14 Fresh Ways to Enjoy the Bible

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First Impressions

SUMMARY: In the "First Impressions" technique, readers identify what the biblical author shares about a character's first words, first actions, and any physical descriptors. This can give the reader an accurate thumbnail portrait of that character's traits (both positively and negatively).

PREVALENCE: By its very nature, this technique is only present in narrative texts. Many major Bible characters demonstrate this technique and some minor characters do as well. It does seem to be more prevalent in the Old Testament but can also be implemented in the four gospels and the book of Acts because they are narrative in style.

INSTRUCTION: Look closely at when major characters (and even some minor characters) are introduced for the first time in the Bible and identify their first words (look for quotation marks), first actions, and (if present) any physical descriptors shared about that person. Then reflect on how those preliminary

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findings help the reader capture an accurate portrait of that person's character (both positively and negatively), which will be evident the rest of the time they appear in Scripture. These early details often form an accurate first impression that is helpful for the reader.

VALUE/PAYOFF: This technique helps readers gain insight into the lives of biblical figures. Biblical authors had to be selective in sharing details. The details shared about a character were intentionally chosen to portray character traits that will be reflected in their later appearances in Scripture. This technique often reveals not only a character's positive traits but also what will be their Achilles' heel—that is, their besetting flaws.

CHALLENGES: This technique requires that readers be somewhat familiar with the story arc of a character's actions and words. Readers can easily isolate a character's first actions, first words, and any physical descriptors, but may not be able to see how they form an accurate first impression until they can identify future actions that point back to what is communicated up front. Physical descriptors are not always present, so the reader may have to rely on the other two components. There is some degree of subjectivity in determining how first impressions accurately reflect their overall character both positively and negatively. Some characters' first actions and words may be spread out over several chapters, which will require more diligence to identify.

> **EXAMPLES FROM NONBIBLICAL WORKS:**
>
> **William Shakespeare,** *Hamlet:* The first word out of Horatio's mouth is "Friends." As Hamlet's truest friend, we can observe key characteristics of friendship throughout the book.
>
> **William Shakespeare,** *The Taming of the Shrew*: Katherina begins with "I." As the "shrew" of the play, readers can begin to sense her self-centered approach to life.
>
> **The shark hunter Quint in the film** *Jaws*: In a town hall meeting discussing how the community of Amity plans to address the great white shark mauling beachgoers, Quint's first scene is of him sitting down in a relaxed position, scratching his fingernails on a chalkboard in a classroom full of the town's leaders. His first words are "Y'all know me. Know how I earn a livin'. I'll catch this bird for you, but it ain't gonna be easy. Bad fish." His physical appearance (scruffy), his improper use of the English language, and his first actions portray him as an uncouth, prickly, irritating fisherman confident in his abilities. This aptly sets up his character for the rest of the film.

A popular maxim goes like this: "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." First impressions are often etched into the mind and hard to overcome with later interactions. The whole field of marketing seeks to create positive first impressions of their product, candidate, or service. They are hoping for a "halo effect" that generates a positive aura around what or who they are pitching. Whenever someone encounters

a new person, quick appraisals are formulated based on that individual's behavior, appearance, and speech, which creates an indelible impression.

In giving my testimony of how I came to faith, I often display my high school ID from senior year. That photo was taken a few months before my conversion. It certainly creates an impression because it captures a number of traits that were true about me at that point in my life. The smile portrays a zest for life and an overall joyful disposition. The bronzed facial suntan and bandana illustrate that I was a bit of a "wild" man who loved the outdoors and traveling to new places (I had just spent that summer backpacking in Colorado and canoeing the boundary waters in northern Minnesota and southern Canada). The long hair shows some of the "rebel" streak that characterized my life at that moment.
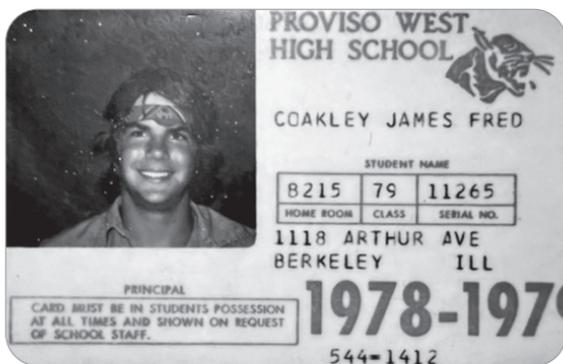
When I look at that ID today, I still see some of those same traits present in my life over forty years later! I still have an overall joyful disposition, love traveling, and even though it pains me to admit it, I still have a bit of that rebel nature (although I was

always a quiet and friendly rebel, or so I like to tell myself). That visual image accurately captured not only a particular moment in my life (I am still surprised that school officials let me get away with wearing that bandana!) but it also captures a number of traits that have characterized me through my entire life.

So it is with biblical authors. They give readers a literary snapshot, a first impression, that sets the tone for the rest of that character's life.

Now to be sure, some initial impressions may not be accurate and can feed into false stereotypes, such as when the prophet Samuel was to anoint the next king of Israel and saw Eliab, the oldest son of Jesse, and thought him fitting to be the next king. But Eliab's heart was not right for the task (1 Sam. 16:6–7). The priest Eli, based on his initial exposure to Hannah, thought that she was drunk when in fact she was extremely pious (1 Sam. 1:8–16). Saul was described as handsome and tall (1 Sam. 9:2), and since those are his only traits listed in the text, it appears that the people thought that his stature and looks would make him an ideal candidate to be king of Israel. That certainly did not turn out to be the case as Saul demonstrated over and over again his inability to properly lead the nation of Israel throughout his reign.

All three of these examples from 1 Samuel—which show that initial impressions may not be accurate—are intentionally included in the book to highlight one of its themes: that outward appearances can be deceiving. The author of 1 Samuel is utilizing the "First Impressions" technique to make a practical application point—we, too, should not rely on outward appearances as a gauge to determine someone's spiritual vitality and character.

With that in mind, it is reasonable to assume that those initial actions, words, and physical descriptors are, more often than not, truly reflective of that individual and their overall character. Authors cannot share everything about an individual, but they can be intentional and selective about what they do share in order to create an accurate portrait of a character's persona in the text.

The way that authors portray individuals is part of what is called "characterization." Authors can use direct methods of portraying a character by stating it plainly, such as when John calls Judas a "thief" (John 12:5–6). Another way that authors help readers develop a better sense of what a character is like is through what is called "indirect characterization," which is when they use roundabout ways of developing a person's character by letting readers externally "see" their early actions or "hear" the first words that come out of their mouth. This subtly reveals internal motivations or character traits.

Of course, the first words uttered from a character in Scripture are not their *actual* first words but the first words we as readers encounter in the text. It often turns out that the information gleaned from this up-front content sets the tone for how this character is going to act in the rest of the narrative.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF "FIRST IMPRESSIONS"

Esau

Let's look at how this plays out in the story of Esau. When Esau is introduced in Genesis 25, here is what Moses communicates about his first actions, first words, and physical description:

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FIRST ACTIONS: He is portrayed as a skillful hunter and an outdoorsman (Gen. 25:27).

**FIRST WORDS:** "Let me eat some of that red stew" (Gen. 25:30).

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTORS: red and hairy (Gen. 25:25)

Keep in mind that this content was intentionally selected out of many things that could have been used to describe Esau. If we take this information and reflect on how it develops Esau as a character, several traits come to the surface that paint a portrait of Esau.

For instance, the fact that he is described as red and hairy (so hairy, in fact, that Jacob later clothes himself in goat skin to mimic his brother when he steals his blessing!) not only explains why he is such an effective hunter (because of his camouflage from all this hair) but also subtly foreshadows his more brutish, animal-like nature as someone who prefers to live in the wild.

In addition, his first words—the churlish way in which he asks for something to eat—show that his stomach is his main motivator.

These details clearly portray Esau in animal-like fashion. Like an animal, he wants instant gratification, and he shows no capacity to understand the long-term benefits of keeping his birthright. Esau looks animal-like, spends a lot of time in open fields like an animal, and brutishly talks like we envision an animal would communicate. This first impression of Esau accurately gives the reader a portrait of his overall general character traits that define the way we encounter him in later texts.
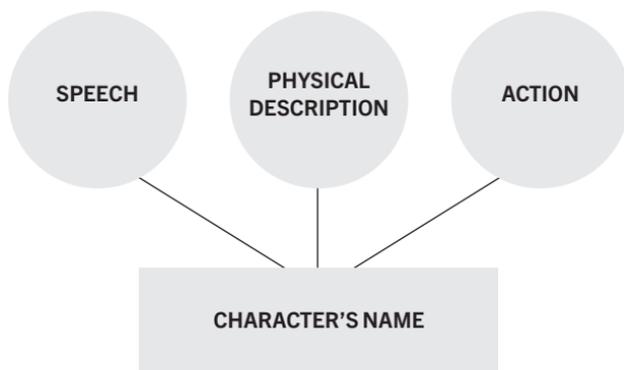
Components of Indirect Characterization

Abraham

FIRST ACTIONS: "Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him" and set out for Canaan. When a severe famine struck, he went to Egypt (Gen. 12:4–5, 10 NASB).

FIRST WORDS: "When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, 'I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife." Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. *Say you are my sister*, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake'" (Gen. 12:11–13).

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTORS: none communicated other than his age (seventy-five) when he set out for Canaan (Gen. 12:4).

Abram's first actions (positively) reveal him to be obedient to God's commands but also (negatively) show his tendency to take matters into his own hands, which he demonstrates by going to Egypt to avoid a famine. This move seems to have been taken

unilaterally without consulting God or waiting upon Him to provide. His first recorded speech also reveals this tendency toward expedience and to manipulate situations to his own liking when he tells Sarai to say she is his sister instead of his wife. This combination of sometimes obeying God (as when he is willing to offer up Isaac as a burnt sacrifice in Genesis 22) and sometimes choosing the path of expedience (e.g., in Genesis 12, in bringing his nephew Lot with him from Haran as someone who could take care of him and his estate in case God's promise of a seed did not come through, or choosing to sleep with Hagar to raise up a male heir apart from Sarah in Genesis 16) is a fitting snapshot of Abraham and his walk with God.

Moses

FIRST ACTIONS: "One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and *looked on their burdens*, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. *He looked this way and that*, and seeing no one, *he struck down the Egyptian* and hid him in the sand" (Ex. 2:11–12).

FIRST WORDS: "When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, '*Why do you strike your companion*?'" (Ex. 2:13).

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTORS: He was a "fine child" (Ex. 2:2). (In this case, it probably means that he was a quiet baby so that his mother could keep him undetected by others.)

Moses' first actions show his compassionate side (he is concerned about his people's burdens) but also his difficulty

in controlling his anger. His first words reveal that he seeks justice when he sees unjust actions. So, in summary, what this first impression reveals about Moses is that he is a justice-oriented, compassionate individual who looks out for the underdogs. He also reveals these same traits when he arrives in Midian (see Ex. 2:17) and continues to exemplify them throughout his life. As a result, he is the perfect representative to mediate God's laws to the people. Yet this first impression of him also reveals a negative trait of anger, which will resurface throughout his life, including the incident near the end of the wilderness journey where, instead of speaking to the rock to bring forth water for the people, he strikes the rock twice in anger (Num. 20:10–11). This early information is a fitting snapshot of Moses and his overall character qualities (both positive and negative).

David

FIRST ACTIONS: 1 Samuel 16–17 portrays David doing a number of actions, such as being obedient to his father, Jesse, shepherding the family's flocks, playing the harp in King Saul's court, and fighting Goliath as a warrior in the Valley of Elah.

FIRST WORDS: "And David said to the men who stood by him, 'What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?'" (1 Sam. 17:26).

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTORS: He was the youngest of Jesse's sons, and was "ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome" (1 Sam. 16:11–12).

David is often labeled as a "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), which is expressly demonstrated by his first recorded words. His early recorded actions reveal him to be a shepherd (an apt metaphor for his later leadership skills), a musician (which is fitting since he is a major contributor to the book of Psalms), and a warrior whose military skills will become more evident as the narrative proceeds.

These first actions plant the seeds for the three major roles David will have throughout his life (leader, musician, and warrior). These major character traits are intentionally introduced up front in the narrative. Although embedded with this first impression are David's many positive traits, there is also an introduction to a major character flaw in that he is somewhat self-interested as well. This is revealed by his own lips in the very first words we hear from him when he inquires about what the reward will be for killing Goliath. This focus on "what's in it for him" later reveals itself when he took a census of his own people and committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Like most of us, he is a mixed bag—a man after God's heart, but he can also pursue his own heart and interests as well. David's physical attributes, especially his attractive outer appearance, add tension to the overall account of David's life in that the Bible often depicts attractive people as experiencing more difficulties (Sarah, Rachel, Joseph, Bathsheba, Absalom, etc.).

In summary, the "First Impressions" technique is an easy way to increase the "wow" factor as you read your Bible. You are now able to detect how the biblical authors identify key positive and negative traits of Bible characters by reflecting on a

character's first words, first actions, and any physical descriptors. By focusing on these details, readers can not only increase their enjoyment but also gain an inside track into properly assessing an individual's character by seeing how these early actions and speeches paint an accurate first impression that is further depicted later in the narrative.

GO and IMPLEMENT

This technique can be properly utilized with other characters such as Rachel, Sarah, Jacob, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Saul, Daniel, and John the Baptist. It can also be used in the first two chapters of Genesis by looking at "God's" actions and speech in Genesis 1 and then contrasting and comparing those actions and speech to the "LORD God's" actions and speech in Genesis 2. This reveals great insights into God's character traits by looking at His first actions and words.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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