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Reading scripture through the lens of faith development

BY ANDREW GARNETT

In 2005, I first read James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* and was captivated by his work. It describes so well the patterns of faith I had experienced in the church.

After years of research, Fowler — a minister and developmental psychologist — claimed to have discovered six stages of faith. These stages were universal and sequential, with individuals progressing through them in order — having to do with the ways in which an individual believed rather than the specific content of those beliefs.

After a series of typical childhood stages, Fowler argued, most individuals entered Stage-3 faith during their teen years. This stage is marked by an emphasis on meeting the expectations of peers, a lack of independent perspective, implicit trust in authority figures, unquestioned acceptance of traditional beliefs, and strong emotional feelings.

Fowler believed some individuals in early adulthood would move to Stage-4 faith; as feelings give way to facts, a person would critically examine previously held beliefs, thereby coming to “own” their previously untested faith.

Around middle adulthood, some individuals proceed to Stage-5 faith; comfortable with tension and paradox, these people would experience a renewed appreciation for the emotional power of faith, recognize the complexity of the world, and be ready to spend their lives for the good of others.

Stage-6 faith, which was rarely realized in a human life, meant abandonment of oneself to God in a process of radical transformation.

Fowler's proposal has been contested. His idea that each person is on essentially the same spiritual journey does not seem particularly relevant in a postmodern world.

Yet I am struck by how Christians (and others) have long been aware of the broad contours of what Fowler proposed. Stage 3 is a period of conventional and expected growth. Stage 4 is a period of questioning and searching. Stage 5 is transcendence above those questions, and Stage 6 is a nearly complete union with God.

Third-century theologian Origen named this movement *purgation, illumination, and unification*. In the sixth century, Gregory the Great wrote of the need for the soul to collect itself, then to critically consider itself, and then rise above itself.

We may give the process different names, but the basic experience is the same: first conventional growth, then a period of questioning or testing, and then transcendence. We see this general pattern everywhere — even in scripture.

When thinking of the Bible as a witness to faith development we see that some scriptures are more suitable for some age groups than others. James presents a very confident faith with little room for questioning or doubt. Ecclesiastes delights in testing and questioning.

Paul demonstrates very nuanced thoughts on doubt. Some of us have doubts about theology or disagree about ethical action, but can live together through the unifying power of love (Rom. 14:1-18).

The worldviews of the three authors roughly correspond to Fowler's Stage-3, -4, and -5 faith, respectively. A youth Bible

study on James often goes well, college students intuitively understand what Ecclesiastes is struggling with, and middle-aged adults appreciate the nuance and complexity of Paul.

Also, faith development can help congregants understand that biblical authors had a faith that was similar (or dissimilar) to their own. Both James and Paul cite Lev. 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet they use the verse in very different ways.

For James, the verse functions as a concrete guide to relationships — Stage-3 faith, which makes moral decisions on an interpersonal level. Paul seems more similar to Stage-5 faith. Moral decisions should ensure the greatest good for the greatest number of people, while minimizing adverse effects for those who do not benefit.

Finally, reading scripture through the lens of faith development can help us interpret an author's original intent. The last verses of Ecclesiastes (12:9-14) seem so different from the rest of the book. After speaking in the first person for 12 chapters, the voice suddenly shifts to the third person.

The bulk of the book is radical and freethinking, while these final verses emphasize traditional concepts such as fearing and obeying God. If we can imagine a Stage-4 author writing the bulk of the book, we might better consider how the closing verses are in character with such an author's faith.

Faith development is a useful tool for Christian education and pastoral care, but learning to think of biblical authors in terms of their faith development sheds new light on their writings, and will be a fruitful avenue of study for those willing to undertake the journey. **NFJ**

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