5. THE ACTANTIAL MODEL

SUMMARY

The actantial model, developed by A.J. Greimas, can be used to break an action down into six facets, or actants: (1) The subject (for example, the Prince) is what wants or does not want to be conjoined with (2) an object (the rescued Princess, for example). (3) The sender (for example, the King) is what instigates the action, while (4) the receiver (for example, the King, the Princess, the Prince) is what benefits from it. Lastly, (5) a helper (for example, the magic sword, the horse, the Prince's courage) helps to accomplish the action, while (6) an opponent (the witch, the dragon, the Prince's fatigue, a hint of terror) hinders it.

1. THEORY

ORIGINS AND FUNCTION

During the sixties, A. J. Greimas proposed the actantial model (1966, pp. 174-185 and 192-212), based the theories of Vladimir Propp (1970)[1]. The actantial model is a tool that can theoretically be used to analyze any real or thematized action, but particularly those depicted in literary texts or images. In the actantial model, an action may be broken down into six components, called actants[2]. Actantial analysis consists of assigning each element of the action being described to one of the actantial classes.

1.2 SIX ACTANTS AND THREE AXES

The six actants are divided into three oppositions, each of which forms an axis of the actantial description:

-The axis of desire: (1) subject / (2) object. The subject is what is directed toward an object. The relationship established between the subject and the object is called a *junction*. Depending on whether the object is conjoined with the subject (for example, the Prince wants the Princess) or disjoined (for example, a murderer succeeds in getting rid of his victim's body), it is called a conjunction or a disjunction.

-The axis of power: (3) helper / (4) opponent. The helper assists in achieving the desired junction between the subject and object; the opponent hinders the same (for example, the sword, the horse, courage, and the wise man help the Prince; the witch, the dragon, the far-off castle, and fear hinder him)[3].

-The axis of transmission (the axis of knowledge, for Greimas): (5) sender / (6) receiver. The sender is the element requesting the establishment of the junction between subject and object (for example, the King asks the Prince to rescue the Princess). The receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken. To simplify, let us interpret the receiver (or beneficiary-receiver) as that which benefits from achieving the junction between subject and object (for example, the King, the kingdom, the Princess, the Prince, etc.)[4]. Sender elements are often receiver elements as well.

NOTE: SENDER AND HELPER

Traditionally, the sender is considered to be that which initiates the action; anything that occurs along the way to stir up desire for the junction to be achieved will be assigned to the helper class instead[5] (the same logic applies for the anti-sender and opponents). This problem – where position in a narrative sequence and function in this sequence are mixed up – has been worked out in the canonical narrative schema, Greimas' subsequent model that is more developed than the actantial model (see the chapter on this model). The sender (more accurately called the sender-manipulator) has been redefined as that which prompts the action by manipulating either wanting-to-do or having-to-do, no matter when the inducement occurs.

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[1] For a comparison of Greimas' and Propp's models, see Simonsen, 1984, pp. 51-54 and 57-58.
[2] As with any classification, in addition to the six actants there is a residual class, a sort of "wastebasket category" for elements that do not fit into any of the selected analytical classes, or elements that belong to another action than the one chosen for analysis.
[3] Greimas (1966, p. 178) views the helper as aiding in the completion of the quest and/or the transmission to the receiver; the same logic applies for the opponent.
[4] In actuality, the receiver is not necessarily always the beneficiary, and the anti-receiver is not always the "maleficiary". (An analogous problem, found in semantic graphs, concerns the relations between the dative and the benefactive-malefactive; see the chapter on semantic graphs.) For example, if God is the one who asks Jesus to save mankind, many theologians would argue that he is the receiver, but not the beneficiary, since divine love is completely disinterested and moreover, nothing can add to or subtract from that which is perfect.
[5] This is how Fontanille (2003, p. 121) can maintain that: "when the subject goes into action, he can appear to be independent from the sender. The latter can still intervene, but only in a diminished, ancillary capacity, that of the Helper, who supplements or strengthens the subject's competence."

NOTE: STEPS FOR CREATING AN ACTANTIAL MODEL

In simple terms, the steps for performing an actantial analysis are as follows: (1) Select the general action. (2) Convert the action into an actantial model by first selecting the subject and the object (since the other actants are defined relative to this axis), specifying the type of junction between the subject and the object (a conjunction or disjunction) and saying how and whether the junction is achieved (completely or partially, with certainty (a real junction) or doubt (a possible junction)). (3) Select the other actants. Each selection must be justified. (Where is the element found in the text? Why is it considered to be a subject, a helper, etc.?) It is a common error to lose sight of the particular subject-object axis identified by the analyst, and to designate senders, receivers, helpers or opponents that actually pertain to a different subject-object axis. The helper is not allied to the subject, but to the object-subject junction. For example, if a character's best friend helps him in every action except the one addressed by the model, then he is not a helper in that particular model.

1.3 SETS OF ACTANTIAL MODELS

In theory, any real or thematized action may be described by at least one actantial model. Strictly speaking, *the* actantial model for a text does not exist. For one thing, there are as many models as there are actions; for another, the same action can often be seen from several different perspectives (for example, from the subject's point of view, or his rival, the anti-subject's).

Although one generally chooses the action that best summarizes the text, or lacking that, some key action, there is no rule against analyzing a group or a set of actantial models. A set involves at least two actantial models with at least one relation established between them. Relations may be temporal (complete or partial simultaneity, immediate or delayed succession) and/or logical (simple presupposition (for example, cause and effect) reciprocal presupposition, mutual exclusion (between incompatible actions), or a relation between type-model and token-model and so on). More details on these relations can be found in the chapter on narrative programs.
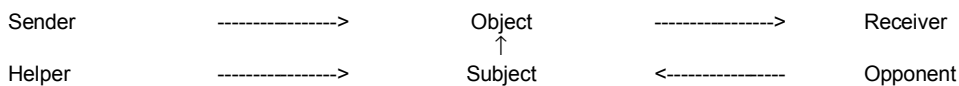
NOTE: COMPARING ACTANTIAL MODELS

In a short analysis, it is often best to examine a single actantial model, but two related models can also be compared. When we bring several actantial models into the picture, we can give them all the same emphasis, or we can develop one model more exhaustively (by focusing the analysis on one model, but making brief comparisons between it and other models). Some models may only be referred to in passing.
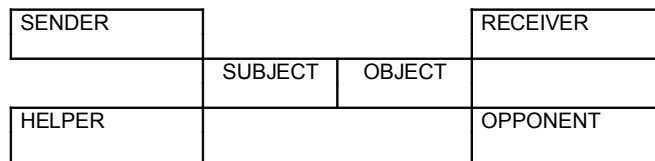
1.4 VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

Technically speaking, the actantial model as a conceptual network should be distinguished from its visual representation. The conceptual network is generally depicted as a diagram, given in formats like the following:

I The actantial model represented as a square

Sender	--------------->	Object	--------------->	Receiver
		↑		
Helper	--------------->	Subject	<---------------	Opponent

II The actantial model represented as a square

SENDER			RECEIVER
	SUBJECT	OBJECT	
HELPER			OPPONENT

We have developed a table format, where we have included the additional features that we are proposing (explanation to come later) to the standard actantial model:

The actantial model represented in table format

No	time	observing subject	actant name	actant class s/o, send/rec, help/opp	actant sub-class: real/possible	actant sub-class: true/false	other actant sub-classes (active/passive, etc.)
1							
2							
Etc.							

Since the actantial model and the visual representation thereof are two different things, a single diagram may be used to combine several actantial models, each of which refers to a different action or reflects a subsequent state of the same model. In this case, the elements of each model are distinguished by using conventional

symbols (regular type for the elements of the first model and italics for the elements of the second actantial model, for instance).

1.5 CHARACTER / NON-CHARACTER ACTANTS

An actant does not always correspond to a character in the traditional sense of the term[6]. The concept of the actant is derived by broadening or generalizing the concept of the character, if you will. From the standpoint of natural ontology (which defines what kinds of beings, broadly speaking, make up reality), an actant may correspond to: (1) an anthropomorphic being (for example, a human, an animal, a talking sword, etc.) (2) a concrete, inanimate element, including things (such as a sword), although not limited to the concrete (such as the wind, the distance to be traveled), (3) a concept (courage, hope, freedom, etc.). An actant may be individual or collective (society, for instance).

In theory, the six actants may belong to any of the three ontological categories listed above. In actual application, there are some common exclusions: subjects, senders and receivers tend to belong to the category of anthropomorphic beings. (An inanimate element or a concept must be personified in order to fill this role.) However, if one defines the sender as the element that acts, voluntarily or not, to elicit either wanting-to-do or having-to-do the action, then it can belong to any of the three ontological categories (see the chapter on the canonical narrative schema).

1.6 ACTANTIAL SYNCRETISM

A single element may be found in one, several, or even all actantial classes. Actantial syncretism occurs when a single element, known as an actor (such as a character in the traditional sense of the word), "contains" several actants from different classes (for example, subject and helper simultaneously) or several actants from the same class that have separate actions in the analysis.

> NOTE: IS EVERY TEXTUAL ELEMENT AN ACTANT IN AT LEAST ONE ACTANTIAL MODEL?
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> Is every textual element an actant in at least one actantial model? No. Setting aside any limiting criteria that we might establish (for example, taking into account only those actants that are characters), we should point out firstly that actantial analysis occurs at the text level (the discourse level), and that each and every element of the lower levels (sentence and word levels) does not necessarily enter directly into this level (such as a definite article). Secondly, even elements at the text level may be designated as external to the actantial model, either on a general basis or relative to a specific actantial model, for example, elements that are judged as circumstantial (such as time and space) or simply descriptive (details deemed to be irrelevant in the analysis of a specific action, such as the color of the bridle on the prince's horse).

There is a quantitative issue to be addressed, similar to the previous one. In theory, for any specific action being described, one actantial class may contain one element, several, or none. In actual practice, it seems that empty actantial classes are not found, except in extremely brief texts (such as a proverb or an aphorism). In order to keep the analysis homogeneous, subjects and objects usually contain only one element (which can be a collective, like humans or society). In fact, the best strategy is to distinguish subjects clearly from each other and objects as well, even if they are closely related, in order to draw distinctions in the descriptions (for example, in the extreme case where two allied subjects who want the same object have all the same helpers except one).

1.7 OBSERVING SUBJECTS

Actantial description must include observing subjects, since they influence how the elements are arranged within the actantial classes (and within the actantial sub-classes, as we will see later). Classification is generally based on the reference observing subject: the one associated with the ultimate truth of the text (usually the narrator, especially if he is omniscient, but one can also assume the point of view of other observers, known as "assumptive observers", meaning those whose classifications may be refuted by the reference observer. For example, an observer-character (an assumptive observing subject) may believe, mistakenly from the narrator's standpoint (the reference observing subject), that a certain other character is a helper in a certain action. The observing subject may correspond to the subject of the action described in the actantial model, to another actant in the model, or to a simple witness-type observer who is outside the model. For example, he might be a helper who indicates, wrongly or rightly, who are the opponents in an action.

1.8 TIME OF OBSERVATION

Classifications may vary, based not only on the observer, but also as a function of time. Thus one can (and sometimes must) set up an actantial model for each observer and each relevant temporal position of a single specific action. There are several kinds of time, or temporality: time as represented in the story (the

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[6] The word "actant" (like the word "actor") carries an entirely different meaning in Rastier's work, where the Greimasian actants seem to correspond to particular cases of stereotyped agonists.

chronological order of events in the story), narrative time (the order in which events of the story are presented), and tactical time (the linear sequencing of semantic units, for example, from one sentence to the next). To illustrate, there are cases where a helper goes further ahead in time in the story than an opponent, and vice versa. In summary, over time actants may integrate, leave the actantial model or change classes (or sub-classes).

1.9 ACTANT SUB-CLASSES

We shall now examine a few actantial sub-classes that can enhance an analysis. These sub-classes are also useful in the other actant-based models: the narrative program and the canonical narrative schema (see the corresponding chapters).

1.9.1 TRUE/FALSE ACTANTS

We will begin with the sub-classes derived from veridictory evaluations (true/false); later we will look at ontological evaluations of actuality vs. possibility (for more details on these modal categories, see the chapter on dialogics). We touched on veridictory evaluations in our discussion of observing subjects. The analysis can adopt the reference evaluations straight away (those deemed to be definitively correct in the text), or it can show the dynamics between the reference and assumptive evaluations. For example, if the observing subject mistakenly believes that a certain character is a helper, then this helper would be true for this observer, but false for the reference observer.

NOTE: ACTANTS AND THYMIC VALUES

There are other modal structures besides the ontological and veridictory categories, such as the thymic and deontic systems. For instance, thymic values apply especially to the object (which will generally be positive from the subject's point of view if he wants the object, and negative if he wants to get rid of it), the helper (positive from the subject's perspective) and the opponent (negative from the subject's perspective)[7]. To give an example that involves veridictory and thymic evaluations, in "Lanval" by Marie de France, if we select King Arthur's wife as the subject, and her love for Lanval as the object, then it is possible to position Lanval as a sender. The queen mistakenly believes that Lanval would benefit from her love; from Lanval's perspective (which corresponds to the reference perspective), the Queen's love holds no attraction, and the hero prefers the love of his mysterious mistress.

1.9.2 ACTANTS AND ANTACTANTS

If we map out an actantial class onto a semiotic square (see the chapter on the semiotic square), we obtain at least four types of actants: the actant (term A), the anti-actant or antactant (term B), the negactant (term not-B) and the negantactant (term not-A) (Greimas and Courtés, 1982, p. 5)[8]. Studying the actantial subclasses is a complex matter. We will attempt to shed some light.

The relevant antactants for use in analytical practice, by our observations, are the following: the anti-sender, the anti-receiver and the anti-subject. For example, consider the subject *Prince* and the object *save the Princess*. The ogre is the anti-subject (he and the Prince are in contention for the same object), the anti-sender (he is certainly not asking the Prince to save the Princess) and the anti-receiver (he will in no way benefit from the rescue of the Princess – quite the contrary). Obviously, antactant positions are relative: We have only to select the ogre as the subject, and then the Prince becomes the anti-subject, and so on. As an obvious corollary to the connection we have established between the receiver and the beneficiary, we propose that the anti-receiver and the *maleficiary* are connected as well. The maleficiary is defined as the actant whose interests are thwarted by the attainment of the junction (for example, the ogre who kidnapped the Princess will be the maleficiary if the subject is the Prince and the object is to save the Princess). In the canonical schema, the model's anti-sender is defined as the actant who manipulates the subject's (the receiver- subject's) not-wanting-to-do and/or not-having-to-do. The anti-object does not seem to correspond to anything in particular in descriptive practice. (The anti-object is not the object for the anti-subject, because the latter theoretically has the same object as the subject); the anti-helper and anti-opponent seem to correspond to the opponent and the helper, respectively.

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[7] For an analysis combining conjunction/disjunction and euphoria/dysphoria, see the chapter on the canonical narrative schema.

[8] Greimas and Courtés (1982, p. 5) do not say whether the negactant and the negantactant correspond to term not-B and term not-A respectively on the semiotic square, or the reverse. We have opted for the first possibility. We will supplement Greimas and Courtés' system by adding the actant subclasses corresponding to the four (or six) metaterms of the square. As with the first four classes, some problems arise, concerning either the understanding of the semiotic square, or more specifically, the subclasses identified. For example, what is a neutral actant (the neutral term of the square), that is, a character who is neither helper nor opponent? If one follows the principle that in order to be the neutral term, an element must be marked as neutral, not simply as being outside the opposition mapped onto the square, then a character who is neither a helper nor an opponent must be both a party to the action and marked as neither a helper nor an opponent. Take Pontius Pilate as an example: In relation to the object *to not condemn Jesus*, he seems to represent the idea of a neutral actant: as neither a helper nor an opponent, he washes his hands of the matter, he says. Now we can introduce the modal category real/possible: Is Pontius Pilate a possible, but unactualized helper (who did not become a real helper) and/or a possible, unactualized opponent? If he is indeed both at once, then he corresponds to the complex term within the modal category of possibility (he is both a possible helper and a possible opponent) and to the neutral term within the modal category of actuality (he is neither a real helper nor a real opponent). And finally, we can introduce the modal category probable/improbable: Now Pontius Pilate appears to be a real opponent, because, without his help, Jesus will most likely be condemned. From a probabilistic standpoint, passivity is far from being neutral; it seems like an accomplice to the *status quo* or the harsher course.

We have found that a better alternative for expanding our study of negactants (and negantactants) is to use the following actantial subclasses instead: actant/non-actant, possible/real and active/passive actants.

1.9.3 ACTANTS/NON-ACTANTS, REAL/POSSIBLE ACTANTS AND ACTIVE/PASSIVE ACTANTS

The actant/non-actant (negactant) distinction is related to the distinctions between real/possible actants (based on ontological status) and active/passive actants. A friend who could have (and should have) helped but did not may be classified at Time 1 not as an opponent, but as 1) a non-helper (a type of non-actant) or as 2) a possible helper (a type of possible actant) who did not become a real helper (a type of real actant) as he should have at Time 2.

We shall now consider the distinction between active and passive actants. It is one thing not to help a person who is drowning (the non-action is what causes harm); it is quite another to hold his head under water (the action is what causes harm). In the first case, one could call this (1) a non-helper (a type of non-actant), or (2) a possible but unactualized helper (a type of possible actant that will not become real), or yet again (3) a passive opponent (a type of passive actant). In the second case, he may be (1) a possible but unactualized helper (a type of possible actant that will not become real) or (2) an active opponent (a type of active actant), which is undoubtedly a more adequate description. A being need not be anthropomorphic in order to be classified as passive/active: an alarm that does not go off when it should, thus allowing a robbery to occur, is a passive helper.

1.9.4 INTENTIONAL/UNINTENTIONALACTANTS, WHOLE/PART, CLASS/ELEMENT

Let us introduce some other useful actantial sub-classes. An anthropomorphic actant will play its role either intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, a character may not know that he is a helper, sender, etc. relative to a certain action.

Actantial analysis also makes use of the mereological opposition between the whole and its parts. Usually, the more specific the actant (with respect to the parts rather than the whole), the better the analysis. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the prince's courage is a helper in his own cause than to state that the prince is an overall helper. Otherwise stated: An analysis done at the level of the parts helps to reveal the differences that emerge between a description of the whole and that of its parts. For example, it could reveal that the Prince, who is an overall helper in his own cause, also harbors characteristics that act as opponents (for example, if he is a tiny bit lazy or fearful). The analysis can benefit in a similar way from the distinction made in set theory between class and element. For instance, a witch is always an opponent in traditional fairy tales; but in some "perverted" texts, it does happen that a witch may intentionally and voluntarily support the hero.

2. APPLICATION : *THE NEW TESTAMENT*

Our application is taken from the *New Testament*. We shall have to simplify the analysis by focusing primarily on the anthropomorphic actants, which provide abundant and complex subject matter from both literary and theological perspectives. As we shall see, using the actantial model, we can identify and describe several theological issues with clarity and integrate them into a complex system.

2.1 SUBJECT AND OBJECT

As the primary actantial model of the *New Testament*, we have selected the action in which Jesus must save mankind.

2.2 SENDERS

The senders in our model are the following[9]:

- God, who sends his only son for this purpose.
- Jesus, who we can assume has a "personal" desire to save mankind in addition to the duty imposed by God.
- Mankind, which is hoping and yearning for the coming of Christ. One could say that the "believers" are intentional senders and that the others are unintentional senders (their souls, although mute, yearn for salvation).

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[9] The Trinity – "The dogma and mystery of one God in three persons, coexisting, consubstantial and co-eternal", meaning God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit (trans. from *Le Petit Robert*) – is not without implications for actantial description. For insofar as he is also God, Jesus is assuredly the sender, even without bringing his "personal" will into the picture.

2.3 RECEIVERS

If one interprets the receiver as the element that benefits from the desired junction between subject and object, mankind is clearly the receiver of the action. What about God and Jesus? Here a theological problem arises. Two points argue in favor of excluding these characters as receivers. For one thing, if that which is perfect neither needs nor benefits from anything whatsoever, then God and Jesus, who were conceived as perfect, cannot be receivers. For another, in Christian ideology, the best "good deed", if we may say, is one for which the subject receives no personal benefit. If we refer back to the semiotic typology that distinguishes an altruistic action (in which the subject is not a beneficiary of his own action) from an egoistic action (with no pejorative connotation; the subject is the only beneficiary of his action or one of them), then we would say that a Christ-like action – and the instincts that God gave him as a sender – must be completely altruistic.

2.4 HELPERS AND OPPONENTS

In order to sort out the helpers and opponents in this actantial model, we must distinguish between several important and related actions, meaning that these actions will form a set of actantial models. In order to obtain salvation for mankind, Jesus must rise from the dead; in order to rise from the dead, he must die, or more accurately, be executed; in order to be executed, he must be arrested and judged. (We shall interrupt the sequence of actions here; obviously, in order for this series of actions to occur, Jesus must be born among men: For our analysis, we shall select the following three actions: (1) Jesus is arrested and crucified; (2) Jesus rises from the dead; (3) Jesus saves mankind. The third action presupposes the second, which presupposes the first. The first and second actions are sequential in time, while the second and third are simultaneous.

As helper characters in action 1, we have: Judas, who sells Jesus; the judges; the people, who choose to liberate Barabbas rather than Jesus; and the soldiers, who carry out Jesus' arrest and execution. The opponent characters seem to be fleeting and fewer in number: the apostles do try to oppose Jesus' arrest, but none of them intervenes directly during the trial (Peter shirks this role with his denial) or the crucifixion. In short, the possible opponents just don't turn into real opponents. Pontius Pilate, who refuses either to condemn or liberate Jesus – by washing his hands of the matter –, thus refuses to occupy any position on the helper/opponent axis. He plays the role of a non-helper-non-opponent. Seen in a different light, one could say that by not intervening, he promotes the harsher course – in this case, Jesus' death – making him a passive helper. (For a more detailed account of Pontius Pilate's role, refer to the note in this chapter.) As for Jesus, he falls more clearly within the passive helper class: he actually asks the apostles to stop resisting his arrest; and he does not defend himself directly before the judges. On the cross, he has a "moment of weakness", in keeping with his temporarily half-human, half-divine nature, and laments the fate in store for him; but he does not interfere personally with that fate (and perhaps at that point he has been deprived of his ability to perform miracles, a theological hypothesis), earning him the jeers of the bad thief: The son of God must be powerless! However, Jesus appeals to his father to take this cup from him, thereby asking God to be an opponent to his death, or at least his suffering. Lastly, let us assume that Satan knows the divine plan (even if the ways of God are said to be impenetrable, at least for mortals), and has every reason to try to divert Jesus from his death; he had also tempted Jesus in the wilderness to divert him from his destiny.

In action 2, the helper characters are God and Jesus, or perhaps only God if it is solely his power that makes his son rise from the dead. There are no opponent characters that appear directly, although Satan, the general enemy, would interfere in the completion of the miracle if he could. There is one non-character opponent that is fundamental in this action: matter, which by its very nature resists the breaking of a rule that generally tolerates no exceptions. That which is dead cannot rise again.

Now we come back to action 3. This is a cumulative action, resulting from the outcome of a series of actions. The most important of these are: Jesus' birth as a man, his death and his resurrection. This means that any helper or opponent in one of these crucial actions is also a helper or opponent in the cumulative action. This produces astounding results from a theological point of view: Judas is indeed a helper, and Satan was inconsistent and ill advised when he gave Judas the idea of betraying Jesus by turning him over to the law. However that may be, even disregarding this point of the analysis, we can say that the main helper and opponent characters are God and Jesus on the one hand, and Satan on the other. The actantial model thus takes on a predominantly metaphysical dimension, with human characters involved only as senders and receivers. However, their role will become crucial in the model of individual salvation: with collective salvation ensured by the redemption Jesus offers, it is now up to each man to "earn his way to heaven" through his good deeds – help yourself and heaven will help you – and by divine grace. In order to accomplish this, the role of the apostles is a major one: they announce the good news of redemption, they teach about individual salvation, and through the *Bible*, they give their example and their instruction to show the way.
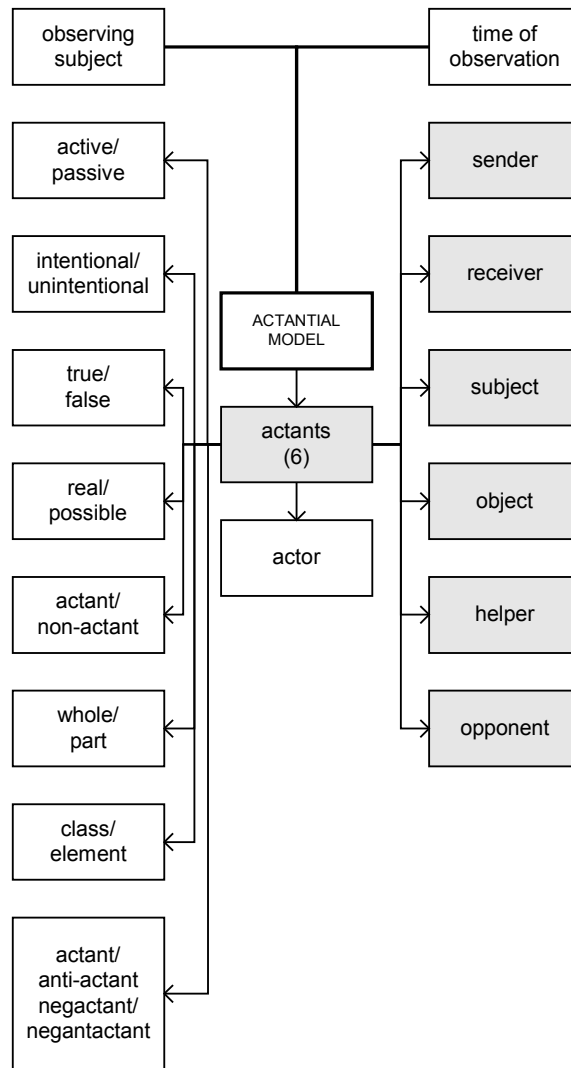
The following table gives an overview of the helper and opponent characters associated with action three.

Actantial Model of the New Testament's Primary Action

No	actant	actant class	actant sub-class
01	God	sender	
02	Jesus	sender	
03	mankind	senders	intentional (believers) and unintentional (non-believers)
04	mankind	receivers	intentional (believers) and unintentional (non-believers)
05	God	helper	
06	Jesus	helper	
07	Satan	opponent	

3. SUMMARY DIAGRAM

Diagram Summarizing the Actantial Model

LEGEND
1. Vertical arrows: components (for ex., an actantial model is composed of six actants)
2. Horizontal arrows with shading: exclusive categories (for ex., an actant is classified as a sender or a receiver or a subject, etc.)
3. Horizontal arrows with no shading: combinable categories (for ex., an actant is classified as passive or active as well as intentional or unintentional, etc.)
4. Bold-face link with no arrow: other relation
The results of the analysis depend on the time of observation and the observer (subject) whose point of view is being reported.