

Yamasaki, G 1998 – John the Baptist in life and death: audience-orientated criticism of Matthew's narrative

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The Gospel of Matthew is about the story of Jesus. Much work has been done on notable characters such as Peter, the disciples or the religious leaders. John the Baptist, however, has received relatively little attention. This vacuum Yamasaki wishes to fill by presenting a "new approach" to the study of John the Baptist.

After an overview on the research done on John, Yamasaki poses, at the end of chapter 1, an unanswered question: What is the overall role that John plays within the plot of Matthew's story? This question he wants to answer.

Concerning his methodology (chapter 2), Yamasaki calls his approach "audience-orientated criticism". He wants to take serious the relevance of the oral reading of the text. What impact does the text have on an audience, given that the Gospel of Matthew was meant to be read aloud. The New Testament writers wrote with a (first-time) hearer, rather than a reader in mind (sic). A reader can read a text over and over again. A hearer hears it only once and it has to make an impact on him/her. Yamasaki no longer examines the text as a static entity. Rather, he "is engaging in a dynamic enterprise, following the experience of the audience as they proceed through the narrative". The interpreter chronicles the ways in which the text has an impact on the audience at each step throughout the narrative. Not what is said is important, but how it is said. How does the hearer respond to the text?

Yamasaki has a specific approach to characterization. He analyses a character in a sequential manner "in order to discover how a first time audience would experience the character at various points in the narrative". How does a character grow throughout the narrative? He distinguishes between the development of a character on the story level and on the "discourse level". How does a character develop at the story level that is within the development of the plot of the whole story, against an approach (as in his study) that is "also attentive to its *discourse level*, that is, the techniques that make up the way in which the story is presented to the audience"?

In chapter 3 Yamasaki abandons the three traditional approaches (pentateuch, chiasmic or tripartite) to the structure of Matthew's Gospel as being too static. In none of these approaches does the audience have the capacity to scan forwards or backwards through the text in order to recognise some sort of structure. From an audience-oriented approach, the text of the Gospel does not contain an overarching structure that can be laid out in outline form. Yamasaki's study lacks such an outline and "it commences simply from the beginning of the narrative and examines, in sequence each passage relevant to the understanding" of the role of John the Baptist.

After an exhaustive exegetical study of all the pericopes in which John the Baptist functions (see chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7), Yamasaki comes to the conclusion that John's primary role in Matthew's Gospel is not at the story but at the discourse level. John is used mainly to influence the way in which the narratee experiences the narrative.

At the story level, John plays a significant role as forerunner of Jesus in the story of the baptism of Jesus (Mt 3:1-15). This role is exhausted and John fades away from the story line. Some detail in the introduction story (Mt 3:1-15) on John's food and clothing (3:4) and his rebuking the Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7-10) for example do not contribute to the development of the plot, but function as important references later on in the narrative as "rhetorical moves" to influence the narratee.

But John's role as forerunner of Jesus continues to be present on a discourse level by his being cast in the role of Elijah. John and (later on) Jesus, meet the same fate as the prophets in that they are executed and killed. Thus John functions as forerunner in preparing Jesus' messianic ministry and as forerunner with regard to Jesus' fate.

The theme of forerunner is further enhanced by the use of John as "target of retrospection". In the introduction a number of motifs are included as part of John's phraseology ("Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has drawn near" [3:2]; "Brood of vipers" [3:7] and the motif of trees bearing fruit [3:10]). These motifs are also used as part of Jesus' phraseology (4:17; 12:34; 23:33; 7:19; 12:33). This demonstrates the narrator's use of diction to have Jesus echo words spoken by John before. In this way the narratee is conditioned to identify John with Jesus.

In the story of John's execution (14:3-12a), a number of motifs occur as part of John's experience. These motifs recur at various points later in the narrative as part of Jesus' experience of his own execution.

The image of Jesus as the Son of God, which is established at the climax of the introduction of John (3:17), functions as backdrop for later accounts where the narratee sees that Jesus debates and pronounces judgement with the authority of the Son of God. The same is true with regard to the backdrop of the fate of the suffering of the prophets against which the narratee views later passages on Jesus.

John is used to communicate the idea of Jesus as eschatological judge. This idea is first introduced in chapter 3, but Jesus has no reason to execute that role until chapter 11. Therefore the narrator uses John to keep alive this idea through the long portion of narrative in which Jesus does not execute that role.

At three places John acts for a christological purpose in that the narrator lets John ask questions on Jesus' messiahship (3:15; 9:15; 11:4-5).

John plays a role in the negative characterization of the Jewish leaders. In his speech against the Jewish leaders in 3:7-10, the narratee is conditioned to see the leaders as having an unreliable point of view.

In short, John the Baptist functions not as much on the story level, as on the discourse level.

A few points of criticism can be mentioned. To my mind it is a questionable assumption that the text of the Gospel was written to be heard. This may be so in the case of the thora or the letters of Paul, but is it really true of the gospels? Furthermore, it is quite pretentious to assume that we are able to "hear" the text through the ears of the "first-time hearers", and therefore may abandon all efforts to find the overall structure of the (written) text. We are reading the text with our twenty-first century eyes, and are therefore in the luxurious position of having an overview of the whole text. Why not structure it? To say that the narrator has the first-time hearer in mind, and has no interest in the overall structure of the text, is quite a weak argument.

Nevertheless, for the exegetical connoisseur this book can be recommended as a useful and interesting work on John the Baptist.