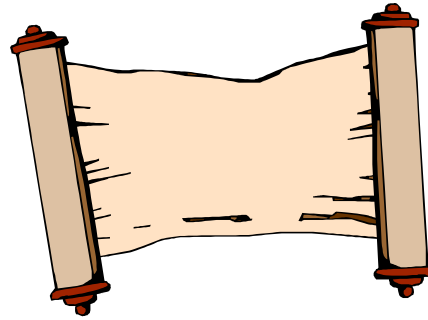


Stages of Faith Development in the Bible

Approaches to Scripture
Compiled by Fr. James DiLuzio C.S.P.
Based on material by Franciscan Father
Richard Rohr (Sources cited below)



The Bible records the experiences of a variety of people in many different kinds of situations in which a great number of spiritual dynamics are at play. These dynamics reflect particular ideas about God that are conditioned and limited by both the context of the events themselves (what humanity had learned and understood about science and culture at that point in time) and the degree of spiritual development evidenced in the people sharing the story. Furthermore, the spiritual insights that a particular biblical experience or event inspired evolved through the reflections of subsequent generations. As the biblical writers recorded the events, prayers and reflections that make up the Bible, they either preserved the stories with theological insights that had become fixed at a particular point in time, or, they themselves imbued the events or prayers with further reflections of their own. Sometimes, the biblical writers created new stories (or new versions of older stories) to express and / or explore the particular theological questions of their day.

The Church understands this entire process of shared experience, subsequent reflection and the process of writing and preserving the texts themselves as the inspired work of the Holy Spirit. This developmental and evolutionary dynamic is evident in many great works of literature and, indeed, evident in the progressive way humanity learns and preserves its discoveries. We need not be surprised, then, to encounter this same dynamic in the Bible. Nevertheless, the Church gives the Bible primacy over all other literature because the Bible alone explicitly explores humanity's evolving consciousness of our relationship with the one, true God.

Part of the excitement and fun of Bible Study is our shared exploration of the texts to determine which spiritual dynamics and insights were at play for the biblical characters and the biblical authors. Biblical Scholars have written innumerable commentaries to help us understand the historical contexts of what we read and point the way to the biblical authors' most likely intent. With these helps as our guide, we then compare our emotional and spiritual responses to what we read in the Bible (and our intellectual insights as well) with that of the biblical authors.

As we stated earlier, humanity learns progressively and collectively. Thus, our Bible Study catches us up into a great continuum of spiritual development that continues the Holy Spirit's work in and through the Church and human history. The degrees to which our Bible Study enables us to identify or not identify with Biblical characters and

events gives us insights as to where we are in our spiritual development--both individually and collectively as Church. Indeed, what we believe about the full and complete revelation of Jesus as Christ has yet to find its complete fulfillment in this or any generation of the Church. The Scriptures, the Sacraments and Church Tradition (and also what we learn from Church History) continue to beckon us to deeper realities of our life with the Triune God.

Just as the Sacred Liturgy (“the Mass”) engages us in proclamation and preaching of the Scriptures as a means of experiencing Christ Jesus Himself, so, too, the Church asserts that reading and discussing the Bible with others (as we do in Bible Study) provides us with a genuine encounter with Christ. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible is the true “Living Word.” As it is spoken, proclaimed, shared and discussed, it unleashes its power to engage us in a true communion with God. Bible Study then, is as essential to our spiritual growth as our participation in the Sacraments, which, it must be noted, further engage us in proclamation and reflection on the scriptures as part of their dynamics of grace. Thus Catholics must continue to develop our understanding of the Scriptures and value them as an integral part of our faith journey.

The following “Four Stages of Faith Development” are tools devised by Franciscan Father Richard Rohr that reflect universal dynamics in humanity’s relationship with God. As with all things about our human nature, each stage elicits strengths and weaknesses in our spiritual development and evidences aspects of light and shadow within us. It is important to acknowledge these as equally operative in the biblical tradition as they are operative in us. I propose we use these concepts as our common points of reference as we explore the Bible together.

Stages of Faith Development as found in the Bible

Adapted from *The Great Themes of Scripture –Old Testament (Chapter 6 Salvation History: Faith in Evolution)* By Fr. Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press. 1987, rev. 1999 Also noteworthy is their book *The Great Themes of Scripture—New Testament*. These books are available through St. Anthony’s Messenger Press. Richard Rohr has released a Set of 10 Audio Cassettes called “NEW Great Themes of Scriptures” that develops the ideas presented here even further. His books and audio cassettes are available from **St. Anthony Messenger on their web site: <http://www.AmericanCatholic.org> or by phoning 1-800-488-0488 or from Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com**

Stage One:

An encounter with “Light:” There is a strong longing in every human heart and mind to explore the mystery of life and an innate desire to encounter the source of LIFE. At some point in our exploration, we are hit with an experience of God that affirms for us the reality of God, God’s love for us, and God’s guiding hand in our identity and destiny. This is faith in its vital and necessary initial stage. It offers us the light of clarity and confidence in the Divine and God’s power to enliven us and imbue our life with meaning.

An encounter with “Shadow:” Overjoyed and awed with God’s love for us, we also experience a needy, almost greedy approach to God. God is for ME, my personal Savior, but not for YOU--unless you agree with me as to the nature of what constitutes a genuine “God” experience. When only we are “the chosen people,” when only our Church offers us the means to salvation, we limit our understanding of the graciousness of God and God’s all abiding spirit in the world. Throughout our spiritual journey, we all can encounter this “shadow” and find ourselves back at “Stage One.” Similarly, certain passages of the Bible express this limited view even in the context of passages that express a more advanced stage of development. We must honor these dynamics as components of the important “first step of faith” at the same time we acknowledge the Holy Spirit calls us to greater spiritual depth.

Stage Two:

An encounter with “Light:” We begin to mature and realize that our relationship with God requires a deliberate, conscious response on our part. We understand the importance of Covenant and that our lives must give evidence to our Covenant with God. This is the stage for rules and guidelines in the path of faith: The Ten Commandments, The Golden Rule and the rules of the Church in faith and practice. At its best, this stage brings us a sense of assurance of "who we are before God" and provides us with an ability to see our personal faith in its communal dimension—faith in God invites us to harmony with others. Our identity becomes clarified.

An encounter with “Shadow:” A great pitfall on this level is our tendency to see God as a great scorekeeper or disciplinarian. The good get rewarded, the evil are punished. Many passages of the Bible reflect this stage of the spiritual journey. But there is more to life than rewards and punishments, and suffering is known by the good and the wicked alike. Furthermore, bad things happen to innocent people. To address these issues, our faith invites us to go deeper into the mystery of God and the meaning of our covenant with God. The Book of Job takes us on such a journey as does the prophet Jonah and developments in Jesus’ own teaching.

To Richard Rohr’s insights, I would also like to add a couple caveats of my own: First, we no longer view natural phenomenon as expressions of God’s will to punish or bless us the way many of the ancients did. For them, a flood was a willful, moral punishment from God; for us, the flood in Noah’s story is more of a symbol of the catastrophe that results from sin. In light of the scientific knowledge we have today, Nature herself is neutral, not “moral.” As a result, we need to approach the Bible’s use of natural phenomenon without the ancient prejudices.

Here’s another “shadow” to stage two: rigorist legalism —wherein our emphasis on “the law” is so absolute that “the Law” becomes an idol, replacing God Himself (no room for Providence, Mercy). Remember Jesus Himself spoke about “the Spirit of the Law” being more important than the “letter of the law” (See Luke 6: 1 -5 & Paul’s Letter to the Romans.) Lastly, not all laws in the Bible are of equal weight or value in the wider scheme of Jesus’ teachings and the teachings of the Church. Prayer, dialogue and discernment are necessary to move us out of this “shadow.”

Stage Three:

An encounter with ‘Light:’ At this stage, we recognize and experience God’s love as unconditional. We come to know that God continues to love us, is ever patient with us, ever forgiving—even when we aren’t ready to repent, or don’t want to. It is, however, those times when we do repent that we come to experience the vast expanse of God’s tender mercy. Furthermore, we come to understand that God’s love is offered to the just and the unjust alike; God invites us to be patient with others as God is patient with us. There are sections of the Old Testament that move us into this less chartered territory (e.g. Jonah as discussed below. Also see Luke 15: 11-32; Matthew 5: 43-48).

An encounter with ‘Shadow:’ As we find in the Book of Jonah, the revelation that God cares for all people and invites us to right relationship with our enemies and unbelieving neighbors causes us anxieties. Sometimes we experience anger towards God as Jonah did or we may fall into the temptation of seeing God as remote and apart from our daily lives, i.e., we do not sense he is rewarding us and punishing others. We have trouble understanding God’s Justice beyond the human constraints of our justice systems—legal or religious. At this point, we may find ourselves losing our awareness of the deep personal interest God maintains for us. We may lose the assurance of what we felt as ‘light’ in our first stage of development. We have to take further steps on our faith journey lest we keep God at a distance from our daily life.

Stage Four:

An encounter with ‘Light:’ In addressing good and evil in the world (and in our very selves), we realize that God invites us into the deepest kind of relationship: we are to become God’s instruments. For all that we are and are not, God still invites us to accomplish His Will on the earth: Love of God and neighbor as ourselves. This is one way in which Christianity understands the revelation of the Old Testament being fulfilled in Jesus Christ: He makes us One with Him and commissions us to welcome the world to this same unity.

An encounter with ‘Shadow:’ This dynamic evokes our enthusiasm but also issues forth a challenge. When we accomplish noble goals, when we love and forgive, do we see that it is God working through us? Do we acknowledge God’s power as our source of inspiration, motivation and perseverance? Or, do we forget God and want to take the credit for ourselves? Our ‘shadow’ can fool us into thinking we have replaced God and are not indebted to God for the good in our lives. What’s more, the 4th Stage shadow can burden us with oppressive guilt and engage us in the idolatry that comes from the chronic ‘do-gooder’: ‘everything good depends on my doing it’; ‘I can never do enough’; ‘I can never take a Sabbath’; ‘I don’t have time to pray’; ‘All Christian charity begins and ends with me.’ This shadow is at the heart of most ‘burnout’ in ministry and, at its worst, brings the spiritual path to a genuine ‘dead end.’ To counter this shadow, we must trust that God works through others in addition to ourselves; we must keep sustaining our good works with prayer and time for rest and contemplation.