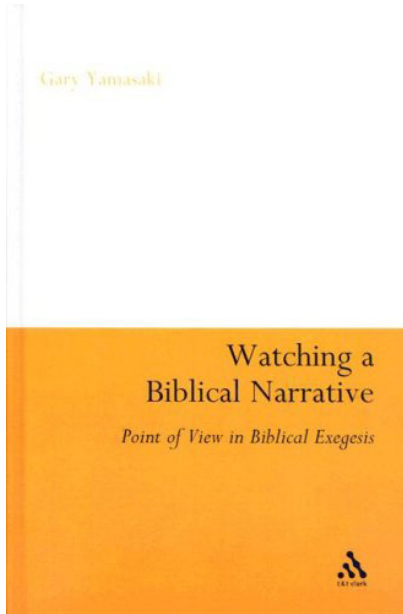


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Yamasaki, Gary

***Watching a Biblical Narrative: Point of View in
Biblical Exegesis***

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This book emerges out of the conviction that the issue of point of view is central to modern literary studies as practiced by secular critics but that most biblical scholars who have adopted secular literary criticism for their study of the Old or New Testaments do not actually understand point of view and those who do possess an accurate grasp of point-of-view methodology have generally failed to develop the significant exegetical possibilities of point of view for the interpretation of the biblical text. Thus, Yamasaki “seeks to develop a methodology for analyzing point of view that provides biblical scholars with a tool that will enable them not only to recognize point-of-view moves in a passage of biblical narrative, but also to discern the significance of these moves for the interpretation of the passage” (3). Accordingly, Yamasaki undertakes the ambitious attempt to offer “the first complete guide to point of view for biblical exegetes ... for the purpose of supplying what amounts of a compendium of point-of-view studies on biblical narratives” (3). Yamasaki hopes that biblical scholars will responsibly and effectively incorporate point-of-view analysis alongside linguistic, historical, and sociological considerations in their exegesis of the text.

Yamasaki begins with a careful analysis of discussions of point of view by a select number of secular literary critics from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the present time,

with emphasis on the more recent studies by Uspensky (1970), Genette (1972), Chatman (1978), and Stanzel (1984). Yamasaki correctly notes that Uspensky's program is the most comprehensive and should therefore serve as the general framework for our understanding of point of view, with insights from these other theoreticians incorporated into the general framework. But it is a difficult task to correlate the work of these four literary critics, whose conceptions of point of view differ markedly, and Yamasaki is to be congratulated for skillfully and successfully integrating these diverse approaches.

Yamasaki next explores ways in which scholars have analyzed linguistic features, that is, lexical, inflectional, and syntactical ones, so as to assist in the identification of point-of-view. Yamasaki here attempts "to provide a systematic treatment of the linguistic issues related to the production of point of view" (65). But Yamasaki admits that discussions of the linguistic indicators of point of view are few and generally brief. Further, the reader will recognize that some of the claims for linguistic indicators of point of view are less compelling than others. Consequently, one senses that this is an area that begs for further research and will require much fuller exploration before anything like a "systematic treatment" is possible.

Having focused thus far on the work of secular literary critics, Yamasaki analyzes the use of point of view on the part of biblical scholars. He concludes that most New Testament narrative critics fail to understand key aspects of point of view as set forth by Uspensky. Whereas Uspensky understands point of view as the perspective that the narrator invites the implied reader to adopt toward the events or characters of the story, New Testament scholars tend to construe point of view as the ideological perspective of the text, essentially identifying it with the theology of the text. Accordingly, these scholars fail to utilize, or even to recognize, the richness of point of view and the robust possibilities of point of view for biblical interpretation. In Yamasaki's estimation, Old Testament narrative critics evidence a more accurate and complete understanding of point of view than do their New Testament counterparts, but even biblical scholars who demonstrate an apt comprehension of point of view do not discuss point of view in a systematic way, nor do they draw out the full exegetical possibilities of point of view.

To address this deficiency, Yamasaki presents his methodology for analyzing point of view. He employs as his general categories the five planes of point of view set forth by Uspensky (along with a sixth, borrowed from Sternberg) and fills out the discussion of each by exploring the significance of linguistic indicators and of insights from Genette, Chatman, and Stanzel. In the process, Yamasaki attempts to demonstrate by examples from biblical passages the exegetical payoff of this point-of-view analysis. But here the results tend to be disappointing, for they pertain more to amorphous conclusions about reader-impact than to a grasp of the precise sense of the communicated meaning of the

text. Thus, Yamasaki posits that point of view illumines the “we-sections” of the book of Acts in the following way: “Assuming for the sake of argument that the author of Acts was indeed a participant in some of the events recorded in the book, his choice between using the first person versus using the third person in reporting those events could have been dictated by whether the impact he wanted to make with any given episode was more personal and emotional, or objective and authoritative” (155). In other words, the narrator uses the first-person point of view to provide a “sense of adventure.” Of course, one might grant that this discussion at least offers an explanation of the presence of the “we-sections.” But when Yamasaki argues that the narrator has assumed the phraseological point of view of the character of Martha in Luke 10:38–42 by referring, as Martha does, to Jesus as “Lord,” Yamasaki draws out the significance by telling us only that “the audience is led from viewing the events from the vantage point of the narrator to viewing them from the vantage point among the characters, specifically, from the vantage point of Martha, a member of the character group for whom ‘Lord’ is a phraseological trait” (173). Sometimes the textual discussion is simply vapid, as when Yamasaki attempts to demonstrate that the use of “there” in Matt 2:14–15, 22 indicates that the narrator’s spatial position shifts from Bethlehem to Egypt.

At other times the examples suggest that Yamasaki may stretch the exegetical significance of his point-of-view analysis and thereby engage in overinterpretation. Thus, merely on the basis of the considerations that in the Greek sentence of Acts 15:36 Luke mentions Barnabas before Paul and that Luke describes Barnabas positively in Acts 11:24, Yamasaki concludes that Luke agrees with Barnabas rather than Paul in their contention over John Mark.

Therefore, readers may come away from this methodological discussion suspicious that Yamasaki’s detailed and complex point-of-view analysis may not offer immediate and compelling exegetical results. Unfortunately, this suspicion is confirmed by Yamasaki’s final chapter in which he applies his methodology to the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10. This chapter presents an excellent demonstration of point-of-view analysis directed toward a specific biblical passage. But the exegetical payoff is disappointing, for after fifteen pages of analysis we are told that the point of interpretive significance is that “though these words of salvation [in 19:9] are directed toward Zacchaeus, the audience experiences them as directed toward itself as well” (203). In the final analysis, then, one may be forgiven for wondering if all this analytical effort is worth so little exegetical fruit.

Yamasaki has rendered a significant service by clarifying the concept of point of view, by identifying the deficiencies of point-of-view analysis on the part of biblical literary critics, and by insisting on the necessity of developing a specific process for analyzing point of view in biblical passages. But the exegetical thinness of Yamasaki’s own process indicates

that much more work remains to be done in this potentially fruitful enterprise. Yamasaki has here spoken the first word on this subject, but by no means the last.