

**Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,
Session 4: Overview of the Exegetical Process [ACTS]:
Analyzing the Characters and Talking**

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in a series on Preaching Old Testament Narratives. This is session number four, Overview of the Exegetical Process [Acts], Analyzing the Characters and Talking.

Well, welcome back to our course on Preaching Old Testament Narrative.

We've been talking about doing exegesis, that is drawing up the meaning of a text, understanding what a narrative means, and I've suggested to you that a good way to organize the features that we need to look at, that a good way to organize that is to use the word acts, A-C-T-S, think like act one, act two of a play or a story. Well, the A, remember, stands for plot. We already looked at that.

In this session, we're going to look at the C and the T, and the C stands for characters, so in addition to thinking about the plot, the way that the action happens, we need to think about the characters. The characters in Old Testament narratives really are compelling. I love the old rabbinic saying that says, God made people because he loves stories.

Maybe the opposite is true. God made stories because he loves people, but people are interesting, aren't they? And yes, it's one thing to have a plot, it's one thing to have action, but the characters are the ones who drive that action. So I would say, again, plot is primary, but then when we look at the characters, what we want to do is to try to specify the way that they function in a narrative according to the plot.

So let's talk first of all about classifying the characters. This can get really technical, and I've done a lot of reading. Different scholars, literary scholars, and even Old Testament scholars will use different ways of classifying characters, but remember, we're preaching this. We want to understand the narrative.

And so I find that keeping it simple is a good way to go. So what I suggest is that the starting point is simply to distinguish between major and minor characters, and that distinction simply arises from the size of a character's role in the story. Literary scholars, when they look at the major characters, will break them down into some other categories, and these can be helpful.

Again, never use these labels in your sermon, okay? But you're going to read literary scholars and even biblical scholars who will use these terms. So one category would be what we call protagonists. A protagonist is a central character.

I mean, they are indispensable to the plot. Those characters are, you know, often the heroes in the story, but not always. Another group of main characters would be what we call antagonists.

We're familiar with that word. So you've got protagonists, but then the antagonists would be the main adversary or the forces that are arrayed against the central characters. And then a third category would be what we call foils.

And these are characters who kind of stand in contrast to the main character, and they kind of heighten our understanding of that main character because they provide a contrast or occasionally they might offer a parallel. So again, these categories are often used in the analysis of Western literature and understanding that, but again, a story is a story is a story. So even the categories that we use today for Western literature, even say British literature, Charles Dickens and others, those categories still work pretty well.

Now, I will offer this caution. The idea is not to reduce a character to a label. You know, this isn't pinning the label on the biblical story, but it's really to clarify what role a particular character has in a story.

So here's a prime example. First Samuel 17, we call that the story of David and Goliath, right? Now, I'm not on a crusade to change that, but actually, at a literary level, that's not the way that we should describe it. You see, Goliath provides the challenge that will reveal the contrast between the two main characters, the protagonist and the antagonist, and that would be David and Saul.

This section of First Samuel, which starts at about First Samuel 15, goes all the way through Second Samuel 9, and argues that David is the right choice for Israel's king, even though he's going to come from a new family line. And that was a big deal in the ancient world. You had to be part of a ruling family.

Well, David is not. He's not part of Saul's family. So the narrator in this section of the book is trying to convince us that David is the better choice for king.

And so in this story, it's really David versus Saul. And Goliath happens to be the contrast. Technically, he might not quite be a foil, but at least he's a character who's a contrasting figure.

Again, that's why labels don't matter as much as their function does. How are they working together? And David is clearly the hero. Now, fast forward a few chapters in First Samuel 25, and David is the protagonist, I suppose you could say.

Then there's a guy, Nabal, whose name means fool. We'll talk about names in a little bit. He's the guy who opposes David.

And Abigail comes along, and she is. You could say that she's the foil, but she's really the hero of the story. David is not in this story.

Abigail is the hero. David changes so that by the end of the episode, he has the same conviction as Abigail. Abigail talks David out of doing something stupid that could have jeopardized his appointment or his installation as Israel's king.

He had already been anointed. But is he ever going to be recognized as king? Well, David was ready to take the life of her husband because basically, the guy had lived up to his name. He had been a fool.

He was a jerk. And David wanted to get revenge. And Abigail says, "My Lord, you can't do this.

And she talked him out of that. So the point is, even the same character, as you go through a larger narrative, the role from one narrative to another can shift a little bit and change. In 2 Samuel 11 and 12, fast-forwarding again, David continues as the protagonist while Uriah the Hittite serves as a foil.

He's a contrast. And David is not the hero in the story, is he? I mean, he commits this package of sins in his desire for Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, not only commits adultery, but has Uriah killed in battle. So what's interesting in that story is that while Bathsheba is important, she's critical of the story, but her role is minor.

In fact, she's really acted upon. I think it's right to see her as a victim in this story, because David really misuses his power. So I might, in this story, call her an agent.

Again, it's not the labels that matter. It's just understanding how these characters relate to each other. So you go to Genesis 38.

We talked a little bit about that. Judah is the central character, the protagonist. And Tamar is the foil.

And they're clearly major characters. There are other characters, but they play minor roles. Again, it's not that they're unimportant, but for the purpose of this story, we don't have to spend a lot of time analyzing the sons who were killed, the first two, and some of the others in the narrative, the friends of Judah.

Yeah, their overall importance in the scheme of redemptive history just isn't there. So again, a person can play a different role in a different story. So that's one of the issues that we have to look at when we look at characters, is how do they function? Now, I want to talk a little bit about the means of characterization.

How do the writers of the Old Testament narrative develop these characters? And what's interesting is that they do not give us a lot of description like we're used to in modern novels. A few years ago, I read a novel by John Grisham called *The Testament*. And it's about a lawyer, Nate Riley, who's searching for a surprise heir to an \$11 billion fortune.

And guess what? This heir is a missionary named Rachel Lane. So he finds her in the jungles of Brazil. And I want to read to you, this is how John Grisham describes her as he relates the encounter.

So this lawyer comes and finds her in the jungles of Brazil with a group of tribesmen. And this is how he describes her. He says Rachel was with them.

She was coming. There was a light yellow shirt in the midst of the brown skin chest, and a lighter face under a straw hat. She was slightly taller than the Indians and carried herself with an easy elegance.

Nate watched every step. She was very slender with wide, bony shoulders. She began looking in their direction as they grew closer.

She removed her hat. Her hair was brown and half gray and very short. Now, what's unique about that? Well, nothing really.

That's what we do in Western literature. Here's another one from a Western novelist named Louis L'Amour. This is the picture he paints of one of his characters, James T. Kettleman.

This is from his novel called *Flint*. He said about Kettleman, his face was lean and hard, triangular with high cheekbones, green eyes, and a strong jaw. His sideburns were long in the fashion of the time.

His hair is dark brown and curly. In the light, it showed a tinge of red. His skin was dark, his features, except for his eyes, were normally without expression.

James T. Kettleman, financier and speculator, had often been called a handsome man. He had never been called a friendly one. So, that's our Western literary tradition, isn't it? Particularly the novels.

They go to great lengths to paint character portraits. Now, in contrast to that and in contrast to a Charlotte Brontë or a Charles Dickens, the authors of Old Testament narratives tell their stories in a rather lean, spare style. So, I guess you could say the characterization in an Old Testament narrative probably resembles a quick pencil sketch.

There's not a lot there. Robert Alter is not just a leading literary scholar, but a Jewish scholar who wrote a groundbreaking book called *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. That was the title of his book.

It's now in its second edition. In fact, my book is kind of a tip of the cap to Alter's work. I mean, he's really one of the first that I started reading, that evangelicals started reading when they're rediscovering how narrative works.

But he says this. He says, we are given only the barest hints about the physical appearance, the tics and gestures, the dress and implements of the characters, the material milieu in which they enact their destinies. Another well-known literary scholar by the name of Meir Sternberg says that these elaborate descriptions that we're used to in our culture perform no other role than realistic fullness.

And he says the biblical storytellers just don't concern themselves with vivid depictions. Now, here's why that's important. The fact that those details are scarce means that when they show up, they are important.

There are no throwaway lines in biblical narrative. If there's a detail about the character, that detail is really significant. And I'll give you a few examples of that.

In the story of Ehud in Judges chapter 3, beginning at verse 12, runs all the way through the end. That's a bizarre story, but it actually has a pretty profound message, a theological message, as we can talk about later. But the descriptions in Judges describe Ehud as left-handed and Eglon as very fat.

Now, that's not very socially correct. Not today, and I don't think it was then. But they prepare us for what happens in that narrative.

So, in that narrative, Eglon, or Ehud, is the judge. Actually, they're really saviors in the book of Judges. But he's going to be the one who delivers the people of Israel, I believe it's from the Moabites.

And why do we need to know that he's left-handed? Well, as it turns out, when he goes to see King Eglon, when he goes through customs, you know, they didn't have the airport metal detectors, they would have frisked him and patted him down. They would have patted his left side, because most warriors were right-handed, and you would take your sword from your left side. You would do it like this.

You wouldn't try to yank it out from your right side. And, by the way, the Hebrew text tells us that this was more like a dagger. It was a cubit, but it's not even the ordinary word for cubit.

One of my friends, Lawson Younger, in his commentary on Judges, argues that the word probably refers to something that's just a foot long. So this is a dagger. So think about it.

He's left-handed. He's going to be pulling it out from a sheath on the right side. But when he goes through customs, everybody is. Most warriors are right-handed.

So if they're in a hurry, they're just going to check his left side. Yep, you're fine, go. So he sneaks in this sword undetected, and eventually, spoiler alert, if you haven't read the story, he assassinates the Moabite king who had been oppressing Israel.

Now, why call this Moabite king Eglon very fat? Actually, I said there's some humor in the Bible, and there's kind of some crass humor here. Maybe this is like 10-year-old boy humor, because guess what? The name Eglon means calf. So it's almost like he's being portrayed as the fatted calf fit for slaughter.

But because he's very fat, when Eglon sticks the sword in, we're told that the fat covered the blade. And when his attendants found him dead on the floor, this lifeless Moab, they didn't realize that he had been assassinated right away because the fat covered the sword. And I think that's one of the reasons why we're given that detail that he's very fat.

It's not just to make fun of him, although I think that's kind of going on as well, but it's there for a purpose. So likewise, why are we told in Genesis 39 verse 6 that Joseph was a good-looking guy? That's my paraphrase. He was a good-looking guy.

Well, that helps us understand the sexual advance made by Potiphar's wife. And why does the writer of Genesis describe Esau as a hairy man in Genesis 27:11? Well, it's to help us appreciate his brother Jacob's attempt to impersonate Esau. When he went to his father, Isaac, he wanted to get the blessing of the birthright, and he covered himself with skins that had hair on them so that when his almost-blind father felt him, he would say, "Oh yeah, your voice sounds like Jacob, but yeah, you've got the hairy arms.

All right, you're Esau. So those kinds of details are really important. Another way that we understand the characters, and this may seem obvious, but it's through their behavior.

I mean, generally, biblical writers and biblical narrators will show us rather than tell us. They will give us insight into a character's nature by paying attention to his or her actions. One of the most fascinating stories, and I find it very convicting and very needful for the church today, is the story of Micah and the Danites in Judges 17 and 18.

And if you read that, the narrator doesn't come out and say, "Hey, by the way, this guy Micah, he's corrupt. He doesn't have to tell us that. He just shows us that.

And if we're alert readers, we read this, and it's like, what? I can't believe this guy is doing this. How can he do this? That is so immoral. It's so corrupt.

That's how it works in the Old Testament narrative. You will find the writers showing us rather than telling us. So we're always looking at their behavior, and we're noting too, we're reading these narratives against the backdrop of the Torah.

Again, some of the narratives are in the Torah, but the later narratives like Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, those narratives, we're always reading that with an eye back on Deuteronomy, especially, but other books in the Torah, and we're seeing how these characters match up to what God had said in the law that he gave through Moses. Another feature that we have to pay attention to would be the characters' names. You know, certain cultures attach special significance to names.

When I lived in Montana, I would often do public address broadcasting for local high school basketball games, and some of those high school basketball games featured teams from the Native American communities, and I heard names like Tawny Whistling Elk and Jonathan Takes Enemy. By the way, Jonathan Takes Enemy is one of the best high school basketball players I've ever seen, and I've watched some guys that eventually ended up in the NBA, but that was his name. Jonathan Takes Enemy, Stacey Big Hair, I remember that one, and then Elvis Old Bull.

I mean, these were the names that were part of their cultural heritage, and those names reflected either the circumstances that attended their birth, or maybe a virtue that would hopefully characterize the child's life. Well, guess what? In the Old Testament, the characters were given names kind of along those same lines. One Old Testament scholar, Jean-Louis Scott, points out that a very common way to characterize a person was to give him or her a name.

And of course, some obvious examples, I mentioned Nabal already. His name means fool in Hebrew. And I don't know if that was a name he was called behind his back.

Hard to believe that that was a name his mother gave him. Hey, fool, it's time to come in for dinner. But then, remember the name, Abraham? Remember his first

name? His first name was Abram, or Avram, which sounds like the father of, you know, yeah, exalted father.

Avram means exalted father. But then, Abraham means the father of many nations. By the way, there's some irony in that, wasn't there? Because Avram was given the name Abraham before he ever became the father of a single child.

And yet, that was part of the promise. There's a biblical scholar named John Steck who argues for the significance of names in Judges 4. The account of the defeat of Caesarea, he was the cruel Canaanite commander. So, one of the names is an Israelite warrior by the name of Barak, whose name means lightning.

And in this story, his role is a bit passive, a little bit hesitant. And the glory goes to a couple of faithful women. One of them, Deborah, whose name means bee, and the other, J.L., whose name means mountain goat.

By the way, you may not want to name your daughter J.L. She might not be flattered if you call her a mountain goat. But in that narrative, what's interesting at the end, J.L. provides the enemy commander with this nourishing milk. He just wanted water.

And she gave him milk, and so probably that relaxed him, and he fell asleep. And then she did what Barak was unable to do, and that was to take his life. Again, this is a military battle.

And as a result, peace was restored to the promised land of milk and honey. So, kind of interesting how that works out. I think the book of Ruth is fascinating when you understand how the names work.

One of the main characters, well, he is at the beginning of the story, and he quickly fades away. His name is Elimelech. That's how we say it in English.

But Elimelech, El means God, I means my, and then Melech is king. So, his name means my God is king. But the irony, and we talked a little bit about irony already.

Remember that discrepancy? The irony is that my God is king turns his back on God as king, and he leaves the promised land during a famine for the land of Moab. And that may seem innocent to us. If you live in Chicago and you're not able to get the job that you need, but you know that there's good work in Indianapolis.

You can move to Indianapolis, or you can move from L.A. to Boston, or wherever. And that's, you know, that's not, you know, wrong, unless there's other factors that are wrong about it. But we have the freedom to do that.

Not the people of Israel. They were bound to the land. So, Elimelech flees the king's territory because of a famine.

He has a couple of sons, Malon and Kilion. We're not sure. Some have suggested their names mean sickly and failing.

And if so, they foreshadowed their early demise, because they died and likely could have died from the famine. Anyway, Elimelech's wife was named Naomi, whose name means pleasant one. And again, we see the irony of her name, because, you know, she goes with her husband to the land of Moab, and things don't go well there.

She hears that God has provided food for the people. So, she goes back to the land. And when she comes into Bethlehem, the women are shouting, "It's Naomi, it's Naomi."

And she says, no, don't call me pleasant. Call me Marah, which is the Hebrew word for bitter. Because, she said, Shaddai, the Almighty, has dealt with me bitterly.

And then you have Ruth, whose name means friendship. What a friend she was. Boaz, whose name means swift strength, shows that strength just in the way that he cares for Ruth and for Naomi.

And then the one that really cracks me up in Ruth 4.1 is a reference to the potential kinsman redeemer, who had the right, before Boaz did, to redeem Ruth. But the guy refused. And so, Boaz addresses him with the Hebrew expression, Poloni Almoni, which basically means, Mr. So-and-so, or Mr. What's-his-name.

And that's just a way of saying, this guy doesn't deserve to have his name remembered. So, come over here and sit down, Mr. So-and-so. By the way, sometimes a character's name gets withheld.

In 1 Samuel 17, David doesn't refer to Goliath by his name. He refers to him as an uncircumcised Philistine. Kind of a put-down.

He's not going to dignify him by giving him his name. So, names are fascinating. Now, we always have to be careful not to build a castle where the Bible's only built a little shack.

And sometimes, not every name is significant, and we don't want to over-read the Bible. That's where commentaries can help us. They can remind us that maybe we're making a little bit too much out of a certain name.

But a lot of times, these names have meaning. I think of the name Isaac Yitzhak in Genesis. His name means laughter.

And that's a theme, a sub-theme, through the whole story. I mean, when he's born, Sarah's laughter of joy replaces the laughter of disbelief. And God, I think, gets the last laugh because He says, You're going to name the boy Isaac.

So, every time they called in laughter for supper, they were reminded that they had laughed in the face of God's promises. But then, they laughed with joy. Sarah laughed with joy when she finally had a son.

Something else that we should pay attention to would be what I'm going to call designations. You know, sometimes the narrator will give us, or actually, it could be in the character's speech, where they will describe a character a certain way. In fact, I already mentioned David referring to Goliath as an uncircumcised Philistine.

That's how he designates him. Here's another example. In Genesis 21:9, you get a sense at how much Sarah resents the Egyptian slave Hagar.

And when the text says, But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking. Actually, what I meant to say there is that she doesn't refer to him by the name Ishmael. She withholds the name.

And it's subtle, but it really shows her, you know, disdain. She doesn't want to recognize this child. Later, I think you see the text betraying David's attitude towards Bathsheba by mentioning her as a woman or the woman, even though her name had already been given.

Sometimes it can happen the other way. A character can emerge from anonymity. That's the case with David.

You read the account of his anointing in 1 Samuel 16, verses 1-13. And you have this parade of sons. And finally, the last one comes, and the narrator withholds his name, David, until the very moment when he is anointed, and he is elevated.

All right. So that will give you a good handle on how to study the people who make these stories interesting. Again, take time to classify the characters, not just slapping a label on them, but noticing how they function in the story.

Is their name significant? How does the writer describe them? Are we told anything about their physical characteristics? So we've talked about A for action. We've talked about C for characters. Now, the next feature of the narrative is to consider what the characters and the narrator says.

So T stands for talking. Highly technical term, I know, but that works out pretty well, doesn't it? Near the end of *A River Runs Through It*, a semi-autobiographical novella by Norman MacLean. Norman and his father, the Reverend John MacLean, are reminiscing about the tragic death of Norman's brother, Paul.

He was the youngest brother. So when the elder MacLean asked his son if he shared all the details he knew about the death of the younger son, Paul, Norman said everything. His father replied, it's not much, is it? Norman responded, no, but you can love completely without complete understanding.

And in agreeing, his father ended the conversation and said, "Yes, that I have known and preached. And I think Norman's response really captures the message of that novella. You can love completely without complete understanding.

Well, when you read an Old Testament narrative, you have to focus on the statements that the characters made. Just like that novella, *A River Runs Through It*, where you really get the big idea. You get the message in the dialogue between the father and son near the end of the novel.

That's what you see in the Old Testament narrative. The statements that the characters make, as well as the editorial statements that are shared by the narrator, we'll talk about those in just a moment. But that talking plays a big role in shaping the story's meaning.

So the place to start is what the characters say. Robert Alter is one who really helped me understand this. Cynthia Miller, now Cynthia Miller Naldea, notes that speech permeates the Bible from the creative word of divine speech in Genesis to the decrees of a Persian king at the end of Chronicles.

You know, what's interesting is Joshua is a narrative book, and chapter one, while it has a narrative structure, is almost entirely speech. The same thing happens in 1 Samuel 15. 1 Samuel 15 is a fascinating story, and yet most of that story is dialogue between King Saul and the prophet Samuel, as well as some instructions that the Lord gives to the prophet Samuel.

The David-Goliath, or the David versus Saul and Goliath narrative in 1 Samuel 17, is another example. You know, the action doesn't take very long, but it's some of the things that the characters say, especially David. And so we're always looking at what these characters say.

And Robert Alter is one who said that the dialogue carries a huge freight of meaning. So if you want to get meaning across to your listeners, one way to do that is to put that in the mouth of the characters. Now, I want to qualify what I just said.

By putting that in the mouth of the characters, I don't mean, I don't mean at all that the biblical narrators made these up and said, yeah, I want to communicate this message, so I'm going to have David say this, whether or not he really did. No, we believe that if the Bible says David said this, that David actually said that. It's just that the narrator, out of all of these details that he could put into the telling of this story, chooses the ones that make the point that he wants to make.

So very quickly, what is the function then of this talking on the part of the characters? When the characters are, you know, I say they're giving speeches, but they're just sometimes having conversations as we do. What does it do? Well, there are at least four roles. One is that it gives us insight into their character traits.

Again, rather than the narrator telling us things like, well, Esau is a man who gave into his cravings. We see that when we hear him say to his brother Jacob, give me some of that red stuff, red stuff. That's literally what he said to him.

Or Abigail, the writer, biblical narrator, doesn't say she was an amazing woman who was incredibly wise and a very powerful communicator, doesn't have to. All we do is read her lengthy speech to David, not to take revenge against her foolish husband. And we just go, "Wow, that just blows me away.

She is so wise. And wow, does she know how to use a metaphor? Does she know how to turn a phrase? So we get insight into the character's character. We get insight into what they're like.

Secondly, these speeches of the characters often give us an indication as to the meaning of the entire narrative. And I mentioned already, Robert Alter said, dialogue is made to carry a large part of the freight of meaning. Maybe one of the best-known examples of this is at the end of the story of Joseph in Genesis 49.

I think he summarizes the whole meaning of those narratives about himself, as well as the immediate story, when he says, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. Boom, there it is. Genesis 50:20, that is the big idea of the Joseph stories that appear in Genesis 37 through 50.

Again, when you go to 1 Samuel 13 or 1 Samuel 17, I mentioned 34 to 37 and then verses 45 to 47. I think those really provide the key to the David and Goliath story. In fact, I want to read to you what David says in 1 Samuel 17.

His first speech, when he's standing before Saul, and he's volunteering to go fight the giant, and Saul said, "You can't go out against this Philistine and fight him, you're only a young man. He's been a warrior from his youth. But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep.

When a lion or bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it, and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it, and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear.

This uncircumcised Philistine, and you hear that little expression, this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine. And then when he faces Goliath in later in the chapter, chapter 17, verses 45 through 47, Goliath cursed David.

He says, come here, I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals. And here's David's reply. David said to the Philistine, verse 45, you come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

This day, the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day, I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves, for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands.

And that really summarizes the meaning of that narrative, doesn't it? That the battle is the Lord's, that it's those who have faith in the living God who are going to experience victory. So we ought to look to speeches, whether they're just short statements or a longer speech like the one that I read to you. There's a third role of speech, and that is, sometimes it has a summarizing function.

This is often the case with poetry. Sometimes when you're reading a narrative, you're going to come to a section of poetry. One of the first examples is in Genesis 2.23 where Adam breaks out in poetry when God creates the woman, and he's celebrating God's creation of a suitable helper for him.

And then in 1 Samuel 2.1-10, Hannah's speech, really this outburst of praise, this prayer, this song has more of a summarizing function, and it actually highlights all the themes that are going to be developed in the book of Samuel. So that's important as well. Finally, speech can highlight a contrast.

Again, you look at what Esau says versus what Jacob does, and you get a sense of the difference between those characters. Or Joseph's refusal when Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him, and he says, how can I do this great evil and sin against the Lord? And you see a contrast with her two-word bluntness, which is basically, come lie with me. Just a couple of words needed in Hebrew.

All right, so that's the character speech. Now, let's think a little bit about what the narrator says. And this is where we need to pay attention to what I would call insider information or editorial comment.

I mean, the narrator's telling the story, but occasionally it's almost like they hit the pause button and say, by the way, you need to know this about the character. Or they will make some kind of comment about the character that we wouldn't ordinarily know. And at that point, they're doing more than telling the story.

That's why some literary scholars or Bible scholars refer to the omniscient narrator, because it seems like he knows everything. Yeah, he doesn't know everything like God knows everything. But as he's telling the story, he will give us, that's why I like the expression insider information, that sometimes the characters don't know.

I mean, at the beginning of Genesis 22, the account where God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, the narrator tells us, the reader, at the very outset, that the events that we're about to hear were really a God-given test. That God was testing Abraham. But Abraham didn't know that, did he? Genesis 38 provides us with another example of the narrator's omniscience.

Remember when those sons started dying? In Genesis 38:7, the narrator discloses that Ur died because he was wicked in Yahweh's sight and Yahweh killed him. And then he does the same thing in verse 9 when he reveals Onan's motives for refusing to impregnate Tamar and to carry out the duty of the levirate marriage. So we're given information that Judah doesn't know that.

He thinks that Tamar is the problem. And we might think that too, if the narrator hadn't said, by the way, these guys both were killed because they did evil in Yahweh's sight. So we read the story, or if somebody reads it to us, we hear the story through a different lens, don't we? We know already something that's going on.

So those are the kinds of things that we have to pay attention to and notice as we're reading a narrative. All right, so far we've considered the action or the plot. We've considered the characters, and we've considered the talking, both what the characters say and also insider information that the narrator shares with us.

Now we need to turn our attention to the final major element in our exegetical process, and that is, the setting. And that's going to be our topic for the next session.

This is Dr. Stephen D. Matthewson in a series on preaching Old Testament narratives. This is session number four, an overview of the exegetical process [Acts], analyzing the characters, and talking.