

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

**Abstract:**

In this session, **Dr. Steven D. Mathewson** explores the second and third components of the **ACTS model** for interpreting Old Testament narratives: **characters** and **talking**. He emphasizes that while modern novels use extensive physical descriptions, biblical writers employ a **spare style**, meaning any specific detail provided about a person's appearance or name is **highly significant** to the plot. Characters are classified by their functions—such as **protagonists, antagonists, or foils**—and their traits are typically revealed through **behavior** rather than explicit narration. The author also explains that **dialogue** is a primary tool for conveying a story's **theological meaning** or summarizing its main themes. Furthermore, the **narrator** occasionally provides **insider information**, offering the reader a perspective of **omniscience** that the characters themselves lack. Ultimately, Mathewson argues that analyzing these literary elements is essential for uncovering the **deeper message** of the text.

**Briefing Document:**

Exegetical Process in Old Testament Narratives: Character Analysis and Dialogue  
Executive Summary

The exegetical process for Old Testament (OT) narratives requires a specialized framework to extract meaning from texts that are often lean, spare, and strategically composed. Utilizing the "ACTS" acronym (Action/Plot, Characters, Talking, Setting), this analysis focuses on the **Characters (C)** and **Talking (T)**.

Characterization in OT narrative functions like a "quick pencil sketch" rather than the detailed portraits common in modern Western literature. Consequently, every physical detail, name, and behavior provided by the narrator is highly significant. Dialogue carries the "freight of meaning," often providing the key to a story's theological purpose. By analyzing character classifications, symbolic naming, and the "insider

information" provided by an omniscient narrator, readers can discern the deeper moral and redemptive-historical messages of the text.

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### Character Analysis: Function and Classification

While Old Testament characters are compelling and drive the action, their roles must be analyzed in relation to the plot. Classification should be kept simple to serve the purpose of understanding and preaching the narrative.

#### Character Categories

The primary distinction is between major and minor characters based on the size of their role. Within major characters, literary roles include:

Role	Definition
<b>Protagonist</b>	The central character, indispensable to the plot; often, but not always, the hero.
<b>Antagonist</b>	The main adversary or force arrayed against the central character.
<b>Foil</b>	A character who stands in contrast or parallel to the protagonist to heighten the reader's understanding.

#### Dynamic Roles and Shifting Functions

Labels are less important than the character's function within a specific episode. A character's role can shift across different narratives:

- **David vs. Saul:** In the story of David and Goliath, Goliath is a contrasting figure, but the real literary conflict is between the protagonist (David) and the antagonist (Saul), as the narrator argues David is the better choice for king.
  - **David vs. Abigail:** In the story of Nabal, David acts as a protagonist who is talked out of a foolish mistake by Abigail, who serves as the actual hero of the episode.
  - **David vs. Uriah:** In the account of David's sin with Bathsheba, David is the protagonist but certainly not the hero, while Uriah serves as a righteous foil.
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#### Means of Characterization

OT narrators rarely use the elaborate descriptions found in modern novels. Because details are scarce, their appearance indicates high importance.

##### 1. Physical Descriptions

When the narrator includes a physical trait, it usually prepares the reader for a specific plot point or theological irony:

- **Ehud and Eglon:** Ehud is described as "left-handed" to explain how he sneaked a dagger past guards who only frisked his left side. Eglon is "very fat," a detail that facilitates his assassination (the fat covering the blade) and serves as a crass pun on his name (meaning "calf"), portraying him as a fatted calf for slaughter.
- **Joseph:** Described as "good-looking" to provide context for the advances of Potiphar's wife.

- **Esau:** His hairiness is noted to explain how Jacob was able to impersonate him using animal skins.

## 2. Behavior ("Show, Don't Tell")

Narrators typically reveal nature through actions rather than editorializing. For example, in the story of Micah and the Danites (Judges 17-18), the narrator does not explicitly call Micah corrupt; instead, Micah's immoral actions speak for themselves. Readers are encouraged to evaluate these behaviors against the backdrop of the Torah (specifically Deuteronomy).

## 3. Symbolic Naming

Names in the OT often reflect birth circumstances, virtues, or ironic destinies:

- **Nabal:** Means "fool."
- **Abraham:** Changed from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of many nations") before he had children.
- **Isaac:** Means "laughter," reflecting both the disbelief and the eventual joy of his parents.
- **The Book of Ruth:** Names drive the irony of the story. *Elimelech* ("My God is king") abandons the promised land. *Naomi* ("Pleasant") asks to be called *Marah* ("Bitter"). *Boaz* means "swift strength." The potential redeemer who refuses his duty is called *Poloni Almoni* ("Mr. So-and-so"), a slight indicating he does not deserve to be remembered.

## 4. Designations and Anonymity

How a character is addressed reveals status or attitude. David refuses to call Goliath by name, referring to him only as an "uncircumcised Philistine." Conversely, a character's name may be withheld for dramatic effect, such as David's name being revealed only at the moment of his anointing in 1 Samuel 16.

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## The Function of "Talking" (Dialogue and Speech)

Dialogue is a primary vehicle for communicating the "big idea" or message of a novella or biblical narrative.

### Roles of Character Speech

1. **Insight into Traits:** Speech reveals character where the narrator is silent. Abigail's wisdom is demonstrated through her sophisticated use of metaphor and persuasive rhetoric.
2. **Indicating Narrative Meaning:** Key theological themes are often placed in the mouths of characters. Joseph's statement in Genesis 50:20—"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good"—summarizes the entire Joseph cycle. David's speech in 1 Samuel 17:45-47 establishes the theme that "the battle is the Lord's."

3. **Summarizing and Highlighting Themes:** Poetic outbursts, such as Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2, serve as a programmatic summary of the themes developed throughout the entire book.
4. **Highlighting Contrast:** Differences in character are exposed through their speech patterns, such as the contrast between Joseph's principled refusal of Potiphar's wife and her blunt, two-word solicitation.

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### The Role of the Narrator

The OT narrator is often described as "omniscient," possessing and sharing "insider information" that the characters themselves do not have.

- **Editorial Comments:** The narrator may hit the "pause button" to provide crucial context. In Genesis 22, the narrator informs the reader that God is "testing" Abraham, though Abraham is unaware of this fact.
- **Disclosing Motives:** In Genesis 38, the narrator reveals that Judah's sons died because they were "wicked in Yahweh's sight," info that Judah did not possess. This shapes the reader's perspective, ensuring they see the events through a theological lens rather than just a human one.

## Study Guide:

### Study Guide: Analyzing Characters and Dialogue 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. It focuses specifically on two components of the **ACTS** acronym: **Characters** and **Talking**.

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#### Executive Summary of the Exegetical Process [ACTS]

The exegetical process—the act of drawing out the meaning of a text—can be organized using the word **ACTS**. While the "A" stands for **Plot** (action), this session focuses on "C" and "T."

- **Characters (C):** Identifying the roles and functions of the people within the story.
- **Talking (T):** Analyzing both the dialogue spoken by characters and the editorial comments provided by the narrator.

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### I. Character Analysis

#### Classifying Characters

While literary scholars use complex systems, a simple approach is best for preaching.

The primary distinction is between **major** and **minor** characters based on the size of their role. Within major characters, three labels are helpful for understanding function:

Category	Definition
<b>Protagonist</b>	The central, indispensable character; often the hero, but not always.
<b>Antagonist</b>	The main adversary or force arrayed against the protagonist.
<b>Foil</b>	A character who stands in contrast to the main character to heighten the reader's understanding of that character's traits.

### Means of Characterization

Old Testament writers use a "lean, spare style" similar to a quick pencil sketch rather than the elaborate descriptions found in modern Western literature.

1. **Scarcity of Detail:** Because physical descriptions are rare, any detail provided is highly significant. For example, Ehud's left-handedness and Eglon's obesity in Judges 3 are critical to the mechanics of the plot and the story's irony.
2. **Behavior:** Narrators typically "show rather than tell." Instead of labeling a character as "corrupt," the writer describes their immoral actions (e.g., Micah and the Danites) and expects the reader to evaluate them against the backdrop of the Torah.
3. **Names:** Names often reflect a character's nature, their circumstances at birth, or a hoped-for virtue.
  - *Nabal:* Means "fool."
  - *Abraham:* Means "father of many nations."
  - *Ruth:* Means "friendship."
4. **Designations:** How a character is referred to (or the withholding of a name) signals their status or the speaker's attitude. David calls Goliath an "uncircumcised Philistine" as a put-down, while the narrator in 1 Samuel 16 withholds David's name until the moment of his anointing to create dramatic effect.

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## II. Analyzing Talking (Speech and Dialogue)

Speech permeates biblical narrative and carries a "huge freight of meaning." The narrator chooses specific dialogue to emphasize the point of the story.

### Functions of Character Speech

- **Insight into Traits:** Speech reveals character nature more effectively than a narrator's description. Abigail's wisdom is proven through her lengthy, metaphorical plea to David.
- **Indicating Theme:** A character's statement often summarizes the big idea of a narrative. Joseph's declaration in Genesis 50:20—"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good"—is the interpretive key to his entire life story.
- **Summarizing Function:** Poetry or songs often appear within narratives to highlight developed themes, such as Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2.

- **Highlighting Contrast:** Differences in speech patterns can underscore character differences, such as the contrast between Potiphar's wife's blunt demands and Joseph's lengthy theological refusal.

#### The Role of the Narrator

The narrator often acts as an **omniscient** voice, providing "insider information" that the characters themselves do not possess. This allows the reader to see the story through a specific lens, such as knowing that Abraham's ordeal in Genesis 22 was a "test" from the very beginning.

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### III. Review Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the source context.

1. What does the "C" and the "T" stand for in Dr. Mathewson's ACTS acronym?
2. How does a "foil" function within a biblical narrative?
3. According to the text, why is the physical description of characters like Ehud and Eglon important?
4. Why is it significant that the Old Testament narrator "shows" rather than "tells" regarding character nature?
5. What is the significance of the name "Elimelech" in the book of Ruth?
6. How does David use "designations" to describe Goliath in 1 Samuel 17?
7. What does Robert Alter mean when he says dialogue carries a "huge freight of meaning"?
8. How does Joseph's speech in Genesis 50:20 function within the larger Joseph narrative?
9. What is "insider information" in the context of the narrator's role?
10. Why might a narrator withhold a character's name, as seen in the story of David's anointing?

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### IV. Quiz Answer Key

1. **Question:** What does the "C" and the "T" stand for in Dr. Mathewson's ACTS acronym? **Answer:** In the ACTS framework, "C" stands for Characters and "T" stands for Talking. These categories help organizers analyze how the people and the dialogue (both from characters and the narrator) drive the meaning of the story.
2. **Question:** How does a "foil" function within a biblical narrative? **Answer:** A foil is a character who stands in contrast to the main character to heighten the reader's understanding of that protagonist. Occasionally, a foil may also offer a parallel that helps clarify the main character's role or choices.
3. **Question:** According to the text, why is the physical description of characters like Ehud and Eglon important? **Answer:** Because physical details are scarce in Old

Testament narrative, their presence indicates they are essential to the plot. Ehud's left-handedness allowed him to hide a weapon, while Eglon's fatness is used both for dark humor and to explain how the weapon was concealed after the assassination.

4. **Question:** Why is it significant that the Old Testament narrator "shows" rather than "tells" regarding character nature? **Answer:** By showing behavior rather than using labels, the narrator invites the reader to observe actions and evaluate them against the standards of the Torah. This approach provides insight into a character's nature through their choices and interactions rather than editorial summaries.
  5. **Question:** What is the significance of the name "Elimelech" in the book of Ruth? **Answer:** Elimelech's name means "my God is king," which creates a sense of irony in the story. Despite his name, he turns his back on God as king by leaving the promised land for Moab during a famine.
  6. **Question:** How does David use "designations" to describe Goliath in 1 Samuel 17? **Answer:** David refers to Goliath as an "uncircumcised Philistine" rather than using his name. This serves as a put-down and a way to avoid dignifying the adversary with a personal name.
  7. **Question:** What does Robert Alter mean when he says dialogue carries a "huge freight of meaning"? **Answer:** He means that dialogue is a primary tool used by biblical writers to communicate the central message or "big idea" of a story. Instead of the narrator explaining the point, the characters' speeches often reveal the theological or moral essence of the narrative.
  8. **Question:** How does Joseph's speech in Genesis 50:20 function within the larger Joseph narrative? **Answer:** Joseph's statement summarizes the meaning of the entire narrative sequence from Genesis 37 to 50. It explicitly identifies the theme of divine providence—that God intended the harm meant by others for a greater good.
  9. **Question:** What is "insider information" in the context of the narrator's role? **Answer:** Insider information refers to editorial comments made by an omniscient narrator that reveal facts unknown to the characters. For example, the narrator tells the reader that God is testing Abraham in Genesis 22, though Abraham himself is unaware of the test.
  10. **Question:** Why might a narrator withhold a character's name, as seen in the story of David's anointing? **Answer:** Withholding a name can be a literary device used to create suspense or to emphasize a specific moment of elevation. In 1 Samuel 16, David remains anonymous through a "parade of sons" until the exact moment he is anointed, making his introduction more powerful.
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## V. Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast the characterization styles of modern Western literature with Old Testament narratives. Why is understanding these differences crucial for biblical exegesis?
2. Using the examples of David, Saul, and Goliath, explain how character roles (Protagonist, Antagonist, Foil) can be more complex than simply "hero" or "villain."
3. Discuss the role of "irony" in the names of Old Testament characters. Provide at least three examples from the text and explain how these names contribute to the theological message of their respective stories.
4. Analyze the function of speech in the David and Goliath narrative. How do the various speeches by David, Saul, and Goliath shape the reader's understanding of faith and divine victory?
5. Examine the concept of the "Omniscient Narrator." How do editorial comments and "insider information" change the way a reader experiences a biblical story compared to the characters within that story?

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## VI. Glossary of Key Terms

- **ACTS:** An acronym representing the four features of narrative analysis: Plot (Action), Characters, Talking, and Setting.
- **Antagonist:** The main adversary or the forces arrayed against the central character in a story.
- **Designation:** A way of describing or referring to a character (e.g., "the woman" or "uncircumcised Philistine") that reveals status or attitude.
- **Exegesis:** The process of drawing out the meaning of a text to understand what it means.
- **Foil:** A character who provides a contrast or parallel to the main character, thereby highlighting the main character's traits.
- **Omniscient Narrator:** A storytelling voice that possesses all-knowing "insider information," including character motives and divine intentions unknown to the characters themselves.
- **Poloni Almoni:** A Hebrew expression meaning "Mr. So-and-so" or "Mr. What's-his-name," used in Ruth 4:1 to refer to a character who does not deserve to be remembered.
- **Protagonist:** The central, indispensable character of a narrative who drives the plot.
- **Torah:** The first five books of the Bible (the Law), which provide the moral and theological backdrop against which later narratives are read.