

# Explosive Book Disputes Authorship of John's Gospel Forceful Rationale Draws Fire from Scholars, Acclaim from Laity

By: Rick Kern

A stunning but potentially credible biblical challenge to the authorship of the fourth gospel has some scholars slightly off balance and perhaps somewhat indignant in their role as guardians of the truth. The commotion has been inspired by a well-reasoned apologetic framed as a "whodunit" entitled, "The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved," by Texas author, Jim Phillips.

The seven-chapter, 145-page book is an easy read that is loosely divided into two sections. The first, breaching tradition and extra-biblical scholarship, makes a case against the renowned "Apostle John, son of Zebedee" as the beloved disciple who penned what has been celebrated as the simplest, yet most profound of the gospel narratives. Based exclusively upon direct biblical evidence, the premise of the book flies in the face of convention and convenes an inspirational challenge for the reader to consider the facts of the case and, like an impaneled juror, decide whether the evidence adequately proves "beyond a reasonable doubt" that the Apostle John and the unnamed author of the fourth gospel were two different individuals. The remainder of the enlightening chronicle reveals the alleged identity of the gospel's author based upon circumstantial, but again, strictly biblical evidence, therefore reducing the standard of proof to a "preponderance of the evidence." Notwithstanding, the reader is invited to determine whether the biblical rationale presented is credible and compelling enough to sufficiently prove that the Apostle John could not have written the manuscript that has inherited his name.

While the book is rich in scriptural corroboration, mounting considerable biblical support for Phillips' position, it has still landed with a muted thud among scholars nation-wide and Phillips has no illusions about the lingering struggle he faces for critical acclaim (though that is not his foremost objective). He has doggedly approached several distinguished seminaries, prominent ministries and noted spiritual leaders that feature a national platform, relentlessly pursuing their honest critique as opposed to their endorsement. The man is driven by the fear of God and desperately wants to do what is right, not just be right. Thus, he has virtually pleaded for Christianity's elite to tender even one verse of scripture that supports the Apostle John as the identity of the author of the fourth gospel. "I have had seminary professors, ministers and radio show hosts cite everything but the Bible to support their teaching about this," Phillips noted. "Nobody can cite even one verse that might suggest that their teaching is correct, or conversely, one verse that my conclusions aren't biblically accurate."

Phillips has confined his supporting documentation exclusively to the Bible because he feels that scripture is the solitary standard of truth credentialed by God. In addition, most of the scholars he has confronted are resolute in their position that the Bible teaches the fourth gospel was penned by the Apostle John. And though he refuses to discount extra-biblical references out-of-hand, he is convinced that the answer to the question of the fourth gospel's authorship has been hiding in plain sight within the scripture itself and stresses that if we allege something is scriptural, we should be able to find it in the Bible.

"I'm sure you'd agree that no one should be teaching that something is Biblically true if it turns out that they cannot cite even one verse of scripture in support of their teaching," he asserts. "And while we should always be willing to consider extra-biblical sources of information, no extra-biblical evidence can be allowed to trump the inspired and infallible evidence that is revealed within the text of the scriptures."

According to Phillips, not only is it a common misconception that the Bible supports the authorship of the Apostle John as the writer of the fourth gospel, but evidence to the contrary is plentiful. In one of many calls to national radio broadcasts produced by prominent Christian leaders, Phillips enjoyed a vigorous exchange of ideas on the matter with the host. The net effect was that the Bible teacher (a man of considerable influence and renown) asserted that there were “lots of verses” that teach John’s authorship and he vowed to produce them on the air. Phillips is still waiting.

It is not an isolated incident but rather, an echo of multiplied encounters that tend to fuel decidedly visceral reactions from the scholarly quarter of the nation’s spiritual hierarchy. “Most seem uncomfortable that this question would even be asked,” Phillips laments. “And, unfortunately, they seem to want to ignore the fact that the Bible might actually teach something that they disagree with and would prove embarrassing to them.”

The controversy stems from the apparent lack of “biblical” evidence for the Apostle John’s authorship of the fourth gospel strong enough to mount a respectable challenge to Phillips’ premise. And, if he is to be believed, there is not a single verse that can be marshaled in support of it at all. However, both intellectual and ignorant alike sincerely hold to what may turn out to be a very flawed position supportable largely by extra-biblical documentation alone and animated primarily by tradition or legend.

Thus, in Phillips’ view, if there is extra-biblical evidence theoretically endorsing John’s authorship, but biblical evidence that controverts it, then the voice of the scripture must be heeded, end of argument. Ironically, any Bible teacher worth his or her salt would probably say as much. “Their beef ought to be with those who have added to God’s word – both those who added the identity of John in the label of the gospel as well as those who have continued to teach it as being scripturally true even though there is no scriptural basis,” he explains. “It doesn’t matter that those who teach this are sincere in their belief that this is true any more than those who sincerely believed that the earth was flat and therefore claimed that was true. Those who teach the ‘John identity theory’ do so because this is what they have been taught, not because there is any biblical basis for doing so.”

Responses to Phillips’ stance by contemporary power-brokers throughout the Kingdom of God have been all over the map but predominantly evasive. One woman, a highly influential national figure with an exceptionally large following was initially very supportive describing the book as “fascinating and well researched and thought out.” She asked for permission to forward the volume to a friend whom she described as “one of the world’s most respected apologists” and “an author of over 40 books.” The man in question, while gracious, felt that there was unanimous support for John’s authorship and suggested that a professor of New Testament at a prominent seminary would be in a better position to critique the book than he is.

The absence of direct scriptural support has forced those in academic circles to default to external sources to brace the position of John’s authorship. Enriching it with a mixed bag of historical credentials such as writings from the early church fathers or forensic examinations of “writing style,” some have suggested that John’s authorship of the fourth gospel is well established, the only question being, is it John the son of Zebedee or a different John.

This is a common impasse Phillips finds himself facing. He is passionately pursuing evaluation and correction from a biblical position and in earnest about being shown where his conclusions are unscriptural. However, he is constantly being redirected to the endorsement of a noted scholar or theologian. For example, the senior pastor of one of the most celebrated and renowned churches

in American history was given a copy of "The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved" by Phillips' sister and replied: "I have read it and I think his argument is convincing. I'd really like, however, for some noted scholar to agree that it is convincing and endorse it." In deference to academic savvy and tradition, Phillips has been summarily dismissed from serious appraisal, (all he is asking), by others in similar positions of spiritual authority the same way.

"It seems that many scholars tend to start with the premise that the traditional view, (suggesting that theirs and their peers' teachings), cannot be wrong," says Phillips. "And that therefore, any challenge to the historical position does not deserve any serious consideration." What Phillips deems as excessive regard for extra-biblical scholarship and too little for the Bible itself, compounded by the fact that so many capable spiritual leaders will not give him the courtesy of an honest and thorough Godly review with corresponding feedback, presents Phillips with a chronic puzzle. "Should the general public really study the Bible," he wonders tongue in cheek? "If the best the public can hope for is what scholars have already discovered, then shouldn't people skip the Bible and just read the writings of scholars so they won't risk misunderstanding the scriptures?"

Though numerous organizations have, according to Phillips, taken a dim view of his assertions and politely, but spiritually refused to give him the time of day, he is not wholly on his own. Among the "heavy-hitters" that have authorized the time and effort to bluntly weigh the merits of his case is the Southwest Radio Church (SWRC). A national ministry founded in 1933 by Dr. E.F. Weber, SWRC is one of the oldest daily religious programs on the air. It is heard on over one hundred stations across the United States and Canada as well as throughout the world via short wave radio. The Oklahoma based, multifaceted evangelical powerhouse is instructional, evangelistic, missionary and prophetic in purpose, and continues to enjoy the enduring blessings of God across the globe. The group was so enamored with "The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved," that it dedicated a full half-hour radio broadcast to interviewing Phillips and promoting his findings.

To be sure, their support is a big deal, countering their colleagues' inaction and inadvertently leading the charge to validate Phillips' conclusions. But curiously, as sporadic as its critical acclaim is among biblical scholars, theologians and spiritual heavyweights, the book has generated a groundswell of interest and spawned a burgeoning glut of support among "everyday people." Perhaps it is because the layperson has much less to lose by honestly considering its findings, whereas those in the public eye have very brittle reputations to protect. Additionally, those with a high profile often shoulder a keenly felt sense of responsibility for the influence granted them, rightly regarding it as a sacred trust from God. At least one Distinguished Professor of New Testament from a major seminary has taken Phillips seriously enough to mount a lengthy and thoughtful rebuttal to his findings as well as challenging his attitude.

Unfortunately, he is the exception rather than the rule, far too many will not even weigh the merits of the case much less render a verdict. And while Phillips is honestly grateful for the input, he needs a much larger jury-pool to evaluate the virtues (or vices) of his biblical research. Furthermore, he has been aghast to discover that many of those he had considerable respect for because of their public love for truth, insightful teachings and seemingly fearless pledge to defend "the faith once delivered to the saints," appear much too frightened of his book to engage him in robust debate and rebuke his conclusions.

Regardless, Phillips has been warmly welcomed and flooded with correspondence from laymen who have been dramatically inspired or enlightened by his work with comments ranging from the poignant to the scholarly. The upshot is that readers everywhere are plunging into the scriptures and emerging with a deeper, more vivid faith in Christ, and that is hard for even seasoned Ph.D.'s to take issue with. "It (Phillip's book) has shown me that my relationship with Jesus will never

reach a pinnacle, there will always be new layers and depth to His greatness and love,” declared one reader, “I thoroughly enjoyed the journey your book took me on...”

Another woman who was deeply moved wrote, “I have never ‘starred’ so many portions of anything I’ve ever read before! I felt as if my eyes had been restored to sight, that I had never really seen before.” And an intellectually stirred enthusiast observed, “It solves a two thousand year old biblical mystery, ‘who authored the fourth Gospel.’ Honest commentaries own up to the fact that there is no factual data to support the assertion that the Apostle John wrote the fourth Gospel.”

An attorney, went as far as to pen a letter of endorsement to her friends saying, “This work of extraordinary and detailed biblical scholarship, just published, is a compelling case for clearly identifying who in fact wrote the “Gospel of John.” It DOES NOT QUESTION THE AUTHENTICITY of GOD’S WORD in any respect. In fact, it uses the information EXCLUSIVELY from the BIBLE ITSELF to prove its extraordinary thesis (upper-case letters, hers).”

Her sentiments were echoed by a mechanical engineer who spearheaded his impressions with, “In a general sense, Phillips has a very plausible theory that is fairly well supported.”

Unlike “truths,” which can be subject to the erroneous whims of men, “truth” is much more fickle and has an enduring quality that eclipses our attempts to assault or defend, enrich or impoverish, manipulate or adore it. And Phillips at least, is eager to have his work “rightly divided” by those with enough fidelity to the truth to risk their reputation, carefully scrutinize the evidence and be true to what is true whether his book rises or falls. Like many of his detractors, he is a man of principle and if convinced that he is in error, would change his direction between heartbeats. All he really wants is for those who say that they love the truth, that they have dedicated their lives to defending the truth and that they walk in truth – to put their muscle where their mouth is.

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