



**Rev. Dr. Cynthia Park:**

I believe that finding and using the full range of one's own voice is preferable to using character voices for the following two reasons. First, character voice choices telegraph and perpetuate biases against



collectives, not individuals. **For example, intoning what one imagines to be a southern drawl suggests a set of stereotypes that reflects the image of an entire group of people, and usually the stereotypes have negative associations.**

The same could be said for intoning a South Jersey accent that paints all Italian/Americans with the same wide brush.

Second, my understanding of one of the key tenets of biblical storytelling is writing the story on one's own heart. From my personal experience, this process has involved deepening self-awareness of the degree to which

the character's aspects are part of my own complicated personality. It seems more appropriate to modulate my own voice as I perform each character's part. This still allows for a range of tone, intensity, vulnerability, strength, rage, sorrow, and yes, even stupidity. I believe that such a performance compels the listener to engage the heart of the story; whereas, using character voices associated with stereotypes allows the listener to avoid engaging the heart of the story because, of course, any negativity in the story isn't about them, and they identify with only the protagonist, whose character voice is usually the performer's own voice.

**Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones**

I believe character voices are one of the ways that the storyteller helps the audience to hear the variety of textures in a text and to track who is talking at what time. **Pitch, speed, tone, and cadences reveal how different characters respond to situations.** I find that occasionally I am tempted to make these differences apparent with particular kinds of dialects that tap into our shared social memory. When a mob shows up at Lot's house threatening to harm strangers, I want to plug into the vigilante KKK cadences I have heard in movies. When the disciples

are acting like airheads, the sound of certain characters from movies come to mind. When David sends Joab a military command to kill Uriah, he sounds a bit like Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*. But here is the thing.

**Tapping into the voices of stock types means hauling more baggage than you may have intended.** Inevitably, when resorting to regional dialects, occupational rhythms, or ethnic intonation, I find that I am doing more to firm up stereotypes than to break them down. And inevitably someone else hears their voice in my vocalization in a way that offends inappropriately.

When I am wise, I am more likely to listen deeply within to find the different vocal coloring I myself use in diverse situations.



Then I try to voice the vigilantes in tones I sadly hear myself using to attack others; I tap into my own times of confusion to voice those fallible followers we call the disciples. This is a good rule, and at times I break it. But I hope that in those exceptional times, I

make my choices intentionally, owning the dangers as well as the possibilities. And I remain open to correction from those who heard what I certainly did not want to communicate.

## Professional Storyteller

**Pam Faro:**

Storytelling is a complex endeavor, and every storyteller is faced with scores of choices to make with every telling of every story, whether conscious of them or not. One fascinating area of choice-making is in how we depict the characters in our stories.

### When telling a story in which characters engage in dialog with each other, we have a responsibility to our listeners to enable them to discern which character is speaking when

(hopefully without inserting “said he” or “said she” every time). There are so many different ways of doing so, all within the vast scope of “embodying” our characters. You can adopt different postures or gestures for each, change your direction of stance and eye behavior, move about in different ways, etc.

You might choose to employ specific voices and manners of speaking for your story’s characters, especially when there is direct dialog (but also in narration devoted to different characters). You can play with pitch and tone, tempo and volume, different turns of phrase and pronunciations. (How does a young man sound different from an old woman? Or a happy farmer from a grumpy banker? Etc.)

You can also use different accents and dialects...but it’s complicated!

When it comes to choosing to employ accents (I’ll use just “accents,” unless commenting specifically on dialects) in storytelling, storytellers’ opinions and practices are all over the map.

Many tellers feel comfortable and may be skilled at one or several different accents not necessarily “their own” that they’ll use with stories, and for good reasons. **An accent can bring a sense of place—either of the specific setting or a story’s cultural origin.** And it can certainly contribute to effective characterization: it can identify a character with a place, with a social class, and with an assumed perspective. Use of an accent can also add entertainment value, sometimes because of adding more humor or more drama.

One of the truly useful and magical things about accents is that they can telegraph something about your story’s characters, and be key in your interpretive characterizations. “Southern” can communicate “charming;” “Downeast” can communicate “taciturn;” “British” can communicate “refined;” etc. What a useful tool for a storyteller who can skillfully employ an accent! And yet there are dangers and downsides aplenty.

The reason a given accent can, by itself, telegraph something about a character generally rests on stereotype – “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type.” The aspect of being widely-held is what makes it a useful tool for communicating to your audience; the aspect of being fixed and oversimplified is where the dangers of miscommunication and of giving offense reside. “Southern” may be chosen to communicate “charming”...or “stupid.” “British” may indicate “refined”...or “snobbish.” And so on. Particular offense may be especially experienced by the native speakers of a given accent when it’s “put on” by someone for whom it’s not native. And then there’s the intriguing question of applying contemporary regional and class accents to biblical storytelling.

If you choose to apply an accent to a biblical story you are telling, it obvi-

ously will not be for the purpose of establishing an authentic sense of place or provenance of the story, as when I use a French accent for a fun French fairy tale, or Spanish for a story set in Mexico. Nor will it be to establish knowledge of a character’s point of origin or place of birth. I think it’s safe to say that no one among us is choosing to employ Aramaic or Koine Greek accents, or Egyptian or Moabite.



I don’t think I’ve ever chosen to apply a contemporary regional accent to a biblical story. But I’ve witnessed others’ interpretive choices to do so, and it appears they do for one or more of these reasons:

1. Entertainment – “New Joisey” or “good ol’ boy” accents, for example, have been used in tellings of biblical stories I’ve heard for primarily humorous effect and successfully so.
2. Power/relation dynamics - for example: a “king’s English” British accent for someone in authority and a British Cockney accent for an underling.
3. Characterization – Relying on “widely-held” perceptions among the listeners to communicate, in a sort of storytelling shorthand, something about a character.

There is a very real and very long continuum of how and why accents function in telegraphing character information to your listeners. It is a complex endeavor to apply contemporary accents to biblical stories, whatever the teller’s motivation. It is replete with potential to offend, and also rich with potential interpretive, entertainment, and aesthetic benefits.