds; modern studies recognize paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes in discourse. And while Peterson acknowledges that John is not a rhetorical speech and admits of only informal rhetorical analysis, he nevertheless draws many of his analytic categories from the ancient handbooks. Although some of the material is more relevant to the domain of social scientific criticism (e.g. the treatment of group theory, pp. 69-71), the chapter on sociolinguistics is the strongest methodologically and provides a brief but much-needed exploration of the implications of sociolinguistics for New Testament interpretation.

Roughly one third of the book recounts and evaluates research on the source and intertextual parallels for λόγος in the prologue (though in his own analysis Phillips is concerned with how the author uses λόγος to create a sense of community identity, p. 73). The selection of material avoids many of the fallacies of traditional diachronic analysis, yet it also lacks consistent reference to the insights of modern lexical semantic theory. The chapter sets out to provide a comprehensive examination of (seemingly) every possible parallel in the Hellenistic period in order to dismiss each text or set of texts as an unlikely intertext for the prologue. In the process, Phillips offers several fair criticisms of previous studies. He begins with the standard lexicons’ suggestions (LSJ, BAGD and Louw and Nida) that while λόγος may have a variety of meanings in other contexts, a specialized meaning is required in the Johannine prologue. Phillips argues that this may enforce ‘a specific intertextuality upon the text, a meaning from the world of the critic rather than the world of the reader... Such highly specialized readings demand much of the reader, suggesting either a very sophisticated readership or a readership that has come to know the gospel and its thought-world very well’ (p. 79). Therefore, his warning

that when we read the prologue ‘we need to be careful not to read the text in the light of later theological developments’ is welcome, especially when dealing with a text so enshrined in orthodoxy. The evaluation of the use of λόγος in the Synoptics and Johannine material as ‘message’ or ‘teaching’ (never as a person) further highlights the technical nature of the meaning required in John 1. While Phillips covers an impressive body of Hellenistic and Jewish literature, one wonders whether such an extensive treatment of modern research was required to support his conclusion that John uses λόγος to echo a variety of ancient traditions instead of borrowing intratextually from a single source or set of sources (pp. 140-41)—a conclusion which is, of course, not entirely novel. It is also surprising that such a sizable portion of his application draws very little from the methodological framework outlined in the first four chapters of the book.

The final, exegetical chapter (Chapter 6), however, is a bit more successful at integrating the method in its analysis. Phillips moves through the prologue ‘sequentially’ (i.e. word by word, phrase by phrase) attempting to reconstruct a reading that represents the way the text would have been read by the intended reader while seeking to distinguish these insights from various impositions on the real reader found in the standard lexicons and commentaries. He tries to capture how the intended reader would have understood the prologue when she read it for the first time. Various exegetical and lexicographical works are criticized along the way. Louw and Nida, for example, are accused of taking into account ‘all of the intertextual and metatextual evidence gathered over subsequent generations of scholarship and then read[ing] their conclusions back into the Johanne text’ in their suggested translations of ἐν ἀρχῇ in Jn 1.1: ‘in the beginning’, ‘before the world was created’, or ‘at a time in the past when there was nothing’ (p. 146). However, far from offering an unchecked imposition of theology upon the text, Louw and Nida’s suggestions reflect a dynamic-equivalence translation philosophy that seeks to do justice to what they perceive to be the full range of semantic nuances within the text. The first suggestion is fairly formal in its representation of the language while the second and third provide more interpretive alternatives. This is not the place to enter a debate on translation philosophy, but a distinction should be maintained between imposing one’s theology upon the text and attempting to accurately represent the original language in a receptor language by using fuller expression—whether that attempt is

successful is another issue. Moreover, when Phillips provides his own reading based on a re-reading of ‘the text in the light of the new Johannine anti-language, learned through the reading process’ (p. 147), his interpretation of ἄρχή is strikingly similar to the second and third translations suggested by Louw and Nida: ‘the specific beginning of all things, before creation, before anything—the “eternity” where God and the Logos co-exist’ (p. 147). What hinders us from allowing Louw and Nida to have based their suggestions on a re-reading of the Gospel in light of its discourse-linguistic context? Phillips’s point throughout his analysis seems to be that we should try to understand the Gospel from the perspective of the intended reader, reading it for the first time. But this cannot be a serious criticism of commentaries and lexicons since meanings are disambiguated as the reading process continues and even further upon re-reading—which Phillips acknowledges. Certainly commentators and lexicographers should take these factors into consideration in their analysis.

Although Phillips’s sequential approach provides several helpful windows into the text, in many places it slips into a more traditional mode of analysis that looks more like an exegetical commentary than a ‘literary reading’. He includes several word studies (e.g. ἐγένετο, pp. 158-61), comments on the possible functions of the preposition according to the standard grammars (pp. 150-51) and the uses of διὰ with the genitive (pp. 157-58), gives a fairly typical analysis of the predicate nominative, heavily dependent on Wallace (pp. 153-54), and includes a very primitive discussion of the aorist in terms of *Aktionsart* (p. 173—though he references a standard work on aspect, it is not clear that the implications are fully grasped) and temporality (p. 188). Verse 6 is dealt with entirely in light of Greco-Roman and Jewish backgrounds (pp. 175-76). He weighs various syntactical options according to the commentaries (pp. 179-82), discusses the Johannine uses of κόσμος (pp. 183-85), does a study of the morphology and meaning of μονογενής (pp. 203-205), gives various alternatives in commentaries for the adjectival phrase in v. 14 (p. 205), and an analysis of the Semitic background of χάρις (pp. 206-207) and ἀλήθεια (pp. 207-208), explains the various functions of ἀντί + the genitive in the standard lexicons (pp. 211-14), and even weighs in on text-critical discussions (p. 217). When Phillips can establish a clear connection between this data and the literary reading he perpetuates, these types of considerations may be justified to some degree. For example, in his

treatment of adjectival modification in v. 14 (p. 205), he is able to draw on his previous literary analysis to argue for his own reading of the text. However, this is not typically the case. For the most part, his analysis done along more traditional lines seems to be put forward for its own sake. Perhaps this is due to the 'sequential' nature of the reading he wishes to pursue. But if this is the case, it seems that the line between a 'literary reading' and a traditional exegetical commentary has been significantly blurred in that much of the ground he covers has already been thoroughly addressed in traditional analysis.

Undoubtedly, Phillips's reading offers many fresh insights as well. Perhaps the most valuable is his emphasis on disambiguation in the reading process. As the reader moves through the text, various referents are disclosed or further revealed to the reader. The prologue begins with the Logos as an abstract, ambiguous concept with a wide range of possible meanings. Then the Logos is resemanticized as God, then later as life and light. Finally, in the climax of the prologue, the Logos-God-life-light matrix is given a name, Jesus (v. 17). Phillips's analysis highlights the narrative movements of the text as it progressively discloses and disambiguates the identity of the Logos by 'sequential disclosure'. His reading also helps reveal the strategy of the author in moving from abstract to specific concepts and finally naming the Logos: 'a conscious attempt to speak in a different register, to speak someone else's language' (p. 226). The evangelist seeks to bring a wide range of Hellenistic readers into his narrative world by avoiding the use of exclusively Jewish and Christian language.

Although Phillips's monograph does not draw on the most recent developments in literary criticism, often fails to make a systematic connection between theory and practice and falls into a very traditional mode of exegesis at times, his insights into the narrative movements and rhetorical strategy of the Johannine prologue are valuable and worthy of serious consideration. His criticisms of vertically oriented literary criticism are pertinent and convincing. These concerns raised by *The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel*, as well as its insight into the Johannine agenda, establish it as a significant contribution to the continually expanding corpus of literary criticism in biblical studies.

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