

“In *Phases of Faith in the Biblical Story*, Sherrill Stevens uses the biblical narrative to offer an engaging account of the development of religious tenets and practices that comprise contemporary Christian religion. Through careful study of scripture, interwoven with insights from history, philosophy and anthropology, he shows how the Bible reflects the successive insights of generations and cultures to enrich modern understanding of ancient texts and traditions. His vision is both collective and personal. The story he tells from scripture of tribes, nations, and entire movements also illuminates aspects of an individual’s maturing faith. By integrating a lifetime of scholarship, personal study and pastoral ministry, Dr. Stevens offers a pragmatic, intellectually honest, and spiritually-sensitive story of a deepening human experience and understanding of God. This book is a helpful resource for people of faith who want to think deeply about how religion has arrived at this point in time, what remains important to retain—and what new insights have yet to be revealed.”

*Christopher Ingram*  
*Pastor*  
*Yates Baptist Church*  
*Durham, North Carolina*

“Without a doubt, God’s Holy Spirit hovered around and in me as I read, pondered, and absorbed Sherrill Stevens’ words in *Phases of Faith in the Biblical Story*. Deliberately as I read, I listened to the Holy Spirit and prayed for my own awakening. I became keenly aware that Dr. Stevens’ shared journey of ‘searching, learning, reasoning, analyzing, and concluding’ had allowed me to continue to cherish all my years of spoon-fed learning about Christianity—but most importantly to wake to a new view about the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Dr. Stevens, a biblical scholar and believer, confirms that ‘my central religious authority is the life and teachings of Jesus.’ This book lights a candle, plants a seed, and helps this wisdom-seeker see the light more clearly.”

*Carolyn Martin Harriss*  
*Stephen Minister*  
*Mt. Sylvan United Methodist Church*  
*Durham, North Carolina*

“Here is a distillation of the faith-learnings of a life-long, Jesus-exalting student of the Bible. In Sherrill Stevens’ brief but masterful review of the major plotline of scripture, with context and comment on each phase, he challenges us to see the Bible as a developing story rather than a divinely dictated script. Stevens writes as a ‘candle lighter’ and a ‘seed planter’ for readers who suspect (or already know) that the Bible’s best is heard only by listening with one’s mind as well as with one’s heart.”

*J. Daniel Day  
Pastor Emeritus,  
First Baptist Church  
Raleigh, North Carolina*

“Sherrill Stevens brings wise, deeply insightful context to the phases of faith in the Hebrew text. Nothing could be more necessary for the understanding of an ever-evolving religious faith than cohesively painting the biblical grand narrative. Dr. Stevens makes it possible for clergy and laity alike to better grasp the history of the canonical scriptures, thus revealing for the reader a larger story that is still forming and shaping the peoples of today. This is an important book and one whose audience should be much broader than the merely scholarly.”

*Jillian Martin-Prouty  
Pastor of Students  
First Baptist Church  
Clayton, North Carolina*

“I have known and respected Sherrill Stevens as a person, minister, and professor of religion and ethical integrity for more than forty years. I wish his latest book had been available and required reading in my first college religion class. It would have helped me make the necessary jump from childlike faith to a grownup faith. Biblical faith is difficult enough to understand and practice for clergy and laity alike. Dr. Stevens has made that journey accessible and rewarding to anyone committed to growing in the faith.”

*Thomas M. Denton  
Retired Pastor  
New Bern, North Carolina*



# **Phases of Faith in the Biblical Story**

Sherrill Gardner Stevens

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To Marguerite Godwin Stevens

Devoted Soulmate  
Exemplary Mother  
Gifted Teacher

# Introduction

In the pages that follow, I will demonstrate through the familiar text of the Bible the development of religious faith, and the practices that express it, from the “call” of Abraham to the traditional Protestant Christian religion since the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE.

I am a devout “Jesus” theologian who cherishes the Bible deeply, but I do not believe it is a product of verbal inspiration. Our Bible is a product of human response to the issues of life, nature, aspiration, fear, culture, and—I believe sincerely—to the inspiration and guidance of God.

Our Bible developed through changing eras of human social evolution, incremental learning, historical dynamics, and scientific development. In ancient times there was very limited understanding of the physical structure of the natural universe because people were limited to what they could see with the eye and what they could imagine.

The discovery of lens and the development of the telescope and microscope did not occur until long after Jesus lived (17<sup>th</sup> century CE). Reading and writing were not a feature of life for the general populace for many centuries of Hebrew/Israelite/Jewish history. Traditions and genealogies were preserved almost totally by oral passage from father to son in the nomadic and tribal cultures described in the Old Testament. This cultural situation prevailed until after the end of the kingdom period (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE).

Through the centuries, folklore and superstitions came to be included and carried forward in those oral traditions. I believe that in the great majority of recorded stories there was indeed an actual incident that became the foundation upon which additions and details led to an expanded and often radically changed “story” in generations later.

Keeping in mind the limitations and evolutions noted above, as I address the development of faith, I will not significantly engage in textual criticism—that task belongs to technical scholars and involves problems. *Phases of Faith in the Biblical Story* is intended for people who accept the text as we have it in our Bible.

My purpose is to help readers understand what people through the ages have believed about God and religion, what their religious practices have meant to them, and how they have applied their faith to their lives. I am deeply convinced that God is always active in guiding the human development of religious faith so that in our Bible a stream of truth is preserved that leads humanity upward and prepares us for the awesome life and teachings of Jesus.

A brief statement of textual orientation is appropriate to explain why this writing begins with Genesis 12, instead of Genesis 1. Genesis 1–11 are pre-Hebrew stories. They are insightful parables, similar to ancient primitive origin fables and hero epics. They are not, however, the beginning of the Hebrew story. They did not become part of Jewish

religious history until the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. The “stream” of Hebrew faith began as a “spring,” at the call of Abraham, and “flowed forth” from there.

The “spring” had a time and place. The time was 2000–1900 BCE, and the place was the Near East, Mesopotamia west to the Mediterranean Sea. The culture was tribal, and the climate dry. Some cities existed, but life was largely nomadic herding. Religion was polytheistic, primarily worship of natural objects and forces—sun, moon, air, wind, and water.

Into that world a man named Abram lived, a world-changing religious event happened, and a new kind of religion was born. For that reason, our story begins at Genesis 12:1-3.

The biblical story covers several periods of historical, cultural, and religious development. These divisions are loosely traced through the Old Testament as the patriarchal, tribal, kingdom, and exile periods. Faith development continues in the New Testament with the life and teachings of Jesus and the first centuries of Christianity.

### Patriarchal Period

Faith development began with the narrative of a family headed by patriarchs and lasted for about a century and a half (1850–1700 BCE). The lives of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) and their wives (Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, and Asenath) involved migrations, wanderings, wars, and famines.

The religion of the patriarchs was largely about a call from God, a covenant with God, and the belief in “their” God as a sovereign among other gods worshiped by neighboring tribes. The patriarchal period ended when a famine forced families/people to migrate to Egypt for survival.

### Tribal Period

The tribal period includes the story of the twelve sons of Jacob, beginning with their slavery in Egypt and continuing for two and a half centuries (1300–1050 BCE). The leaders through those years were Moses and Aaron, Joshua, tribal family heads, judges, and Samuel (the first leader considered to be a prophet).

Major events included suffering under slavery, Exodus, Sinai, the wilderness, entry into Canaan, settling in tribal areas, and conflict with neighboring Canaanites whom they could not drive out of the land. The primary religious development of the tribal period was the establishment of Mosaic legislation and ritual sacrifice practices.

### Kingdom Period

The kingdom period began when the Hebrews/Israelites/Jews insisted on having a king—“like other peoples”—whom they thought could lead them in their battles. Saul, the first king, was tasked with “bringing them together.” Then came David, the warrior king, who was victorious in establishing the nation of Israel. Next, Solomon expanded the nation to

imperial status, but so burdened the people that the nation divided under Rehoboam after Solomon's death.

The divided kingdoms, Judah and Israel, continued until the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE. Judah continued for more than another century until it fell to Babylonian conquest in 587 BCE, ending the kingdom period that began in 1040 BCE.

Major events of the kingdom period included the coronation of Saul, the building of the Temple, the division into two kingdoms, and the fall of the kingdoms under foreign imperial expansion. The central religious development was the belief that God is enthroned in a palatial city in heaven, patterned after the royal city of Jerusalem built by David and Solomon.

### The Exile Period

The period of Babylonian exile and post-exile spanned the remainder of the Old Testament era (587 BCE through the interbiblical centuries). The Exile itself lasted only half a century (587–539 BCE) before the Persian Empire conquered Babylon, and the Persian king Cyrus issued an edict ending the Exile and granting permission for the Jews to return to Judah.

Over a couple of centuries, groups of Jews did return and re-establish Jerusalem and a rebuilt Temple as a struggling “province” under Persian control. That situation continued until the Greek conquest by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE. Greek dominance prevailed until Roman conquest and rule began in 63 BCE. Among the religious events of the exilic/post-exilic period, three are most consequential:

- The recording of oral traditions into written documents that became the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian Old Testament:

Persians required the subject provinces to put local laws into written form to be approved and used in local administrative control. The Jewish people were bereft of being exiled in a foreign land away from their destroyed Temple and Jerusalem. Context convinces me that God inspired the priests and Levites to write the oral traditions to preserve their heritage and the sacred Law of Moses.

- The origin of the synagogue:

Away from the Temple, the Jews' religion could not center in sacrifices and offerings. To preserve the teaching of the Torah, and to provide a center for religious services, the synagogue was established as a place of worship through teaching and prayer. The synagogue became pervasive in Jewish life after the Exile.

- The shared experience and influence upon each other by Judaism and the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism:

After the Exile, post-exilic Judaism was characterized by exclusive monotheism (only one real God) and moral dualism (the existence of an adversary demigod/Satan advocating for evil in the world in competition against God). These beliefs of post-exilic Judaism were carried forward as tenets of faith into the Christian faith.

The biblical story of faith development continues in the New Testament era, beginning with the life and teachings of Jesus (5–4 BCE–c. 30 CE). And in the first centuries after Christ, the disciples of Jesus had to “figure out” what this new faith really meant, how it affected their future lives, and what they could believe about God and life. The story is about the rise of leadership, the spread of the gospel, the development of streams of belief about the nature of Jesus, the character of God, and life in relationship with God.

Different traditions developed that were later put into writing by the Gospel writers, Paul in his letters, and other writers. Together, through three centuries, these came to be considered inspired and sacred and were (in 367 CE) canonized to become our Christian New Testament.

The Christian faith has been, and is, a living faith. It has continued to change through the centuries of church history as the store of human knowledge has grown, as culture has affected it, and as skilled and devoted Christians have searched and applied discovered information and inspired insights. Divine guidance has been an unfailing help in fulfilling humanity’s search for light, truth, and abundant life.

...

I readily identify as a non-traditional interpreter of Judeo-Christian tenets of faith. I was trained at the graduate level in systematic theology and ethics, but after forty years of serious study I transitioned into an analytical theologian. Therefore, the explanations and interpretations I will present reflect my developed understanding of religious faith and practice.

As a matter of full disclosure, I understand my role to be “lighting candles” and “planting seeds” of information. I sincerely believe that all persons in reality “create” their own religious faith, responding to the sources of religious teaching and influence they choose to trust. If the subject of this manuscript is of interest to you, and if the information and interpretations presented prove to be helpful to you, I will be grateful for the privilege of having shared your personal journey of faith.

### Editor’s Note

In the chapters that follow, the author’s remarks are divided into two sections:

1. Study / discussion of the biblical text appears in regular font.
2. Contextual background / commentary appears in bold type.