

Perspective Criticism: An Emerging Methodology for Analyzing Biblical Narrative

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Perspective Criticism is a methodology for uncovering the interpretative significance of point-of-view strategies utilized in biblical narrative material. This article traces its recent emergence from Narrative Criticism, highlighting the intriguing suggestion that point-of-view crafting has the capacity to prompt readers to empathize with particular characters, even negative ones. An overview is provided of narrative devices that impact the point-of-view crafting in biblical stories, and this is followed by a perspective-critical treatment of Genesis 22:1-19, an analysis that results in a new interpretation of this account of God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Keywords: perspective criticism, Genesis, Abraham, Isaac, point of view

It is well known that the discipline of Narrative Criticism emerged four decades ago and has made a significant impact on the way biblical narrative material has been conceptualized ever since. Not so widely known has been a particular stream of work within the discipline focused on the narrative dynamic of *point of view*. This stream started a decade ago, and it has charted an analytical trajectory distinct from that characterizing the mainstream of narrative-critical studies, a trajectory that has resulted in the emergence of a new biblical-studies discipline called *Perspective Criticism*. The present work lays out the factors that led to the emergence of this new approach to point-of-view crafting in biblical narrative, outlines key components of this new approach, and provides a perspective-critical analysis of a biblical text as an illustration of the methodology.

The Birth of Perspective Criticism

During the mid-1970s, some members of the Mark Group of the Society of Biblical Literature caught a vision for attempting to analyze the narrative

material of the Gospel of Mark in the same way literary critics analyze modern novels. The first published work to emerge from this new approach to Mark appeared in 1978, and it tackled the literary concept of point of view.¹

Author Norman Petersen's motivation for focusing on the point-of-view crafting in Mark begins to become clear about one-third of the way into the article where an issue is raised: whether the Gospel of Mark as a whole qualifies as a narrative or is simply a redacted collection of many short narratives.² In addressing this issue, Petersen looks to the point-of-view crafting of Mark, reasoning that a consistency of points of view throughout the whole Gospel would constitute evidence that Mark is indeed a single discrete narrative.³

For the purposes of undertaking his analysis of Mark's narrative, Petersen adopts Boris Uspensky's conceptualization of point of view that envisions point of view as functioning on five planes in a literary work: ideological, psychological, phraseological, spatial, and temporal.⁴ Petersen's analysis of these five planes in Mark leads him to conclude that there does exist a consistency of point of view throughout Mark's Gospel. Unfortunately, his work with Uspensky's planes reflects misunderstandings of what Uspensky was trying to convey, some of them quite serious.⁵

For our purposes, Petersen's work is more significant for what it does not do than for what it actually does. Petersen's focus is on analyzing the point-of-view crafting in Mark in the service of addressing whether this Gospel qualifies as a narrative or not. What Petersen's work does not do is address the more basic issue of how Mark's point-of-view crafting might be significant to *the interpretation of Mark's story*. This more basic issue did not attract much attention as the narrative-critical enterprise picked up momentum as it entered the 1980s; rather, it was a *narratological* approach to literary studies that became characteristic of the enterprise. As pointed out earlier, Uspensky created a five-category typology to provide a picture of the various kinds of point-of-view moves found in literary texts. Typologies such as this are helpful for instructional purposes, for each one sets out in a simple list all the possible options available to an author for a given literary component, with each option supplemented with an example text from a prominent literary work to illustrate the option. Uspensky,

¹ Norman R. Petersen, "'Point of View' in Mark's Narrative," *Semeia* 12 (1978): 97-121.

² *Ibid.*, 102-103.

³ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

⁴ Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, trans. Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig (Berkeley: University of California, 1973).

⁵ For a critique of Petersen's treatment of Uspensky, see Gary Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative: Point of View in Biblical Exegesis* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 68-74.

writing in Russian, draws almost all of his example texts from Russian literary works.

As helpful as typologies can be, however, their utility goes only so far. While they do provide clear pictures of the range of options available for any given literary device, they do not provide any guidance on how the use of one option over another *makes a difference to how the text is to be interpreted*. Identifying that a literary move belongs to one category as opposed to another relates more to the *quality* of the writing, for it allows the critic to adjudge whether that move "works" better in a particular context than the other possible moves available to the author. This is an issue important to literary critics.

This, however, is not a major issue among biblical scholars. Rather, their interest lies more in the interpretations that emerge out of analyses of texts. With familiar literary components such as "plot" and "character," at least some interpretive work on the narratives of biblical literature is possible even without guidance from literary critics on the interpretive significance of the various types of plot or character moves. Such, however, is not the case with the literary concept of "point of view," which is not a part of common parlance in the way "plot" and "character" are.

One biblical narrative critic who has been able to provide a cogent explanation of the literary concept of point of view is Old Testament scholar Adele Berlin. She writes, "In a [movie] . . . the story is filtered through the perspective of the camera eye. . . . It constantly shifts perspective, showing the action from different angles. The viewer's perspective is both expanded and controlled by the camera; he can see the action from many directions and perspectives, but can see only what the camera shows him. Biblical narrative, like most modern prose narrative, narrates like film. The narrator is the camera eye; we 'see' the story through what he presents."⁶

Berlin goes on to point out instances in Old Testament narrative texts where point-of-view moves are used to create ambiguity, irony, and even humor in biblical stories, and this is helpful for demonstrating the narrative artistry of the biblical authors. However, left unaddressed is the issue of whether analysis of a passage's point-of-view crafting might have the capacity of unearthing an understanding of the passage's *meaning* not yet uncovered by any of the existing biblical interpretive methodologies.

Perspective Criticism, emerging out of Narrative Criticism, is a methodology capable of doing just that. Its emergence is similar to that of

⁶ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 44.

Redaction Criticism, which emerged out of Source Criticism to unearth layers of meaning not yet uncovered. Up to the late 1940s, New Testament source critics had spent decades working out various hypotheses on possible relationships among the Gospels. Proceeding from the assumption that similarities between the wordings of different Gospels' versions of the same passage were the result of borrowing, their work focused on comparing the wordings of parallel passages in an attempt to determine the direction of the borrowing, work that had no reason to address the meaning issuing forth from the words they were examining.

In the late 1940s, however, Günther Bornkamm, Willi Marxsen, and Hans Conzelmann began to shift the focus away from the nature of the borrowing that had taken place toward the *interpretive implications* of the acts of borrowing. This new work is still source-critical in nature in that it deals with how later Gospel writers were using their source material. However, it took Source Criticism to a new level, a level at which the acts of borrowing are examined for possible theological motivations behind the redactional changes, thus uncovering a layer of meaning that had always been there but remained hidden for lack of an interpretive tool capable of discovering it. This orientation toward the interpretive implications of source-critical research proved a significant enough distinction to justify the emergence of Redaction Criticism as a new discipline in its own right.

Now, several decades into the practice of Narrative Criticism, a similar dynamic appears to be occurring. Up until a few years ago, narrative-critical work had not been exploring how analysis of the narrative components of biblical passages might unearth meanings that have always been there but have not yet been uncovered. Recent research into the literary concept of point of view has revealed a narrative dynamic with the potential of doing just that, thus elevating the study of biblical narrative to a new level. And it is suggested that this new initiative—Perspective Criticism—be considered a new discipline in its own right.

The genesis of the interpretation-oriented approach to point-of-view studies highlighted in the present work can be traced back to a passing remark by New Testament narrative critic Janice Capel Anderson in her 1994 *Matthew's Narrative Web*. After explaining Uspensky's five-plane typology of point of view, Anderson provides the spatial-plane observation that the Matthean narrator establishes a spatial alignment with the character Jesus, and then asserts:

The colloquial expression, 'Walk a mile in my shoes' summarizes it best. When combined with sympathetic inside views the spatial alignment of the point of view of an implied author-narrator and a character is powerful. It can even lead the implied reader to adopt the ideological viewpoint of a murderer rather than a

victim. *If the reader views a murder scene through the eyes of the murderer, he or she is more likely to identify with the murderer than the victim.*⁷

Here, Anderson makes the provocative suggestion that point-of-view crafting has the capacity of having readers identify with a particular character over against the other characters, even a character who is negatively characterized.

On this point, Anderson cites an analysis by literary critic Wayne Booth of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Booth notes that in the composition of this novel, Austen faces a problem. On the one hand, she wants the story to be a comedy, with the title character's tendency for imposing herself into the lives of those around her (often to their grave detriment) constituting the main source of comedic moments. On the other hand, Austen also wants her readers to be pulling for Emma to find happiness in the end, a goal made difficult by the ruin she almost brings upon herself and her friends, which has the effect of distancing the readers from her. Booth suggests that Austen is able to display Emma's faults and still retain the reader's empathy for her by presenting most of the story through Emma's eyes, that is, by leading the readers to experience the story through Emma's point of view.⁸

The idea presented here by Booth finds corroboration in the world of film in the cinematic genre of "anti-hero." Films of this genre are characterized by protagonists who are portrayed with traits usually associated with villains, yet these characters elicit the empathy of viewers despite their negative characterization. Consider, for example, the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), the account of a pair of bank/train robbers in the Wild West of the 1890s. Why is it that when they become cornered by a posse of law enforcement officers, viewers side with the "bad guys" to escape, as opposed to siding with the "good guys" to capture them? It is because the point-of-view crafting of the movie has the viewers experiencing the story through the point of view of the outlaws, and this has the effect of having us side with them.

With regard to the study of biblical narrative material, the discovery of this point-of-view dynamic constitutes a breakthrough in that it represents a component of point-of-view crafting that really does have interpretive implications. If experiencing events through the point of view of a particular character has the effect of having readers come to identify with, and thus side with, that character, then point-of-view crafting can be seen as a source of

⁷ Janice Capel Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative Web: Over, and Over, and Over Again* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 67 (emphasis added).

⁸ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 244-45.

evaluative guidance, a means by which a storyteller can guide readers' evaluation of characters.

The Contours of Perspective Criticism

The foregoing provided only a skeletal sketch of the nature of point of view, and this section will put some flesh on those bones by covering a number of the literary moves involved in point-of-view crafting in narrative material. This narratological treatment of point of view provides the tools needed for an actual point-of-view analysis of Gen. 22:1-19 to follow. The typology utilized here is actually a hybrid, using Uspensky's five-plane categorization as a base, but adding a sixth from the work of Meir Sternberg that covers an aspect of point-of-view crafting not provided with a plane of its own in Uspensky's typology.⁹

It should be noted that these six planes of point of view reflect scholarly thinking on the *crafting of the modern novel*, the context in which the concept of "point of view" was invented. The fact that this concept did not exist in biblical times does not mean that point-of-view crafting did not exist then. Any story produced in any era has its audience experience the events presented from one point of view or another, though the literary moves used to do so were not recognized as "point-of-view" moves until the nineteenth century. Having said that, it is necessary to add that the *style* of point-of-view crafting in modern literature differs from that in biblical literature. Two categories of point-of-view moves significant in modern literature hold little significance in biblical literature; these two will not receive coverage in the following to allow the focus of the present work to remain on the four that are pertinent in the study of point of view in biblical narrative material.¹⁰

Psychological Plane

As mentioned earlier, one category of point-of-view dynamics has to do with whether the readers' angle of viewing keeps them entirely on the outside of a character, or allows access into the character's inner life—that is, viewing from the position of a mere *bystander* versus from a position *inside the head of the character*—and these dynamics belong to the psychological plane of point of

⁹ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1987), 129-52.

¹⁰ For detailed coverage of all six planes, see Gary Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism: Point of View and Evaluative Guidance in Biblical Narrative* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 18-105.

view. The difference between these two experiences is obvious. Readers experiencing the action of a scene as though they are inside the head of a character, looking out through his or her eyes, provides them with a view of the action as through the character's point of view. On the other hand, readers viewing the action from the position of a mere bystander are seeing the action as through an objective point of view where the character is a mere object involved in the action.

Almost all analysis on this plane involves searching the text for indications of perceptions or feelings experienced by the characters, that is, "inside views." The thinking here is that any time readers become aware of some inner experience of a character, they cease to be mere objective observers of the character, for mere observers are not privy to the perceptions or feelings the character is experiencing. The fact the readers have become aware of such inner experiences means they have been transported by the storyteller to a position on the inside of the character, the only position from which the character's inner experiences are perceivable. And once inside the character, the readers then begin to view the action as the character views it, that is, as through the character's point of view.

Spotting most indicators of perception or feeling on the part of a character is straightforward. For example, when the Matthean narrator says, "[Jesus] *saw* the Spirit of God descending" (Matt. 3:16), it is clear that the readers are intended to imagine they are looking out through Jesus' eyes at the Spirit of God coming down. Compare that to the Lukan narrator's reference to what Jesus does immediately following Peter's third denial and the cock crowing: "The Lord turned and *looked at* Peter" (Luke 22:61). At first glance, this may appear to be another indicator of perception, but a closer look makes clear this is not the case. This statement does not lead the readers to imagine they are seeing an image of Peter as through Jesus' eyes; rather, they are led to imagine they perceive an image of Jesus with his eyes pointing in Peter's direction, which indicates nothing of what Jesus is seeing.

One last comment is warranted before leaving the psychological plane. It may be tempting to conclude upon discovering even a single inside view that the readers are intended to experience the passage as through the point of view of the character whose head has been entered. However, even a cursory look through biblical narrative material reveals numerous examples of isolated inside views of characters in contexts where it is clear these characters are not intended to be taken as point-of-view characters. It would appear that inside views *in a cluster*, or an isolated inside view of a character in a context where other planes of point

of view are drawing readers into proximity with the character, are more reliable indicators that the character is being established as a point-of-view character.

Informational Plane

Sternberg's conceptualization of point of view involves only two planes, or "axes" as he calls them.¹¹ The one important for our purposes is his informational axis. His analysis of point of view on this axis involves monitoring the levels of information possessed by the narrator, the reader, and each of the characters, monitoring these levels vis-à-vis each other as progress is made through a passage.

He demonstrates the workings of this axis with an analysis of the account of the wooing of Rebekah (Gen. 24:1-52). For example, he notes that in the introductory segment of this passage in which Abraham commissions a servant to find a wife for Isaac, the reader is in a superior informational position in comparison with the servant. The narrator has informed the reader that the servant's efforts in finding a wife for Isaac will be successful, whereas the servant himself does not possess that information. On the other hand, the reader is in an inferior position in comparison to the narrator, for the reader has not been made privy to all the details of the process through which success is accomplished, whereas the omniscient narrator is aware of all details.¹²

In addition to pointing out the plethora of informational moves made in this story, Sternberg also searches for patterns in the moves. For example, once Sternberg has reached the point in the story where the servant has met Rebekah and has discovered that she is the daughter of a nephew of Abraham, he comments,

What we have been tracing amounts to a twofold movement that is integral to the Bible's dynamics of point of view. One movement consists in a process of illumination within each of the limited perspectives—the reader's and the hero's—that brings them closer by degrees to the static pole of the omniscient. At this stage, though still not so privileged as God and the narrator themselves, each of the human observers has gained considerable insight into the disposition of things.¹³

¹¹ Sternberg, 129-152.

¹² *Ibid.*, 135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140.

It is clear how this type of analysis can be helpful for our purposes. Readers possessing less information than a particular character have a different perspective on what is happening in the story world than does the character. Further, readers possessing exactly the same information as the character have the same perspective, at least informationally, as the character. Therefore, supplying certain key pieces of information to readers is an effective means for leading readers to identify with the point-of-view character, whereas withholding information from readers leads them to feel distanced from the character.

Spatial Plane

To grasp the idea of point of view on the spatial plane, it is helpful to think back to the description of point of view by Berlin presented earlier. She spoke of how the story of a movie "is filtered through the perspective of the camera eye [such that the viewer] can see the action from many directions and perspectives." After this, the excerpt goes on to assert that the narrator of a piece of biblical narrative "is the camera eye; we 'see' the story through what he presents."¹⁴ This movie-camera analogy is meant to elucidate the nature of literary point of view in general, and it does a more than adequate job of doing so. However, looking more closely, it becomes evident that this analogy is not particularly strong with regard to the psychological and informational planes of point of view, for both of these deal with dynamics that take place on the *inside* of a character, which is not accessible to a movie camera. Rather, the movie-camera analogy, in that it addresses aspects of a movie that are visible, relates best to the spatial plane of point of view.

Perhaps the most effective way to undertake an analysis of a biblical story's spatial plane is to allow the details of the text to create a *movie* of the story playing in one's "mind's eye." This would involve careful attention to the details in the text that dictate one's spatial positioning in the scene in relation to that of each of the characters mentioned. One factor important here is that sustained proximity to a given character means experiencing the same details of the story world that the character is experiencing. This creates for the readers a frame of reference similar to, if not identical with, that of the character, and this will incline the readers to perceive the details of the story in the same way the character does, that is, through the character's point of view.

One means for determining whether the readers are in proximity to, or at a distance from, a particular character on the spatial plane is noting the *degree of*

¹⁴ Berlin, 44.

detail used in the description of the character.¹⁵ Consider, for example, the description in Matthew's narrative of the appearance of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:4: "John had a garment made of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist." From this description, we can conclude that the readers' positioning is not at a distance from John, for the inclusion of the details that his garment was made of hair and his belt was leather suggests a positioning close enough to him for these details to be discernible. In fact, the inclusion of the detail that the hair of his garment is that of a camel, as opposed to some other animal, suggests an even closer positioning.

With regard to determining the readers' spatial positioning in relation to one character versus another in a scene, *word order* is a significant factor. Work on Functional Syntax by linguist Susumu Kuno is helpful in this regard. Functional Syntax is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the communicative functions that linguistic phenomena perform, seeking to explain the usage of the phenomena on the basis of these functions.¹⁶ Kuno uses Functional Syntax as a theoretical basis for judging the grammatical acceptability of various linguistic constructions, but his analyses are helpful for our purposes because they are conceptualized in terms of *camera angles* produced by various linguistic constructions from which a speaker describes an event,¹⁷ a perfect parallel to the way in which the present work conceptualizes point of view.

Kuno's "Syntactic Prominence Principle" is most significant for our purposes. According to Kuno, a speaker's proximity to the elements of a described event is reflected in the syntactic prominence of each of the elements, with syntactic prominence being the highest at the beginning of the statement, and diminishing through the length of the statement.¹⁸ Given the sequential nature of the reading process, this makes sense, for whatever a reader encounters first will make the strongest impression, and will become the frame of reference by which all that follows is viewed. This being the case, a reader of a biblical narrative passage would establish a spatial positioning closer to the first character encountered than to any subsequent characters.

¹⁵ Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 158-59.

¹⁶ Susumu Kuno, *Functional Syntax: Anaphora, Discourse and Empathy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 628-29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

Temporal Plane

The most obvious manifestation of the distinction between proximity and distance on the temporal plane of a biblical narrative text is the use of the *historical present* in the Greek of New Testament narratives. The story material of the Bible is primarily narrated retrospectively; that is, narratives are told from the perspective of being past the end of the storyline, looking back at all the events of the story as past events, and thus, at a distance. However, the Greek of New Testament narratives narrates some of the past events *using the present tense* as if to draw the readers from a distant position past the end of the storyline into a position of proximity right in the middle of the action.

This temporal-plane dynamic is relatively rare, but there is another temporal-plane dynamic in operation in every line of narrative material, and that is *pacing*. Pacing has to do with the speed at which readers are led through the details of the story, whether that be at high speed, in which case readers perceive little detail, or at moderate speed, at which they are able to perceive more detail, or at slow speed, at which they are able to take in all that is happening.

Pacing in a text is measured by comparing the time lapse of the narration of an event with the time lapse of the event itself. If the time lapse of the narration equals the time lapse of the event, the pace is slow, allowing readers to catch all the details of what is happening; this reflects a position in proximity to the character(s) involved in the event. On the other hand, if the time lapse of the narration is somewhat shorter than the time lapse of the event, the pace is moderate, with readers catching most of what is going on, but not all; this reflects a position of moderate distance from the character(s). However, if the time lapse of the narration is significantly shorter than the time lapse of the event—for example, five seconds of narration time covering events lasting two days—the pace is fast, and this reflects a position at a great distance from the character(s).

A Demonstration of Perspective Criticism

With the foregoing as a basis, we will now conduct a verse-by-verse analysis of how point of view is used in the enigmatic account of "Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac" (Gen. 22:1-19).

Verse 1a: "After these things God tested Abraham." The introduction of these two characters is in the order of "God" then "Abraham," not only in this English translation, but more importantly in the original Hebrew as well. It positions the readers more in proximity to God than to Abraham. Further, the subject "God" is not in the most common Hebrew "subject" slot, following the

verb at the head of the clause, but is given an even higher profile with a positioning before the verb. These moves work on the spatial plane of the verse to have readers view the following material as through the point of view of God.

Charles Aaron makes a helpful informational-plane observation when he asserts, "The reader diverges with Abraham on the informational plane. The reader knows that the events constitute a test; Abraham does not. The narrator informs the reader of something Abraham doesn't know. This creates distance between the reader and Abraham."¹⁹ Here, then, we have informational-plane data corroborating the dynamics on the spatial plane.

Verse 1b-2: "He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.'" On the temporal plane, dialogue like this is considered slow pacing, for the readers are being presented with the whole of what is being said, as opposed to just a summary where some of the detail is left out. Slow pacing like this has the effect of drawing the readers in on the action—in this case, in on God, the character into whose proximity they were being drawn in the preceding material.

Regarding the informational plane, what is being asked of Abraham—data already in God's information database—is simultaneously fed into the databases of Abraham and the readers. This, however, does not result in a convergence of their databases, since readers are aware of the fact that all this is a test, a piece of information Abraham's database is still lacking.

Verse 3: "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him." With regard to the temporal plane, the first two-thirds of this report would be fast pacing (about twenty seconds of narration covering events that might have taken as much as an hour), with the last third being very fast pacing (ten seconds of narration for an action taking days to accomplish). Clearly, readers are not here being drawn in to experience these events through the point of view of any of the characters involved in these actions. Rather, they continue with the point of view they already have, that is, the point of view of God.

John Sailhamer draws attention to the fact that no mention is made of Abraham's thoughts on all that is being asked of him, an issue clearly within the purview of point of view on the psychological plane, though Sailhamer does not

¹⁹ Charles L. Aaron, "A Perspective Criticism Analysis of Genesis 22 for Preaching" (paper presented to the Homiletics and Biblical Studies Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, Baltimore, November 2013), 2.

speak of it as such. Rather, he makes comments such as, "The writer gives no hints as to the nature of Abraham's inner thoughts, but this is certainly only because no hints were necessary. What reader cannot imagine what Abraham felt?"²⁰ While this may be helpful in the context of reader-response criticism, it does not address the point-of-view dynamics of this text.

Verse 4: "On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away." A look at the temporal plane of this verse reveals that the pace here slows considerably from the preceding verse, for the time lapse of the narration is roughly equal to the time lapse of the actions themselves. This draws readers into a position of proximity to Abraham.

A sense of proximity to Abraham is also produced on the spatial plane, for Abraham is cited as the subject of both verbs. There is, however, another spatial-plane dynamic in operation here, one we have not encountered to this point in the passage. Note how the narrator does not just report that Abraham saw the place, but also first mentions that he "looked up." The action of "looking up" is rather subtle, the type of thing that could not be perceived by an observer off in the distance, but rather only by an observer nearby, one close enough to be able to notice the slight raising of the looker's eyes a mere inch or two. This being the case, the inclusion of this detail is an indication that the narrator is here drawing readers into a position of proximity to Abraham.

One final detail of this verse requires attention, and that is the reference to Abraham "seeing" the place far away, which is, of course, relevant to point of view on the psychological plane. The fact that the narrator is here transporting readers to a position inside Abraham's head to look out through his eyes contributes to readers being drawn into proximity to him. Granted, this is only an isolated inside view, but the fact that a sense of proximity is also being produced on the temporal and spatial planes in this verse suggests even this isolated inside view is making some contribution toward the same end.

Verse 5: "Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.'" While the preceding verse involved just Abraham, this verse also includes his young men, and so word order again becomes an issue for analysis of the spatial plane of the verse. Here, readers encounter "Abraham" before encountering "the young men," which contributes to a sense of proximity to Abraham on the spatial plane. And on the temporal plane, this verse consists mainly of direct discourse—with the elapsed time of narration roughly equaling

²⁰ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 178.

the elapsed time of the statement made—which also works to perpetuate a sense of proximity.

Before leaving this verse, one detail of the direct discourse is worth noting. As pointed out in the above discussion of the psychological plane of this verse, the readers to this point have been given no indication of Abraham's thoughts or feelings about the fact that God has directed him to offer his son as a sacrifice. This being the case, Abraham's mention here that he and Isaac will worship "and then *we* will come back to you" becomes significant in that it appears to constitute an indication of his intentions on this matter. It must be noted, however, that the content of direct discourse of a mere human character cannot be considered a reliable source of data for analyzing point of view on the psychological plane, for such spoken words may or may not match the intentions hidden away in their minds. Inside views, on the other hand, are indications by a reliable narrator of what is happening in a character's thoughts or emotions, and therefore can be trusted as reflecting the true state of affairs in a way spoken words cannot. Therefore, Abraham's mention that "*we* will come back to you" is a non-factor for analyzing the psychological plane.

Verse 6: "Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together." On the temporal plane, the pace speeds up here; Abraham could not possibly take all the wood and lay it on Isaac in the mere few seconds it takes to narrate these actions. However, readers do not totally lose a sense of proximity when experiencing the actions of this verse. First, note that the pace does not speed up as much as it did in verse 3's description of all the preparations for the journey, as well as the first couple of days of journeying, in a single verse; rather, the time lapse of the actions here are modest in comparison, as is the degree of journeying.

Also, the spatial positioning of readers vis-à-vis characters is closer than it was in verse 3. Back there, all the action reported—saddling a donkey, taking young men, cutting wood, setting out—would be perceivable from quite a distance, perhaps as far away as one hundred yards. Compare that with the reporting of verse 6. Abraham's taking wood and laying it on Isaac might be perceivable from a hundred yards away, as might his carrying the fire because of its luminescence and trailing smoke. However, what about the knife? From one hundred yards, even a large knife probably could not be clearly differentiated from some other straight, narrow object. The narrator's mention that Abraham took a knife suggests a vantage point not so far off in the distance. Therefore, while the spatial dynamics here involve movement away from the proximity

produced in verse 5, it is a controlled movement away, leaving readers still within reasonable proximity to Abraham and Isaac.

Verses 7-8a: "Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'" With the direct discourse of these two verses, readers are again drawn in temporally to a position of proximity, but the most striking feature of these verses is that the proximity is not to Abraham, but to Isaac, as seen in the fact that the Hebrew word order of verse 7 presents Isaac first, and then moves to Abraham.

Verses 8b-10: "So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son." With regard to the temporal plane, the pacing starts fast, with the time lapse of the report of Abraham and Isaac walking being much shorter than the time lapse of the action itself. But with the successive reports of Abraham's building the altar, his laying the wood, and his binding of Isaac, the pace slows in steps as the time lapse of each action gets shorter and shorter, and thus closer and closer to the time it takes to report the action. Note also that the last report of Abraham laying Isaac on the altar is accompanied with the phrase "on top of the wood," an addition that does not add anything of significance to the emerging image, but does stretch out the time lapse of the reporting to a point roughly equaling the time lapse of the event itself. Further, the description of Abraham's taking the knife is also stretched out by the inclusion of the clause "Abraham reached out his hand," resulting again in the time lapse of the narration roughly equaling the time lapse of the event itself; this enhances for readers the sense of proximity.

The concluding words "to kill his son" are significant to point of view on the psychological plane, for they constitute an inside view of Abraham. These words, when appended to the statement "[he] took the knife," constitute an indication by the reliable narrator to readers of the intent behind Abraham's taking the knife, a dynamic of Abraham's thinking to which readers would not otherwise be privy. This inside view on the psychological plane, along with dynamics on the temporal plane, functions to draw readers into a position of proximity to Abraham.

Verse 11-12: "But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'" The direct discourse

of these verses functions on the temporal plane to perpetuate the sense of proximity on the temporal plane experienced by readers in the preceding verses. The proximity there was to Abraham, but it appears that readers are being drawn into proximity on the spatial plane to the angel of the LORD, as it is this character who is the subject of the initial verb "called," with Abraham represented by the mere indirect object "to him" which follows.

A look at the Hebrew text of verse 11 may reveal a different picture. The Hebrew word order has the verb at the head of the sentence, but instead of the subject immediately following the verb as normally happens, it is the indirect object "to him" that follows, with the subject "angel" coming after that. Here, the indirect object (Abraham) has been fronted such that it supersedes the subject "angel" as the first character encountered by readers, suggesting that the narrator is here going to uncharacteristic lengths to maintain for readers a sense of proximity with Abraham.

However, closer consideration of Hebrew grammar in this verse reveals this is not the case. We have here an indirect object made up of a preposition and pronominal suffix. According to the *Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, such a construction is to be as close to the verb as possible.²¹ This being the case, the fact that the indirect object (Abraham) precedes the subject "angel" is not significant for point-of-view purposes. The controlling factor on the spatial plane is, then, the angel's status as subject of the clause, and this begins to draw the readers back from a position in proximity to Abraham and toward proximity with the angel.

As direct discourse continues in verse 12, the proximity dynamics on the temporal plane continue in that direction. During the long statement by the angel, readers' focus becomes fixed on the angel and they are drawn into proximity to this character. Further, the content of this statement indicates that the speaker is actually God and not merely an angel of God, as seen in the words of the angel, "You have not withheld your son, your only son, *from me*," which concludes the statement, reflecting the common practice in Hebrew narrative of using "angel of the LORD" as a designation for "God." Therefore, readers sense being swung toward God at this point.

Verses 13-14: "And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place, 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.'" The opening words of verse 13 follow the same pattern as the opening

²¹ Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, Jan H. Kroeze, *Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 46.1.3.ii.a.

words of verse 4, "Abraham looked up and saw." Recall the point made there that the reference to the fact he "looked up" implies a position in proximity to him, a positioning necessary to be able to observe an action as subtle as the raising of his eyes a mere inch or two. The same is true here, and readers are again drawn into proximity with Abraham on the spatial plane.

This is immediately followed by the clause "he saw a ram," which as a mere isolated inside view may not be sufficient by itself to draw readers into proximity to Abraham on the psychological plane. However, since this is immediately preceded by the proximity-producing "he looked up," we can conclude that even this isolated inside view contributes to readers sensing proximity to Abraham.

It should be noted, however, the narrator immediately begins to draw readers away from Abraham on the spatial plane even before the end of verse 13. While the sentence concluding verse 13 has Abraham as the subject of all three verbs, the degree of detail provided is noticeably diminished from that of the preceding sentence. There, readers are close enough to the action not only to observe the ram in the thicket, but also to notice that the ram is caught by its horns, which suggests readers are in a position of relative proximity. By way of contrast, the following description of what Abraham does with the ram is bereft of any detail at all, thus indicating a position at a distance on the spatial plane. Further, the pace speeds up considerably here, indicating a vantage point at a distance on the temporal plane as well.

While the temporal progress of the narrative speeds up in verse 13, causing a distancing of readers on the temporal plane, the temporal progress is brought to a complete halt in verse 14, as readers are transported away from these past events to a temporal positioning in the present of the narrative's composition, reflected by the words "to this day." Such a move breaks the continuity we have been tracing on the temporal plane. In fact, the continuity we have been tracing on other planes is likewise broken. As far as the point-of-view crafting of this passage is concerned, the material in the following verse 15 needs to be handled as a fresh start.

Verses 15-18: "The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.'" With these four verses, we have a single event consisting of a speech by the "angel of the LORD," again simply a circumlocution for "God." Here, then, the pace slows

down to the point where the time lapse of the narration equals the time lapse of the event, thus drawing readers into a position of proximity, in this case proximity to God. Further, proximity to God on the spatial plane is effected by means of the angel of the LORD—that is, God—being cited as the subject of the verb "called" in verse 15 and the verb "said" in verse 16.

Verse 19: "So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Berr-sheba; and Abraham lived in Beer-sheba." Abraham is cited singularly, or jointly with the young men, as the subject of each of the verbs of this verse, which might suggest an attempt to draw readers into proximity to him on the spatial plane. However, it should be noted that the narrator reports these actions in very general terms with a total lack of details requiring a position of proximity; this indicates positioning at a distance. Further, the one-to-one correspondence between time lapse of narration and time lapse of action in the preceding material is abandoned here as the pace increases substantially; thus, a position at a distance is also effected on the temporal plane. Therefore, we can conclude that although Abraham is the focus of this verse, readers are not here invited to view these actions through his point of view.

Analysis: The simplest point-of-view crafting consists of dynamics on all planes working together to draw readers into a position of proximity with a particular character in order to experience events of the storyline through that character's point of view, or into the position of a mere bystander to experience events from an objective point of view. However, our examination of this passage's point-of-view crafting has revealed that readers are given neither of these simple experiences. We have seen that they are moved back and forth between positions of proximity to, and distance from, a number of different characters.

What details of its point-of-view crafting hold significance for the interpretation of the passage as a whole? Aaron notes that Abraham is present in every scene, but adds that the reader is distanced from Abraham on the informational plane (by the fact that Abraham does not know that this is all just a test, whereas the reader is aware of this fact), and on the psychological plane (by the fact that readers are not given access to what is happening inside Abraham). Aaron concludes that this combination of both proximity-inducing and distance-inducing dynamics in relation to Abraham results in his coming across as an *enigma*.²²

Aaron is correct in pointing out that Abraham is present in every scene of the passage, and this could indeed be a significant factor in the assessment of the

²² Aaron, 2-3.

spatial plane of the passage. However, our verse-by-verse analysis has revealed that on a number of occasions, Abraham's presence in scenes has been *at a distance* from the readers as they are drawn into positions of proximity to God, and even to Isaac on one occasion, instead of Abraham.

Aaron is on more solid footing with his observation that on the psychological plane readers are kept outside of Abraham's thinking. In support of his general assertion that "the reader doesn't know Abraham's thoughts or feelings," he argues,

The reader knows all that Abraham has done trying to set up the fulfillment of the promise. When Sarah sent Hagar and Ishmael away in chapter 21, the narrator tells the readers, 'This upset Abraham terribly.' One should assume, then, that the absence of information about Abraham's feelings and emotions comes as a deliberate strategy by the narrator.²³

Aaron also notes incidences of ambiguity in the words of Abraham as contributing toward the building of distance on the psychological plane:

Abraham tells the servants in vs. 5 'the boy and I will walk up there, worship and then come back to you.' Does Abraham deliberately deceive the servants or does he hold out hope that somehow he and Isaac will both return? Abraham knows; the reader does not know. When Abraham answers Isaac's question about the burnt offering with 'God will see to it,' does Abraham mean that God will see to it by allowing Isaac's sacrifice or by some other means? Abraham knows; the reader does not. . . . If Abraham wrestles with the decision, the reader doesn't know.²⁴

While Aaron makes a number of helpful observations here, he does not take into consideration the inside view of Abraham in verse 10, that is, the indication of intent in the words "to kill his son" attached to the report of his taking the knife. Because neither the sense of distance from Abraham on the psychological plane nor the sense of proximity to Abraham on the spatial plane are as strong as Aaron purports, the requirement of "a sense of distance on one plane and a sense of proximity on another" needed to create an enigma may not be met here, and this calls into question Aaron's assertion that Abraham is here depicted as an enigma.

Aaron sees in the crafting of the informational plane an indication that it is the character God toward whom readers are brought into proximity. As evidence,

²³ Aaron, 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

he points to verse 1's mention of the following events constituting a "test" as bringing readers to God's informational level on this point. Aaron also points to God's saying in verse 12 "Now I know" as indicating that only here does God discover Abraham's willingness to go through with the sacrifice of his son, and this matches readers only here discovering this point as well.²⁵ In conclusion, Aaron asserts,

Because the narrator sets the reader up to identify with God's point of view, the passage makes an important theological statement. The passage becomes, not so much an affirmation of Abraham's faith and obedience, but of God's relinquishment of control so that Abraham could make choices. God gives Abraham the freedom to decide.²⁶

Aaron's conclusion here is compelling. He is correct in asserting that verse 1's "God tested Abraham" and verse 12's "Now I know" help form the idea that God is giving Abraham freedom to decide. Additional appeal could have been made to verse 16's "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son" as further material reflecting that the decision was in Abraham's hands. It should also be noted that the two passages Aaron cites and this additional one as well all occur in contexts where readers are drawn into a position of proximity to God, that is, readers are positioned to experience the action as through God's point of view. This results in their approving of what God is shown doing, that is, giving Abraham freedom to choose whether to obey or disobey God's command to offer up his son as a sacrifice, something that could very well prompt a reaction of disapproval if not for the approval-prompting dynamics created by this particular point-of-view strategy.

The discipline of Perspective Criticism treated in the present work is a field still in its infancy, with much room to expand. How much room? Consider the fact that in the study of the modern novel, more ink was spilled during the twentieth century on the topic of point of view than on any other topic, and to date only a small fraction of research done on point of view in novels has been addressed in the research on point of view in biblical narrative material.

There are also numerous existing fields of biblical research in which point-of-view issues await attention. *Redaction criticism*: Might some redactional work have been motivated by point-of-view considerations? *Biblical poetry*: Does

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

literary research into point of view in modern poetry have anything to contribute to the analysis of the poetry of the Bible? *Performance criticism*: What impact might consideration of point-of-view theory have on the crafting of performances of biblical narrative texts? *Textual criticism*: Could any of the textual changes between manuscripts have been motivated by point-of-view considerations? *Prophetic literature*: What might point-of-view analyses of the narrative portions of the Prophets yield? *Homiletics*: What might point-of-view theory contribute to the crafting of narrative sermons? These, and other issues, still await inclusion into the world of Perspective Criticism.

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