

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

**Abstract:**

Dr. Steven D. Mathewson provides a comprehensive guide for **preaching Old Testament narratives** by comparing the exegetical process to a mountain climb. He introduces the **ACTS acronym**, which stands for **Action, Characters, Talking, and Setting**, as a practical framework for studying biblical stories. This specific session emphasizes **analyzing the plot**, breaking it down into four essential stages: **exposition, crisis, resolution, and conclusion**. Mathewson encourages preachers to identify the **author's theological intent** and the **central idea** of a story rather than merely extracting moralistic bullet points. He also highlights literary techniques such as **irony and repetition** to help readers better understand the message within historical accounts. Throughout the lesson, he stresses that while **rigorous study** is necessary, it must always be supported by **consistent prayer**.

**Briefing Document:**

Briefing Document: Analyzing Plot in Old Testament Narratives

Executive Summary

This document synthesizes the third session of Dr. Steven D. Mathewson's series on preaching Old Testament narratives. The core objective is to transition from understanding the biblical text (the "ascent") to delivering a sermon that applies its meaning to listeners (the "descent"). The session introduces the **ACTS** exegetical framework—Action, Characters, Talking, and Setting—with a specific deep dive into **Action (Plot)**.

Key takeaways include:

- **Unit of Thought:** Preachers must select entire stories rather than isolated paragraphs to ensure the narrative resolves.
- **The Plot-Driven Nature of Narrative:** Biblical stories are primarily plot-driven, following a structure of exposition, crisis, resolution, and occasionally a formal conclusion.
- **The Ethical Thrust:** Narratives are not merely historical accounts; they are theological tools designed to teach God's people how to live.
- **Literary Techniques:** Identifying repetition, irony, and the pace of narration is essential for uncovering the author's intended emphasis and the "big idea" of the text.

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The Exegetical Journey: The Mountain Analogy

The process of preaching Old Testament narratives is compared to climbing Long's Peak in Colorado. It consists of two distinct phases:

1. **The Ascent:** Moving from the raw text to a comprehensive understanding of the "ethical thrust" or the message the author intended to communicate.
2. **The Descent:** Shaping the discovered meaning into a sermon that effectively unpacks and applies the text to the lives of contemporary listeners.

Old Testament narratives require a different hermeneutical adjustment than New Testament epistles or the book of Proverbs, as they communicate theology through story rather than technical, tightly argued logic.

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Text Selection and the "Unit of Thought"

Selecting a narrative text requires identifying a "biblical unit of thought." Unlike New Testament epistles, where a single paragraph may suffice, Old Testament narratives require the inclusion of the entire story for the message to be clear.

Identification of Narrative Boundaries

Boundaries of a story are determined by the plot and specific literary clues:

- **Changes in Place:** For example, Genesis 18:33 signals the end of a narrative when Abraham returns home.
  - **Changes in Time:** Phrases like "after these things" (Genesis 15:1).
  - **Changes in Persons:** The introduction of new characters or the departure of existing ones (e.g., Samuel going home in 1 Samuel 15).
  - **Resolution:** A unit is incomplete if the story has not resolved its central conflict. For instance, preaching only Genesis 38:1–11 provides only the setup without the resolution, leaving the message obscured.
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## The ACTS Framework

To break down the complexity of narrative literature, the session utilizes the **ACTS** acronym as a mechanical process that eventually becomes intuitive.

Letter	Category	Definition/Focus
A	<b>Action</b>	The plot or the way the writer has shaped the story.
C	<b>Characters</b>	The individuals involved in the narrative and their development.
T	<b>Talking</b>	Dialogue and speech, which are primary vehicles for communicating the message.
S	<b>Setting</b>	The literary, historical, and cultural context of the narrative.

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### Detailed Analysis of Action (Plot)

Plot is the way the writer has shaped the flow of action. Biblical plots generally consist of four main stages:

1. **Exposition:** Background information that sets up the story, introduces characters, and establishes the situation.
2. **Crisis:** Also referred to as complication, conflict, or tension. This is the heart of the story; without a crisis, there is no narrative. A story may contain a series of crises.
3. **Resolution:** The point where the plot descends from the climax toward a solution to the original conflict. This can result in a "happy ending" (Comedy) or a "sad ending" (Tragedy).
4. **Conclusion (Denouement):** An optional final section that ties up loose ends, summarizing the outcome or the fate of the characters after the resolution.

### Plot Shapes

- **Comedy (U-Shaped Plot):** The story begins in prosperity, descends into tragedy/crisis, and returns to prosperity (e.g., Ruth, Esther, David and Goliath).
- **Tragedy:** The story ends in a state of loss or disaster (e.g., the life of Samson, King Saul, or the book of Judges).

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### Literary Features in Plot Analysis

Beyond the basic structure, several literary devices help identify the author's intent and emphasis.

#### Repetition

While modern English style often views repetition as redundant, in Old Testament narrative, it is a virtue used for emphasis.

- **Keywords:** The repetition of *hesed* (loyal love) in Ruth.
- **Phrases:** David's repeated cry of "my son" regarding Absalom.

## Time and Pace

The relationship between **narrated time** (the actual duration of events) and **narration time** (the amount of text devoted to those events) reveals the author's focus.

- If twenty years are summarized in a few verses (exposition) but a single hour is described over several chapters, the author is signaling that the shorter timeframe contains the "heart" of the story.

## Archetypes and Type Scenes

- **Archetypes/Plot Motifs:** Common story patterns such as the "hero story," the "journey," "temptation stories" (e.g., Genesis 3), or "rescue stories."
- **Type Scenes:** Recurring settings that signal specific themes, such as encounters at a well, stories involving a barren mother, or the theme of the younger brother being chosen over the older.

## Irony

Irony involves a discrepancy between what is said and what happens.

- **Verbal Irony:** Sarcasm, such as Michal's remark to David that he "honored himself" (2 Samuel 6:20).
- **Dramatic Irony:** When a character's words are truer than they realize, or when the reader knows a truth the character does not (e.g., Sisera's request to Jael in Judges 4:20).

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## Methodological Guidelines for Preachers

The document concludes with practical advice for the exegetical process:

- **Authorial Intent:** The goal is to discover what the writer intended to convey. Authors do not manipulate facts, but they do select specific details to communicate a prophetic, theological message.
- **Search for the "Big Idea":** Avoid reducing narratives to simplistic "bullet point" lists (e.g., "Five ways to deal with anger") that ignore the author's actual intent.
- **Original Work First:** Preachers should study the biblical text and form their own analysis before consulting commentaries.
- **Avoid "Shop Talk":** Technical literary terms (like "denouement") are helpful for study but should not be used in the pulpit.
- **The Necessity of Prayer:** Dr. Mathewson emphasizes that careful study must be saturated with prayer, citing the "Puritan practice" of taking material before God on one's knees to seek the Spirit's help in understanding and response.

## Study Guide:

### Study Guide: Analyzing Plot in Old Testament Narratives

This study guide is based on the teachings of Dr. Steven D. Mathewson regarding the exegetical process for Old Testament narratives, specifically focusing on the analysis of plot and the "ACTS" acronym.

#### Short-Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. What does the acronym "ACTS" stand for in the context of Dr. Mathewson's exegetical process?
2. How does Dr. Mathewson use the analogy of climbing Long's Peak to describe the task of preaching?
3. What constitutes a "unit of thought" when selecting a text for an Old Testament narrative sermon?
4. According to the text, why should a preacher perform their own study of the biblical text before consulting commentaries?
5. What is the difference between "narrated time" and "narration time" in a plot analysis?
6. In literary terms, how are "comedy" and "tragedy" defined regarding the resolution of a story?
7. How does repetition function in Old Testament narratives compared to modern English writing?
8. What is the "ethical thrust" of a narrative, and why is it important to the author's intent?
9. Describe the difference between verbal irony and dramatic irony as presented in the source.
10. What role does prayer play in the exegetical process according to Dr. Mathewson?

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#### Answer Key

1. **What does the acronym "ACTS" stand for in the context of Dr. Mathewson's exegetical process?** The acronym stands for Action (or Plot), Characters, Talking (Dialogue), and Setting. These four elements represent the categories an interpreter must analyze to understand how a biblical story communicates its message.
2. **How does Dr. Mathewson use the analogy of climbing Long's Peak to describe the task of preaching?** Preaching is compared to a mountain journey consisting of an ascent and a descent. The ascent involves moving from the text to a

conceptual understanding of the author's message, while the descent involves shaping and delivering a sermon that applies that meaning to the listeners' lives.

3. **What constitutes a "unit of thought" when selecting a text for an Old Testament narrative sermon?** A unit of thought in narrative is an entire story rather than a single paragraph or a small cluster of verses. The limits of this unit are determined by the plot—the beginning and ending of the action—and are often signaled by changes in time, place, or characters.
4. **According to the text, why should a preacher perform their own study of the biblical text before consulting commentaries?** Personal study allows the preacher to think through the text's actions and meanings independently first. Once this work is done, commentaries serve as "discussion partners" to answer specific questions or provide further insight into the interpreter's findings.
5. **What is the difference between "narrated time" and "narration time" in a plot analysis?** Narrated time refers to the actual span of time the events in the story take to occur, such as several years. Narration time refers to the amount of space or time the writer takes to tell that part of the story, which reveals where the author is placing the most emphasis.
6. **In literary terms, how are "comedy" and "tragedy" defined regarding the resolution of a story?** A comedy features a "U-shaped plot" that starts in prosperity, descends into tragedy or crisis, and returns to prosperity with a happy ending. A tragedy, by contrast, is a story that concludes with a sad ending, such as the accounts of Samson or King Saul.
7. **How does repetition function in Old Testament narratives compared to modern English writing?** While modern English often views repetition as redundant or a "sin," Old Testament writers used it as a virtue to emphasize key themes or points. It functions similarly to using bold print or italics today, highlighting important keywords, phrases, or motifs.
8. **What is the "ethical thrust" of a narrative, and why is it important to the author's intent?** The ethical thrust is the message or instruction the writer intended to communicate regarding how God's people should live. Identifying this helps the preacher avoid simply listing "bullet points" and instead focuses on the theological point the author designed the story to carry out.
9. **Describe the difference between verbal irony and dramatic irony as presented in the source.** Verbal irony occurs when a character says one thing but intends the opposite, such as Michal sarcastically telling David he "honored himself." Dramatic irony occurs when a character makes a statement that is truer than they realize, or when they lack information that the audience already knows to be true.
10. **What role does prayer play in the exegetical process according to Dr. Mathewson?** Prayer is considered essential for preaching with accuracy and

power, as the study must be saturated with the Spirit's presence. While it is not a substitute for careful study, careful study can never be a substitute for seeking the Spirit's help in understanding and responding to the text.

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### Essay Questions

1. **The Challenge of Modern Preaching vs. Narrative Structure:** Dr. Mathewson notes that modern audiences often prefer "bullet points," yet biblical narratives are plot-driven and subtle. Discuss the hazards of forcing an Old Testament story into a "four steps to a healthy marriage" format and how a preacher can honor the author's original literary strategy instead.
  2. **The Mechanics of Plot Analysis:** Explain the four main stages of plot—exposition, crisis, resolution, and conclusion (denouement). Use the example of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 to illustrate how these stages flow together, even when the transitions are "imperceptible."
  3. **Literary Motifs and Archetypes:** The text mentions several story types, such as hero stories, journey stories, temptation stories, and rescue stories. Analyze how identifying these archetypes helps an interpreter understand the "central idea" of a narrative and compare it to other similar biblical accounts.
  4. **Authorial Intent and Theology:** Dr. Mathewson argues that narrative writers use the details of historical accounts to communicate theology without manipulating the facts. Discuss the concept of "ideology" or "agenda" in the context of biblical writing and how it relates to the Spirit's direction of the author.
  5. **The Role of Technical Language in the Pulpit:** While scholars use technical terms like "denouement," "type scenes," and "mechanical layouts," the source warns against using this "shop talk" while preaching. Discuss the balance between using technical tools for deep study and the necessity of translating those findings into clear, engaging language for a congregation.
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### Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
<b>ACTS</b>	An acronym for the four-step exegetical process: Action (Plot), Characters, Talking (Dialogue), and Setting.
<b>Archetype (Plot Motif)</b>	A recurring story structure or pattern, such as a hero's struggle, a journey involving growth, or a rescue narrative.
<b>Comedy</b>	A story with a "U-shaped plot" that moves from prosperity through tragedy back to a happy ending or prosperous resolution.
<b>Conclusion (Denouement)</b>	An optional final stage of a plot that ties up loose ends and summarizes the fate of characters after the primary crisis is resolved.

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<b>Crisis (Conflict)</b>	The stage of a plot where a problem, tension, or complication is introduced; it is the essential "heart" of a story.
<b>Dramatic Irony</b>	A literary device where a character speaks or acts without perceiving a truth that the audience or reader already understands.
<b>Ethical Thrust</b>	The moral or theological message an author intends to communicate to instruct God's people on how to live.
<b>Exegesis</b>	The process of studying a text to understand the author's original meaning and intent.
<b>Exposition</b>	The background information at the start of a story that introduces characters and the initial situation to set up the plot.
<b>Hesed</b>	A Hebrew term for "loyal love," often cited as a keyword that is repeated for emphasis in books like Ruth.
<b>Resolution</b>	The stage of the plot where the tension is released and a solution to the original conflict is reached.
<b>Type Scene</b>	A narrative pattern where stories occur in specific settings (like a well) or involve specific character tropes (like a barren mother).
<b>Verbal Irony</b>	A statement in which a character says one thing but intends the opposite, often used as sarcasm.

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