Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,
Preaching Old Testament Narratives Session 3:
Overview of the Exegetical Process [ACTS]:
Analyzing the Acts [Plot]

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in his series on preaching Old Testament narratives. This is session number three, an overview of the exegetical process, ACTS, and analyzing the Acts or Plot.

In this session, we are going to overview the exegetical process, how we study an Old Testament narrative, and then I'm going to take you through the first step in that process.

The summit of Long's Peak in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park towers 14,259 feet above sea level, and reaching it requires an eight-mile hike from the trailhead all the way to the top with an elevation gain of almost 6,000 feet, and then you have to get back down. Both parts of the journey, both the ascent to the top and the descent to the bottom, have their own joys and their hazards, and I know this from experience because I've attempted to climb Long's Peak three times, and I've reached the summit twice. The reason I tell you that is that I think preaching is similar.

There are really two main parts to the journey. The first part is ascending from the text to a good understanding of the concept. What's this ethical thrust? What's the message that the writer is trying to communicate, and then you have to get back down the mountain?

You've got to deliver the goods to the people, and that means shaping a sermon that will unpack the meaning of the text and apply it to the lives of the listeners. So this session, the next couple of sessions, we're going to be working on kind of reaching that exegetical summit. We're going to be talking about how to read and study an Old Testament narrative because, as you know, Old Testament narratives work differently than, say, the book of Proverbs or Paul's letter to the Romans, and we have to make that adjustment.

Now, before a couple of things that I wanted to highlight, actually three things, first of all would be text selection. When you are ready to preach from an Old Testament narrative, well, where do you go? What narrative do you preach? That can be difficult because there are so many options. You can actually choose from any of the books in your English Bible from Genesis through Esther.

Now some of them are primarily narrative. That's the case with Genesis, the first half of Exodus, and then what we call the historical books starting with Joshua, but even books that contain a significant amount of law code or discourse like, well, certainly the first half of Exodus is narrative, but then when you think Leviticus, you think, oh, that's just law code, but there's some narratives in Leviticus. There are some wonderful narratives in Numbers.

I think of the Balaam oracles for Numbers 22 to 24. They're narrative. There are some oracles within that, but it's really in a narrative text.

You'll also find some narrative sections in prophetic books like Isaiah. Isaiah 36 to 39 are narratives, and then Daniel, a lot of that's narrative, and then the book of Jonah as well. So if you've never preached or even ventured into Old Testament narrative literature, just spend some time reading them and just note the stories that stir your affections.

By the way, I use narrative and story interchangeably, and when I say stories, I believe that these Old Testament narratives, these Old Testament stories are historical accounts, but they're still stories, aren't they? So don't let that throw you. A story is a narrative. It's a historical account, but anyway, read them and see which ones stir your affections.

If you've never preached a narrative text before, well, start with a narrative that means something to you that you found significant, even if it's a popular one. You might think, yeah, everybody's heard the David and Goliath story. Yeah, they have, but it was probably in Sunday school, and quite frankly, some of the ways they heard it taught might not be right.

So it could be familiar. You know, Deborah and JL, that story in Judges 4 is one of my favorites. It's not as well-known.

Or how about Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18? Again, listeners are familiar with these stories, but they're really not familiar with the message they communicate. So yeah, pick a story. If you want to plan a sermon series from a narrative book, that's the next challenge that you can tackle.

You know, a series on Genesis or Samuel makes sense because those stories are, those books are so fundamental to the storyline of the Bible. The challenge is they're large books, so you might want to begin with a section, a smaller narrative unit, such as maybe the Abraham cycle of stories, Genesis 12 through 25, or you could do David's wilderness years, 1 Samuel 16 through 31. The book of Ruth is a terrific entry point into a biblical narrative.

Now, I will say this, while it's natural to base your text selection on a personality such as Abraham or David or even Ruth, remember that the writer intended to do more than to provide a life of Abraham or a life of David. Actually, some of the most potent stories in 1 Samuel come in those early chapters, I think in chapters 4 through 7, before David is even introduced in the story, so don't neglect those. The key to selection is to choose a text that constitutes a biblical unit of thought.

And this is where it's tricky because if you're used to preaching the New Testament epistles, you can preach a paragraph, can't you? But when you come to an Old Testament narrative, you're going to be surprised. So if I am going to preach Colossians 3:1 to 11, how about that? That's a great text. Actually, you could preach 1 to 4, and then 5 to 11; you could do two sermons, but I like to preach that one unit.

How about Genesis 38, 1 to 11? Well, if you do that, all you'll do is get the section that sets up the story, and quite frankly, I don't know what you would preach because the story won't have resolved itself. So you have to think in terms of sometimes preaching a whole chapter, sometimes preaching more than that. Every time I've preached 2 Samuel 11, I also preach chapter 12 with it.

I suppose you could break them up, but the whole narrative is in chapters 11 and 12. That's David's sin with Bathsheba and the results of that. You really have to take those chapters together to get the whole story.

Same thing in Judges 17 and 18. That's one of my favorite texts to preach, but you've got to preach both because the narrative runs all the way from 17.1 through the end of chapter 18. I suppose there are ways that you could try to break them up, but you won't get the whole story.

And that's what constitutes a unit of thought in an Old Testament narrative, an entire story. Now, the limits of that story, where it begins and where it ends, are going to be determined primarily by the plot. And we're going to talk about that in just a little bit by the action.

We're going to analyze that action. We'll find out what stories they have. So that tips you off as to where a story begins and ends.

There are also some other things you can pay attention to. You can pay attention to changes in place, in time, in persons. You get a new character, well, that may or may not be the start of a story, but there will usually be some other literary clues.

Genesis 18.33 signals the closure of a narrative by the change of place. When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home. I can't tell you how many times a story will finish by the characters going home.

And it may seem rather innocent to us, but that's a way of saying, story's over. I think of 1 Samuel 15, when Samuel, the prophet, goes back to his home. Story's over.

So little things like that. Sometimes you'll see time shifts, you know, after this, a character did such and such. Those are some of the things you'll pick up on.

Genesis 15.1, after these things, and then the narrator is on with a different story about Abraham. So those are the kinds of things that you want to pay attention to, but the bottom line is make sure that you have an entire story. Now, let me talk just a little bit about the exegetical strategy that I want to use.

Again, I've said that I believe these narratives communicate an ethical thrust. They are telling God's people how to live. They're confronting people with the truth about God and the difference that that should make in their lives.

So we are looking for what the author intended. What did the writer of Samuel or Kings or this narrative in the book of Daniel intend to convey? So this idea of meaning is important. You can read more about this if you want in my book, The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative. I've talked a little bit about that in the previous section, but in this whole area of meaning and authorial intent, there are a lot of questions that go with that.

I'm not going to deal with those right now, but one of the things I'll say is that when we study a narrative, we are studying a story, and it works like a story. And so when we study, we have to make adjustments to how stories work. And that can be very different than in the New Testament letters, for example, where you've got these more tightly argued, I don't know that I would exactly call them like lawyers' briefs, but they're more technical in the way that they're tied together.

And this clause hangs off that clause. In fact, sometimes when I am, well, always when I'm preaching in New Testament letters, I will do a mechanical layout. I'll just lay it out so I can see the relationship between clauses, but narratives work differently.

I remember one time I saw in a book on studying the Bible that somebody had diagrammed one of the stories about Abraham, and they actually diagrammed Abraham walking to Shechem, and it really looked impressive. And I thought to myself, why? What didn't you understand? I mean, Abraham walked to Shechem. You know, how confusing is that? That's pretty easy to understand.

So what we have to do is to work with these narratives as literature. One Old Testament scholar, John Sailhammer, said that a text is an embodiment of an author's intention. That is a strategy designed to carry out that intention.

So we have to work with the way that the narrative writers worked. And again, understanding that they're communicating a prophetic message, they're communicating instruction. They are giving a historical account, but remember, they're using theology or they're using the details of a story to communicate theology.

And there is what we call an ideology. They have an agenda. They're trying to make a theological point.

Now, what they don't do is they don't mess with the facts. They don't manipulate details or skew details to make their point. No, they just select the stories, the accounts, the details that make the point that God's Spirit is directing them to make as they write.

So yeah, a lot more that I could say about that, but I think that's enough just to understand that our exegetical process is going to honor the author's intent. It wants to understand what theological message is being communicated. How are God's people supposed to live? And I'm also going to suggest that we look for the big idea, the central idea of a narrative or a story.

Now, like any part of the Bible, the narratives contain more than one idea, but what's the central idea? What's the heart of the story? And that's really what stories do throughout history. And it's challenging because we live in an age that likes bullet points. At least a lot of the people that I preach and teach, whether they were cowboys in Montana or chemists in the north suburbs of Chicago, it's like, just give me a bullet point list.

And what I find is that a lot of preachers will comb through Old Testament narratives, and they want to preach a sermon on five ways to deal with anger or four steps to a healthy marriage. And they'll go back to an account about Isaac and Rebekah and pull things out that, frankly, I've never seen, because I don't think that's what the author intended. So I want to help you work with this approach that understands that while we have lists in Scripture, we do, and go to the book of Proverbs, you know, six things the Lord hates, even seven, we do have lists.

But narrative literature primarily does not use lists. And you know what? Listeners actually recognize that feature when they ask, "What's the moral of a story? I thought it was interesting a few years ago, U.S. News and World Report was a news magazine. Those have kind of disappeared.

But anyway, they told a story that, or they had an article about how mothers who first told a story like Cinderella to their children. And if you've grown up in the United States and, you know, you're familiar with Disney, you've probably seen a movie or

read a book about Cinderella. And U.S. News and World Report, this article said, you know, the mothers who first told that story told it to communicate a message.

The message they were communicating ran something like this. Hey, remember, little girls, that the worst thing imaginable would be for me, your mom, to disappear and for your father to replace me with another woman. I thought that's interesting.

That's a secular writer saying that was the moral of that story. Another thing here in the West, Western civilization, and here in America, you know, some of the tales that have grown up around Christmas, one of them would be Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. I remember watching that movie when I was a kid.

You know what? That contains a message. The message is given the opportunity, you can turn a liability into an asset. And while it's not stated that way, you're not going to have a nine-year-old walk away from watching Rudolph and, you know, mom or dad says, so what was Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer about? And the kid isn't going to go, well, given the opportunity, you can turn a liability into an asset.

But that's the message that's being communicated in a very subtle way. And that's what Old Testament narratives do. Again, I'm not claiming that there's only one idea communicated, but I believe that there's a central idea.

And that's what we're going to look for as we work on these narratives. All right, so what are we going to do for an exegetical process? There are some basics that we have to master if we're going to do this. And I'm going to present you with the basic process.

What I like to do is I use what's called an acronym, and it works in English. If you're watching this later and it's in a language other than English, this may not work for you. But there are four English letters that are part of the word acts, A-C-T-S.

So you might think of the acts of a play, you know, act one, act two, act three. And each one of those letters represents a different feature. So the A stands for action or plot.

And I'm glad that the word act starts with A, because I really think that's where the Old Testament narratives start. Most scholars who really study narrative, and some of the Israeli scholars who really were pioneering this, said, " Hey, these are plot-driven narratives. So A stands for action or plot.

C stands for characters. The T, this is a highly technical term, T is for talking. How do you like that? T is for talking because the dialogue, the speech, is a huge way that the narratives of Scripture communicate their message.

And then finally, S represents setting, both what I would call the literary setting, but also the historical and cultural setting. So I use those as kind of categories. Again, at first, it may seem a little bit clunky; it may seem, oh, this is kind of a mechanical process.

I look at the action, I look at the characters, the talking, the setting. But eventually, all of these just kind of merge together. And as you read, it really is a way of reading.

I hope you don't mind another sports analogy here. I grew up loving the American game of baseball. And in baseball, you know, somebody throws the ball, and you hit it.

But when you first start learning to play baseball, you learn to hit off a T, a batting T. So, a batting T, just like a post, and you put the ball on top of it, and then you hit the ball off the post. Well, I used to teach the first level of baseball, and it was called T-ball. And the kids would hit off a T. But I found something rather fascinating.

A number of years ago, when one of the best hitters in baseball was a guy named Albert Pujols, he played for the St. Louis Cardinals. And I went and watched the St. Louis Cardinals game, full confession, I'm a big St. Louis Cardinals fan. So I went, and I watched the game where the Cardinals played.

And before the game, as the players are warming up, you know what Albert Pujols was doing? He was hitting off a batting tee, and you know what? He was slowing down his stroke. He was practicing parts of it. He would practice, you know, rolling his hands as he came through that T. I mean, he would actually stop and do this in sections.

And he would swing his hips, because a lot of the power that you get is not just from the bat. It's from driving the bat with your hips. And he broke it down into new steps.

And I thought, that's fascinating. Because when he gets up to the plate, he's going to face a 95-mile-an-hour fastball, and he's going to have to put it all together like that. That's what we're trying to do with Old Testament narratives.

We're going to break the process down, but eventually I want you to put it all back together so that you're almost doing this intuitively. But we're going to look at the A, the C, the T, the S, the acts of a play. We're going to look at the acts of a story.

Now, a couple of things just to remind you. As we do some of our work, we're going to be using some technical literary terms. And that's because the commentaries that we read, the scholars that we study will use those terms.

But we're not going to use those when we preach, at least you better not. Because if I hear that you do, I'm going to come and find you. No, not really.

But I would just caution us. Let's not use shop talk. You know, we have to use some technical terms, but we're not going to use them when we preach.

So, yeah, be aware of that. I also want to say this before we get into our study: the importance of prayer. You know, there's a temptation to think that, wow, we're going to dig in and do all of this work, and we are.

Some serious thinking, some serious exegetical work. But if we're going to preach with accuracy and power, we have to saturate our study of the text with prayer. One of my heroes is a New Testament commentator named William Lane.

And one of the first commentaries I ever used when I started preaching was his commentary on the Gospel of Mark. The reason he's one of my heroes is that at the beginning of that commentary, he says, " I've often adopted the Puritan practice of taking this material before the Lord on my knees. And I would encourage you, as you study the text, as you prepare to preach, don't forget to pray.

Pray for the Spirit's presence and power. Pray for the Spirit's help in understanding how God wants me, as well as my listeners, to respond to the narrative. Prayer is not a substitute for careful study of the text.

But careful study of the text alone can never, never, ever be a substitute for bypassing prayer. All right, with that said, let's start in on this process of looking at the Acts. A-C-T-S.

A is for action, and that's the one that we're going to cover in the remainder of this session. So, A is for action. When we talk about the action, we're talking about the plot.

I think this is also a good place to say, as you do your study, do study on your own at first, and then go to the commentaries later. Don't go to the commentaries first. You need to think through the biblical text, work with it, you know, what's it doing, what's it saying.

And then, when you're done, you can go to a commentary, and you can have a good discussion. That commentary will be a discussion partner for you, and you may not even read the whole commentary, but you'll have questions that need to be answered. You'll go, and you'll have a discussion.

So, do your own work first, and then you'll go to commentaries later. So, what are you actually looking for? Well, when you're looking at the action, you're looking at

the plot. And the plot, of course, is the way that the writer has shaped the story, the way that the story is put together.

And whenever I read a story for the first time, I look carefully at the shape of the plot. Plots in the Old Testament narrative assume the same basic shape. Generally, they consist of four main stages or elements in the flow of action.

And here they are. And these are literary terms. You might hear them used even in modern literature courses, but they still fit what stories do.

I think it's because stories in all cultures tend to work the same, so that's why these terms work. The first one is exposition. We'll talk about that in a moment.

It's used a bit differently than we talk about expository preaching or Bible exposition. This is going to be a little bit different. But we have exposition, then we have crisis, and then there's resolution.

I mean, the heart of a story is a crisis and a resolution. You don't have a crisis, you don't have a story. And then that crisis is somehow resolved.

Whether you're happy about the resolution or whether it makes you sad, there's still a resolution to the story. And then sometimes, not always, but sometimes at the end of the story, after the conclusion, or after the resolution, there may be a separate conclusion. And French scholars call this a denouement.

It I always joke that we have to use big words like that so we can justify charging tuition. Not really. But I prefer conclusion to denouement.

But if you see that word, denouement looks like denouement. It's just talking about a conclusion. Not all stories have that, but some do.

It's just a separate reflection on how the way that the story resolves, how that impacts what happens later. Now, I'll say this too. Interpreters don't have to agonize over exactly where the exposition ends and the crisis begins.

I mean, these stages are a little bit fluid. Often, the changes between plot elements are almost imperceptible. When I grew up learning to drive, we had something that you don't drive that much today, and that would be standard shift vehicles.

Vehicles today have automatic transmissions. And in an automatic transmission, you don't always know when you've shifted from first to second to third. Now, if you really tromp on it, on the accelerator, you can sometimes kind of tell.

You can hear it or feel it. But back in the old days, you had to actually manually shift from first to second. You'd press in a pedal called the clutch, and then you would shift first to second.

You'd shift from second to third, eventually shift from third to fourth, depending on whether you're driving a three-speed, four-speed, or five-speed transmission. You knew when the change occurred because you made it happen. I would say that the movement from exposition to crisis to resolution is a lot like that.

It's more like an automatic transmission. Sometimes it's imperceptible. You don't have to wrestle and spend half an hour thinking, oh my, did the crisis end at verse 5 or did it end at verse 11? What you're just trying to look for are these basic movements.

Sometimes there may be a gray area, but you'll eventually know when you're in a crisis. You'll see how it's resolved. These are helpful, but don't stress over them.

All right, let's talk a little bit about each one of these. The exposition, and I said this word works differently than when we use it to describe preaching. This is really the information that sets up the story.

Some would call it background information, but it's a technical literary term. Remember, I said a little while ago that if you chose to preach Genesis 38:1-11, you're going to have a rough time. And you know why? Because verses 1-11 are the exposition.

It just gives you the information you need to set up the story. So if that's all you preach, well, good luck with that. You're going to have to read something into the text, which is what we don't want you to do.

But you're going to have to do that to come up with a sermon. So the exposition will introduce you to the characters. It will introduce you to the situation that's going on.

Again, Genesis 38, verses 1-11 are exposition. Some would even say verses 1-6. You see, even there it's debated.

I don't sweat over that. I just know that at the beginning of a story, I'm going to get some details that will help me as I move into the crisis. Sometimes it may be a single verse.

Other times it's a little bit longer. Again, every story is different. So we're not trying to fit a story into our grid, into our categories.

We're just saying, typically, stories start out and give you some preliminary details that set it up. And then you get into the crisis. Some will use the words "complication, conflict, or tension."

It doesn't matter what word you use, but there's some kind of crisis. And it may not seem as big a crisis as something that you would describe as a crisis. But there's some sort of a problem, some sort of a conflict.

And you have to identify that. And here's the other thing about it. It may be a series of crises.

And maybe there's kind of a defining moment. So it's not like all these stories just follow a cookie-cutter pattern. But there will be some kind of a crisis.

So in Genesis 38, you begin reading Genesis 38. You're introduced to Judah, who goes down from his brothers. He separates from them.

And he gets married to a Canaanite woman. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. They eventually have three sons.

And boy, things turn out pretty bad. It's a real mess. Then you start to get into a crisis.

A couple of the sons start dying off. And then, before Judah is ready to give his son number three to Tamar, the woman who married his first son, he died. Then the second son died as well.

Judah's thinking, there's a problem with Tamar. No, the problem wasn't with Tamar. It was with Judah and his sons.

But anyway, you start to get into that crisis. And then you have another crisis when Tamar realizes he's not going to give me the third son. And she was desperate because in her culture, you had to have a male child in order to access your family inheritance.

I know that seems weird to those of you living here in a Western culture. If you're in an Eastern culture, that's not quite as unfamiliar. But there's another crisis.

So what does she do? She solves the problem by relying on her father-in-law's own inability to control his sexual urges. And she dresses up as a temple prostitute. She seduces him.

And he sleeps with her. And she becomes pregnant. That creates another crisis.

And Judah said, he's in charge of her. He's her father-in-law. He says, bring her out and let her be burned.

So anyway, you have these crises in a story, no matter what narrative you're looking at. So you're just trying to identify what the crisis is. Or what is the series of crises in this story? And eventually, the story moves from crisis to resolution. In the resolution, the plot descends rather quickly from the climax to a solution to the original conflict.

And in Genesis 38, the resolution is that as she's being brought out to be burned, she produces what I call the driver's license and credit card that Judah left behind. He was supposed to make a payment. He was supposed to give her a young goat from the flock.

And he didn't have that. So he said, here, take my seal and my staff. The seal would be about the size of your thumb.

It was something that had markings on it. You would roll it in clay. And it would have your identification on it, kind of like the magnetic stripe in your credit card.

It has all that information on it. And then he gave her his staff, which had his markings. So essentially, he said, here, take my driver's license and a major credit card for collateral.

And then she's brought out to be burned for committing sexual immorality, unfaithfulness to Judah's family. She says, "Take a look. I'm pregnant by the man who gave me these.

And the story is resolved. And it's a crazy story. It's a bizarre story.

That's the climax of the story. And the tension's gone. The story is resolved as Judah pronounces her more righteous than he is.

Righteous in the sense that she was more faithful to the standards of her culture in trying to get an heir through leper marriage than Judah was to the standards of his culture, a culture that was supposed to be shaped by devotion to the true and to the living God. So we're always looking at the resolution of the story. Now, something to keep in mind is that the resolution can either be a happy ending or a sad ending.

We call the resolution a happy ending, or literary scholars call this a comedy. This is not comedy as in Stephen Colbert humor, or if you go back further, Jay Leno or Johnny Carson. It's not that kind of comedy.

A comic structure, some call it a U-shaped plot, because it starts in prosperity. It descends into tragedy, but then it makes the turn back up to prosperity as a happy ending. So that's why some call it a U-shaped plot, commonly called a comedy.

Again, don't use a technical term like that when you're preaching, especially because if you say, "This story is a comedy, people are going to think, 'Oh great, you know, funny story. ' " Can't wait to get all the humor. And that's not what comedy means.

Even though there is some humor in some of these stories, that's not what a comedy is. But that's one kind of a story. You think of some of the classic examples.

The book of Esther is a comedy. The book of Ruth is a comedy. The story of David and Goliath is a comedy, not because it's funny, it's because it starts in prosperity, but then Goliath shows up, things are looking bad, but David becomes the one who slays the giant, and so it's back up in prosperity.

So you've got comedies. You also have tragedies. That's a sad ending.

And there are a lot of tragic stories. Boy, the book of Judges is one big tragedy, and all of those stories are tragic. Most of them are tragic, even though there are some bright spots.

But think about the story of Samson. That's a classic tragedy. There's a resolution to the story, isn't there? But it's a tragedy.

How about King Saul? How about 1 Samuel 15? There's a tragedy. So you want to pay attention to how the story is resolved. Again, there might be a series of crises, and there could be a series of resolutions.

But overall, you can pretty much summarize those. And then finally, these stories will sometimes end in a conclusion, or that French term, a denouement, and that just refers to the tying up of loose ends. Usually, it sums up the outcome of the story or the fate of the main character after the story has already been resolved.

So you go back to Genesis 38. I think it's possible that verses 27 to 30 might be a separate conclusion, because you have this little genealogy, and you find out who the offspring is. The offspring are pretty important, because it turns out that from them will come King David, and eventually the Messiah, Jesus himself.

You see the names in Genesis 38. You see them in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew chapter 1. So in Judges 7, 17, and 18, for example, I think the final verse of that narrative is the conclusion to the narrative. I mean, the narrative's already been resolved, the tension's been resolved, but it summarizes the outcome of the Danites' occupation of new territory.

And the writer tells us that they continued using the idol that Micah had made all the time the house of God was in Shiloh, and that turns out to be tragic. We'll talk about that more before our sessions are all done. I think the end of the book of Esther, all the way from chapter 9 verse 20 through 10 verse 3, is a conclusion, because it informs the reader that Mordecai and Queen Esther established the Feast of Purim, and that Mordecai rose to greatness in the Persian government.

This is all after the story has been resolved. So those are the four that we're looking at. We're looking at exposition, we're looking at crisis, then we're looking at resolution, and then some stories will have a separate conclusion at the end.

Now, there are some other details that fit into the plot of a story, and I'll mention them at least briefly. Again, you can go into more detail on these. One of these would be what we call archetypes or plot motifs, and that would be that there are some stories that just seem to work together.

They have the same kind of structure. Actually, I already talked about comedy and tragedy. Those would be plot motifs or architects.

Sometimes you will have what's called a hero story, a heroic narrative, in which a hero struggles to reach a goal, and there are a lot of obstacles that he has to defeat before he gets there. David is a classic example. I mean, all those years in the wilderness, 10 years in the wilderness, wandering before he was anointed king, and sometimes you will have about like a journey where the characters will encounter danger, and they'll experience growth.

I think of Jacob on his way back from the land of Canaan, back to his ancestral place. Remember, he's trying to escape Esau, and it's quite a journey along the way. Some significant things happened to him.

You have temptation stories. Someone is the victim of an evil tempter or temptress, and so you've got the story of Eve in Genesis 3. You've got Samson and Delilah. You've got rescue stories.

You think of Esther and Elisha at Dotan. Again, you can go into more detail. I talk about that in my book.

Even as you read commentaries, they may alert you to, oh, this story that you're going to preach happens to be a heroic narrative. The point of that is you're able to see how it works like other stories, but sometimes there may be a difference, and that difference can be significant. So that's something that is helpful to look at.

Then there's something called type scenes, where sometimes these stories will occur at a well, or there could be a barren mother. That surfaces a lot. Even the theme or the motif of the older over the younger, wow, that happens all the time in the book of Genesis.

As the line gets narrowed, this line through which God is going to bring blessing to the earth. Usually, the line would go through the older, but often it's the younger brother. Things get flipped around.

So those are worth looking at as well. Something else to pay attention to is repetition. I remember when I took advanced composition in my junior year of high school, my dear teacher, Mrs. Blair, was a good teacher, but she would always put these dreaded letters in red ink on my paper, R and R. You know what that meant? It didn't mean, oh, rest and relax because you've done a great job.

It meant repetitive and redundant, which, only years later, I learned was actually repetitive and redundant. I have to use both words, but that's another story. I mean, her preference was you say it well, and one time, and if you have to say it again, well, then you better use a different term.

So in English, at least my English teachers taught me, repetition was a sin. But guess what? In the Old Testament narratives, repetition is a virtue. It's a technique that's used by writers that accomplishes what we accomplish today by using a larger font or putting something in bold print or in italics.

And so plot analysis means we have to pay attention to repetition. And that is often, sometimes it's a single word that gets repeated in a story. I think in the book of Ruth and even in, even in, I think it's 2 Samuel 9, the story of Mephibosheth, where the repetition of the Hebrew word “hesed,” that loyal love, that's significant.

Sometimes it may be a phrase, but yeah, that's that kind of repetition that is important. Yeah, often it is, it's often a keyword. Sometimes it's like David and his grief over the death of Absalom's son.

He just keeps saying my son, my son, my son. So we always want to look at that. Another thing to pay attention to when we're looking at the plot or the action would be time and pace.

This is where literary scholars differentiate between narrated time, which is actual time, and narration time, which is the time that it takes to tell the story. Now, if you held me up at the risk of my life and told me what the difference is between narrated time and narration time, I always get those two labels mixed up, but the concept is really critical. So yeah, how long does it take for a story to play out? You know, what's interesting in Genesis 38, the first 11 verses take place over almost 20 years.

And then the rest of the narrative just takes place in the course of a few months, and you get to the last scene, and it's all happens maybe within an hour or so. So that's the kind of thing that you look at. And there, the time that it takes to tell the story, then, you know, may be subject to gaps or delays, and you're just looking at the difference.

Sometimes that's really fascinating between them. You may have a small space devoted to 20 years, but then you get a big space devoted to a much smaller frame of time. Why is that important? Well, it tells you where the author puts the emphasis.

And by the way, sometimes that's how you can figure out where the exposition tends to end and where the crisis begins, because you have this big swath of years that are summarized in this space. And once that's done, then you move into a single scene and you say, okay, now, now we're really into the heart of the story. So that can be a very helpful detail as well.

Point of view is another thing that we want to take a look at. And I'm not going to say a lot about that. You can, you can do some more reading on that, but you know, most narratives adopt a third-person point of view.

But sometimes you get into Nehemiah. Nehemiah is telling it in the first person. There are also some words, like behold, that you know; when they're in the character's speech, they help you see things through the character's eyes.

So we're always looking at that. Yeah, we're looking at points of view. But I think the most important, you know, issues we've talked about, maybe another would be irony.

Irony is when there's a kind of discrepancy between what is said and what happens. You know, scholars will differentiate and distinguish between verbal and dramatic irony. Verbal irony refers to statements in which a character says one thing but intends the opposite.

So, you know, Michael, for example, in her speech to David, after he returned from the parade, when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem, and her words in 2 Samuel 620, that verse says, and David returned to bless his household. But Michael, the daughter of Saul, came out to meet David and said, how the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants, female servants, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself. So do you think she's saying, "Oh, wow, you really honored yourself today? No, she's being sarcastic, isn't she? She's using irony.

She says, "Yeah, you honored yourself today, just like some vulgar person would do in disrobing themselves. She means that David didn't honor himself. Dramatic irony occurs, though, when a character says one thing, but doesn't perceive what the listener really knows to be true.

So in Judges 4, verse 20, Jael, and you'd have to follow this story, maybe to get the full intent, but the enemy general takes refuge in her tent, and just so you know, what's going to happen, she's about to kill him with a couple of household implements, with a tent peg and a hammer. And yeah, I know, this is not a story that we teach kids in Sunday school, is it? But she is delivering Israel, and the point is, she's not using weapons of war, she's using household implements. It's like she's going to kill the enemy general with a rolling pin and a vacuum cleaner, or something like that.

But before she does this, he seeks refuge in her tent, and he says, "Stand in the doorway of the tent. If someone comes by and asks you, "Is anyone in there?" Say "No." And little does he realize, yeah, that answer is going to be truer than he thinks, because there won't be anybody by the time she's done with him, he's going to die.

So those are the sorts of things that we're looking at. There are a few other literary features, but they get a little bit more detailed, a little bit more technical. So I'm going to stop with those, and just encourage you, as you begin studying Old Testament narratives, start with the action, start with the plot.

How does it unfold? And then do you have some things in that plot, like repetition, repeated words? Do you have ironic statements? Do you have these types of scenes, where they kind of follow a pattern? All of those things will help you understand what's going on. So, A stands for action. That's a great place to start, and we'll continue on in our study of how to preach Old Testament narrative.

Next time, we will begin to look at the characters and also talk -- what they say.

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in his series on preaching Old Testament narratives. This is session number three, an overview of the exegetical process, ACTS, analyzing the Acts or Plot.