

**Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,  
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,  
Session 5, Study Guide:  
Overview of the Exegetical Process [ACTS]:  
Analyzing the Setting and Conclusions**

**Abstract:**

In this lecture, Dr. Steven D. Mathewson details the final stages of his **ACTS** framework for analyzing **Old Testament narratives**, specifically focusing on the "**S**" for **setting**. He emphasizes that students of the Bible must examine both the **historical-cultural context** of a story and its **literary placement** within a book to fully grasp its meaning. To help synthesize these findings, Mathewson introduces a method for identifying the "**big idea**" of a passage, which consists of a **subject** and a **complement**. This process is further refined by observing the "**vision of God**" and the "**depravity factor**" present in the text to determine the author's theological intent. By distilling complex narratives into a single **exegetical idea**, preachers can create a bridge between ancient scripture and **timeless applications** for modern audiences. Ultimately, these tools are designed to move the interpreter from **technical exegesis** toward a clear and effective **sermon delivery**.

**Briefing Document:**

Exegetical Analysis of Old Testament Narratives: Setting and Synthesis

This briefing document synthesizes the pedagogical framework developed by Dr. Steven D. Mathewson regarding the final stages of the exegetical process for Old Testament narratives. It focuses on the dual nature of "Setting" within the ACTS framework and the methodology for distilling a narrative's "Big Idea" for theological and homiletical purposes.

Executive Summary

The interpretation of Old Testament narrative requires a systematic move from raw data to theological conclusion. Central to this process is the **ACTS** framework (Action, Characters, Talking, Setting). This session emphasizes that "Setting" is not merely a

backdrop but a critical interpretive lens consisting of both historical-cultural specifics and literary positioning.

The goal of this analysis is the discovery of the "Big Idea"—a single, unifying sentence that captures the author's intended message. By employing Haddon Robinson's Subject/Complement method and analyzing the "Vision of God" and "Depravity Factor" within a text, interpreters can bridge the gap between ancient historical accounts and timeless theological truths.

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 The ACTS Framework: A Review

Understanding Old Testament narrative involves analyzing four primary components:

Element	Description
Action	The plot and sequence of events.
Characters	The individuals involved and their development.
Talking	The dialogue and its role in revealing themes.
Setting	The physical, historical, and literary context.

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 Analyzing the Setting (The "S" in ACTS)

Setting involves two distinct but interrelated issues: the historical-cultural context and the literary placement. Dr. Mathewson compares this to researching a Civil War battle, such as Gettysburg. One must understand both the specific topography/time (July 1863) and its position in the broader war (the turning point between 1861 and 1865).

1. Historical and Cultural Setting

This covers the specific time, place, and culture of the story. Interpreters should ask:

- Where did the story happen?
- Is there significant geographical movement?
- What time of year was it?
- What was the broader status of Israel at the time?

**Examples of Significant Historical Details:**

- **Elijah (2 Kings 1:9):** Elijah's position on a hill symbolizes his authority as God's spokesman over the king.
- **Ruth:** The movement from Israel to Moab represents abandoning the covenant community. The "days when the judges ruled" signals a morally dark period where famine likely stemmed from spiritual problems.
- **David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12):** The story begins in the "springtime when kings go out to war," highlighting the crisis of David's decision to remain in Jerusalem.

## 2. Literary Setting

This refers to the narrative's position within the flow of the book or the Old Testament. The placement of a story is often intentional and provides verifying or contrasting functions.

- **Verifying Function:** The story of Solomon and the two prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16-18) immediately follows God's gift of wisdom, serving as evidence that Solomon received what he asked for.
- **Sandwiched Narratives:** The story of David, Abigail, and Nabal (1 Samuel 25) is placed between two accounts of David sparing Saul's life. This positioning reveals that while David could refrain from killing the king, he still struggled with the temptation to take revenge against a "fool" (Nabal).
- **Juxtaposition/Foil:** Genesis 38 (Judah and Tamar) is often viewed as an interruption of the Joseph story. However, it serves as a foil, contrasting Judah's lack of sexual control with Joseph's later restraint. It also establishes the line of the Messiah.
- **Mirror Image Structure:** The Book of Judges features an introduction (1:1–3:6) regarding war and idols that is mirrored in the conclusion (17–21). The final chapters show a "downward spiral" where the problems of idolatry and war (civil war) have worsened significantly.

### Drawing Conclusions: The "Big Idea"

The ultimate challenge of exegesis is synthesizing analysis into a "Big Idea"—the central, unifying theological and ethical thrust of the passage. Dr. Mathewson adopts the methodology of Haddon Robinson to achieve this clarity.

#### The Components of an Idea

An idea consists of two parts:

1. **The Subject:** What the writer is talking about. This should be stated as a question (Who, What, Why, When, Where, or How).
2. **The Complement:** What the writer is saying about the subject. This completes the thought and answers the subject question.

#### Developing the Exegetical and Homiletical Idea

The process moves from the specific to the timeless:

- **Exegetical Expression:** Stating the idea in the specific language of the text (e.g., using names like David or Abraham).
  - *Example (2 Samuel 11-12):* David must learn to accept what the grace of God has given him and what it has not.
- **Homiletical/Timeless Expression:** Translating the exegetical idea into "now language" applicable to all people.

- *Example (Universal Application):* Believers must learn to be content with God's gifts (grace) and not covet what He has withheld.

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### Analytical Tools for Synthesis

When the "Big Idea" is difficult to identify (likened to hitting a "knot" while splitting wood), two specific lenses can help:

#### 1. The Vision of God

This identifies which aspect of God's character is on display.

- **1 Samuel 17 (David and Goliath):** God's life-giving power and His role in strengthening leaders for their mission.
- **2 Samuel 11-12:** God as the "Giver of Gifts" or the God of Grace.

#### 2. The Depravity Factor

This identifies the specific sin, rebellion, or temptation addressed in the text—the "problem" that prevents people from responding correctly to the Vision of God.

- **2 Samuel 11-12:** The tendency to despise God by being discontent with the gifts He has already provided.

### Conclusion

Effective preaching of Old Testament narratives requires more than a list of moral principles. It demands a deep understanding of how setting and literary placement shape the message, and a disciplined approach to identifying the author's central theological intent through the Subject/Complement framework. This clarity allows the interpreter to retell the story with a precise aim: communicating the message God intended for His people.

## Study Guide:

### Study Guide: Analyzing Setting and Drawing Conclusions in Old Testament Narratives

This study guide is designed to facilitate a deep understanding of the final stages of the exegetical process for Old Testament narratives, specifically focusing on the element of "Setting" within the ACTS framework and the formulation of a "Big Idea."

#### Section 1: Short-Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following ten questions based on the source context. Each answer should be between two and three sentences in length.

1. What does the acronym ACTS represent in the context of narrative exegesis?
2. According to the text, what are the two primary issues a researcher must address when analyzing the "Setting" of a story?
3. How does the author use the Battle of Gettysburg to illustrate the importance of setting?

4. What does Robert Chisholm suggest regarding the details of a physical setting in a narrative?
5. How does the historical setting of 2 Samuel 11 and 12 create a "crisis" for the character of David?
6. What is the "verifying function" of the literary setting in the story of Solomon and the two prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16–18)?
7. Why is the literary placement of Genesis 38 significant to the overall narrative of Genesis 37–50?
8. According to Haddon Robinson, what are the two components required to form a "Big Idea"?
9. What is the difference between an "exegetical expression" and "timeless language" in sermon preparation?
10. Define the "Vision of God" and the "Depravity Factor" as tools for identifying a passage's central message.

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#### Section 2: Quiz Answer Key

1. **ACTS** stands for Action (or plot), Characters, Talking, and Setting. These four categories represent the "big buckets" of information that a student must analyze to understand a biblical narrative.
2. The first issue is the **historical and cultural setting**, which covers the specific time, place, and culture where the story occurs. The second issue is the **literary setting**, which concerns the position of the story within the larger flow of the book or the Old Testament.
3. The author explains that one must understand the specific location and time of the battle (July 1863 in Gettysburg) while also recognizing its position in the overall flow of the Civil War. Just as Gettysburg was a turning point that reversed the war, a biblical story must be viewed both in its immediate context and its place in the larger historical narrative.
4. Chisholm notes that while some physical details merely provide realism or mood, others can have symbolic value or contribute to the story's theme. For example, Elijah's position on top of a hill symbolizes his authority as God's spokesman over the king's messengers.
5. The story begins during the springtime when "kings typically go out to war," creating an expectation that David should be with his army. The crisis arises because David remains in Jerusalem instead of fulfilling this cultural and historical expectation, leading to his sin with Bathsheba.
6. The story of the two prostitutes immediately follows the account of God giving Solomon a wise and discerning heart in 1 Kings 3:1–15. Its literary placement confirms and verifies that Solomon actually received the wisdom he requested from God.

7. Genesis 38 interrupts the Joseph story to heighten tension and provide a contrast, or "foil," between Judah and Joseph. While Joseph resists sexual temptation in Potiphar's house, Judah is shown as a man who cannot control his sexual urges, eventually highlighting that the Messianic line would come through Judah.
8. Robinson defines the **Subject** as what the writer is talking about (stated as a question) and the **Complement** as what the writer is saying about that subject. Together, the subject and the complement distill the author's main point into one concise sentence.
9. An **exegetical expression** uses the specific language of the text, such as the names of characters like David or Abraham, to summarize the message. **Timeless language** (or a homiletical idea) translates that specific truth into a statement that applies to God's people in any time period.
10. The **Vision of God** is the specific aspect of God's character on display in a narrative, such as His grace or life-giving power. The **Depravity Factor** is the specific sin or rebellion in the text that prevents people from responding properly to that aspect of God's character.

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### Section 3: Essay Questions

**Instructions:** The following questions are designed for more in-depth reflection and analysis. No answers are provided.

1. Analyze the "downward spiral" structure of the Book of Judges as described in the text. How does the literary setting of chapters 17–21 serve as a mirror image of the book's introduction, and what does this reveal about the author's intent?
  2. Using the examples of David, Abigail, and Nabal in 1 Samuel 25, discuss how the literary placement of a story between two similar narratives can change its impact. What does this "sandwiching" technique reveal about David's character development?
  3. Explain the process of moving from exegesis to a "Big Idea." Why does the author argue that stating the subject as a journalistic question (who, what, why, when, where, or how) is essential for clarity?
  4. Compare and contrast the historical/cultural setting with the literary setting. Provide at least two examples from the text to illustrate how each type of setting influences the interpretation of a narrative.
  5. Discuss the concept of "preaching through personality" as mentioned by Phillips Brooks. How can an interpreter maintain fidelity to the author's intent while still allowing for a unique perspective in summarizing a narrative?
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## Section 4: Glossary of Key Terms

- **ACTS:** An acronym representing the four major categories of narrative analysis: Action, Characters, Talking, and Setting.
- **Big Idea:** The central, unifying theme of a passage, consisting of a subject and a complement.
- **Complement:** The part of a "Big Idea" that completes the subject by explaining what the author is saying about the topic being discussed.
- **Depravity Factor:** A tool used to identify the specific sin, rebellion, or temptation addressed in a biblical text that hinders a proper response to God.
- **Exegetical Idea:** A summary of a passage's meaning stated in the historical and grammatical terms of the original text and its characters.
- **Foil:** A literary device where one character or story is used to provide a sharp contrast to another, such as Judah being a foil to Joseph.
- **Historical and Cultural Setting:** The specific geographical location, time period, and cultural environment in which a story takes place.
- **Homiletical Idea:** Also known as the "preaching idea," this is the "Big Idea" stated in timeless language that applies to a modern audience.
- **Literary Setting:** The placement of a specific narrative within the context of the book in which it appears or within the broader flow of the Old Testament.
- **Subject:** The first component of a "Big Idea," defined as what the writer is talking about, usually framed as a question starting with "who," "what," "why," "when," "where," or "how."
- **Vision of God:** The particular aspect of God's character or nature that is emphasized or on display within a specific narrative.