

Stages of Faith Development In the Bible & In Our Lives

Approaches to Scripture Compiled by Fr. James DiLuzio C.S.P.

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 conditioned and limited by both the context of the events themselves (what humanity had learned and understood about God, 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 particular biblical experiences or events 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. (E.g. The Book of Daniel, written around 164 B.C. reflects on earlier events that occurred in 560 B.C. during the Jewish people's Babylonian exile in order to inspire faith and perseverance during Antiochus IV Epiphanes persecution of the people who had already returned to their native land.)

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 that, like much of the Bible, began as part of an Oral Tradition that was eventually edited, and, in some cases, re-written or expanded with new insights as it is being written and preserved for later generations. Indeed, this process also evidences the progressive way humanity learns and preserves its discoveries. Humans learn incrementally. Our knowledge and our understanding of life, people and things develop over time; new discoveries build upon previous discoveries and experiences, old perceptions give way to new insights and deeper understanding. We need not be surprised, then, to encounter this same dynamic evidenced 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. Ultimately, our knowledge and understanding of God comes from taking the Bible in its totality, its ultimate conclusions, not from the intermittent understandings or pronouncements along the way. (E.g. early on, the people understood God as a punishing and vindictive God, as eager to annihilate their enemies as they themselves were! But in time, and with more insight and experience, the people's limited

sensibilities give way to deeper understandings of God’s mercy, forgiveness of sins and even love for our enemies.)

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, spiritual and intellectual responses to what we read in the Bible with that of the biblical authors.

Because humanity learns progressively and collectively, the Bible catches us up into a great continuum of spiritual development guided by the Holy Spirit in and through the Church and human history. The degrees to which the Bible 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 (any time/ any place) 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. Discussing the Bible 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 we 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.

*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 CD’s called “NEW Great Themes of Scriptures” that develops the ideas presented here even further. In addition, I highly recommend a follow-up volume by Richard Rohr that offers deeper insights: *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press. 2008

Stages of Faith Development as found in the Bible

(Based on writings by Franciscan Father Richard Rohr)

Stage One: An encounter with “Light:” There is a strong longing in every human heart and mind to explore the mystery of life; 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. A second “positive” aspect of Stage One, is the human understanding that God is all powerful and all-knowing—both important foundations of faith.

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. The shadow of Stage One can be termed “Tribal Thinking,” i.e., we see the world as a dichotomy of those within our tribe and those out. All those outside of our tribe (family, church, ethnic group, nation) are assumed to be “ENEMY” without any efforts to know or understand them. In essence, a major theme of the entire Bible reveals God moving humanity out of a tribal worldview into a universal brotherhood and sisterhood in which all people are acknowledged as children of God, receiving his love and forgiveness. (See the Book of Jonah for a concretized expression of this theme—a theme embodied fully in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.) In truth, we are “chosen” not to lord it over others but to assist them in understanding that they, in fact, are “chosen,” too; “Chosen” to befriend and worship the one true God.

Throughout our spiritual journey, we all can encounter this “shadow” of “Tribal Thinking” and find ourselves back in “Stage One’s Shadow.” Note how certain passages of the Bible express this limited view, even though other passages express a more advanced stage of development. We must honor these dynamics as components of human weakness while still appreciating the “light,” the positive dynamics of “first stage of faith” without which no faith journey can begin. When we find ourselves tempted by “who’s In/ who’s OUT” thinking, it is vital that we acknowledge the Holy Spirit calls us to greater spiritual depth, inviting us to wrestle with the challenges of more advanced stages.

A second “shadow” also emerges in regard to the believer’s insight that God is all powerful. Early believers understood God’s all powerful nature meant that God intends everything that happens, making God, therefore, the source of both good and evil. (Job 2:10.) Later developments, however, help the ancient mind accept “evil” as a source in opposition to God. Compare Psalm 88 with Psalm 119:69 and Psalm 145; also compare the opening chapter of the Book of Job with Genesis 3 and Wisdom 2: 24. Notice how in the Book of Job, Satan is one among many of God’s assembly of angels! His role is one of “accuser,” or “heavenly prosecutor,” ready to test human virtue. Here,

he has the power to inflict evil with God's permission. In later books, the character of Satan is understood as completely malevolent, with a hatred for humanity, sending a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. Noting the difference between the accounts in Genesis and Job, we find that Job was documented almost 200 years before Genesis reached its final written form. (Scholars date the Book of Job to the 7th & 6th centuries B.C. and Genesis to the late 5th century B. C.). For more details, consult the excellent *Dictionary of the Bible* by John L. McKenzie, S.J., published in 1965 by Macmillan Publishers, New York, NY, and the more recent editions of the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford University Press, and New York, NY.

Stage Two: An encounter with "Light:" Here 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 faith in God. This is the stage for rules and guidelines in the path of faith: The Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule and the laws 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 and, our discipline helps us appreciate God's all encompassing, abiding love.

An encounter with "Shadow:" A great pitfall on this level is our tendency to see God as a great scorekeeper and disciplinarian only, i.e., the good get rewarded, the evil are punished. Many passages of the Bible reflect this stage of the spiritual journey. There is truth in these statements, but they do not reflect the full dynamic of human experience. For example, the ancients interpreted NATURE as God's Moral Agent of reward and punishment, i.e., "God blesses us with good weather and abundant crops because we have obeyed the Commandments; God has punished us with tornados, floods and drought because we have disobeyed the Commandments." Scientific knowledge coupled with our modern sensibilities of the way nature works make this position unacceptable. Nature is simply a neutral agent with its own laws and powers we perceive as good or evil depending on how it impacts us. Compare the expressions of God's rewards and punishments through nature found in many biblical passages with statements that Jesus Himself makes in Luke 13:1-5 and John 9:2. Surely, Jesus invites us to go beyond this stage of "old-world" thinking in this regard.

Moving beyond the earlier Biblical concepts of Nature as God's moral agent, we find in the Bible a willingness to wrestle with more mature concepts. For example, experience makes it quite clear that blessings and tragedies occur within the lives of the good and the wicked alike. In brief: 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. See Matthew 5: 45; Luke 6: 35; It takes maturity to find the tools to move beyond the shadow of this Second Stage.

To Richard Rohr's insights, I would also like to add two of my own. A second "shadow" to Stage TWO's view of all things happening as God's rewards or punishments: rigorist legalism—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 is 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 both Old & New Testaments that move us into this less chartered territory. See Isaiah 2:1-5; Isaiah 11: 1-13; Jonah; Luke 6 and Luke 15; Matthew 5.

An encounter with “Shadow We find in the Book of Jonah and the conclusion of Luke 15 that God cares for all people and invites us to right relationship with our enemies and unbelieving neighbors. This causes us anxiety. 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. We have trouble understanding “God’s Justice” beyond the human constraints of our justice systems—legal or religious. We fear that if God is for EVERYONE, we are no longer “Chosen” or “Special” or that it doesn’t make any difference what our religion is or what we say or do. 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—the belief in PROVIDENCE-- that we are born in to the faith and family in which we were born for God’s purposes. We have to renew the strengths, the ‘light’ of the earlier stages and continue to share our faith in Christ in respectful dialogue with others in order to advance on our faith journey. Otherwise 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 by becoming God’s instruments of grace. 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. This shadow also can also make us ‘driven’ and work-obsessed that we forget to take time to pray, depreciate the value of Worship and the importance of Sabbath rest. Our life becomes imbalanced; we judge ourselves and others only on ‘what we do,’ rather than “who we are.”

TOOLS FOR BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

1. Articulate feeling(s) evoked by a particular passage.
2. Do not judge the feeling – be open, honest – as in prayer.
3. The Bible is Living Word – in constant dialogue with itself,
with Tradition & Church Teaching,
with ongoing, developing human wisdom –
with archeology, science, art, literature & culture –
and with generations of human experience.

The Bible began in Dialogue – with God and with others (oral tradition) and must continue in dialogue for its meaning and purpose to be fulfilled. Therefore, never explore one passage in isolation from the rest of the Bible. The inerrancy of Scripture emerges in its totality. Not all passages are of equal value; each displays a particular stage in the peoples' spiritual development.

4. The Bible is “Condensed” – like condensed soup. In an oral culture, only essential elements would be committed to memory; even when written, ancient writing materials were expensive and the ancient mindset did not desire the details of modern journalism. As “condensed soup,” the Bible requires the “water” of dialogue, prayer and conversation to make it palpable and understandable.
5. Remember the Ancients used FEAR and STRONG LANGUAGE (EXAGGERATION) as their primary teaching tool. Our modern sensibilities must look beyond “the FEAR VENEER” to find the essential message.
6. The Ancients interpreted NATURE as God's Moral Agent of reward and punishment. This is no longer accepted as true. Look beyond the expression to find deeper meaning. (To see the movement away from this ancient concept see Luke 13:1-5 and John 9:2).
7. The whole Bible reflects God moving humanity from a tribal mentality (self-centered world view: “God is only for us, our group, our tribe, our nation”) to one of universal, “chosen” identity: we are chosen to invite all people to befriend the true God; we are chosen to let others know they are chosen, too.
8. Apply the Scripture directly to our own life – relationships, situations, growth issues. The Bible is our AUTOBIOGRAPHY especially the PASCHAL MYSTERY: DYING & RISING with JESUS CHRIST. In Christ, we live in the present moment (Kingdom at hand), allowing the past to simply inform not dictate choices for the future.

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