Interpreting Scripture through Mystery, Doubt, and Ancient Lit: A Review of "Inspired"

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Abstract
"In her new book, Inspired, popular blogger Rachel Held Evans engagingly wrestles in reconciling the difficult passages in the Old Testament with the overarching message of the Bible."

Posting about the book Inspired from In All Things - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God’s creation.


Keywords
In All Things, book review, Inspired, giants, walking, water, love, Bible, Rachel Held Evans

Disciplines
Christianity

Comments
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Kayt Frisch

Title: *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Learning to Love the Bible Again*
Authors: Rachel Held Evans
Publisher: Thomas Nelson
Publish Date: June 12, 2018
Pages: 240 pages (Paperback)
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Some parts of the Old Testament read like plot summaries for *Game of Thrones* episodes:

“And he [David] defeated Moab and he measured them with a line, making them lie down on the ground. Two lines he measured to be put to death, and one full line to be spared.” (2 Samuel 8:2)

“Then they [Joshua and the Israelites] devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword.” (Joshua 6:21)

“[God said] take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” (Genesis 22:1)

In her new book *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Learning to Love the Bible Again*, popular blogger Rachel Held Evans engagingly wrestles with how the same God who “so loved the world” also ordered the genocide described in the book of Joshua; he called King David “a man after God’s own heart” yet ordered child sacrifice as a test of devotion.
Evans describes how her childhood view of the Bible as a magical storybook evolved into a teenager’s handbook (including whether to see Titanic in theaters or go to Bible study) and then into a young adult’s position paper (to determine right and wrong), before pushing her into an on-again-off-again faith in the decade following college. This book is the fruit of her early-adulthood struggles with how to live with and love the Biblical text for what it is—even coming to terms with its concubines, rape, and genocide. Through her journey she has found that “when you stop trying to force the Bible to be something it’s not—static, perspicacious, certain, absolute—then you’re free to revel in what it is: living, breathing, confounding, surprising, and yes, perhaps even magic,” and she wants to share that understanding with her readers.

The book is structured around (mostly) common genres found in ancient literature—stories about origins, deliverance, war, wisdom, resistance, gospel, fish (not exactly what you think), and deliverance. Evans introduces each genre with a creative fiction piece that retells a familiar Bible story (e.g. the Samaritan woman meeting Jesus at the well) and then talks about the Biblical text. The reflection chapters mix theological research, contemporary examples, and stories from Evans’ own journey of faith and doubt. She uses a variety of voices to make her points, and the tone is folksy and accessible—unsurprisingly given her background in blogging. She does not intend the book to be a scholarly work, which sometimes leaves the theological research feeling at odds with the popular nature of the work.

Biblical context is a reoccurring theme throughout the book, but it goes beyond the relatively common talk about the context of a particular writing to discuss the context of the Biblical texts as a whole, pointing out that different Christian traditions have slightly different Bibles. She also notes that authors are trying to convey messages with how they tell the story—for example, the different accounts of the Divided Kingdom reflect the different social situations from which they were written. Evans also spends a significant amount of time discussing the writings of Paul, which have a history of being used to proof-text some of the hot-topic debates in the modern church; and, for this reason, they have led at least one Christian I know to label the apostle a “twat.” She emphasizes that Paul’s letters are often contradictory, primarily because they are intended for a variety of audiences in varied contexts.

Evans wrote Inspired for people who are already asking questions about the Biblical text and who already agree with (or are at least open to) her progressive views. It is not a book that will cross times or cultures well (it has multiple references to the current political situation in the United States of America), and it would likely not be well received by readers who are not interested in better understanding their own framework of Biblical interpretation. However, if you are willing to be curious and listen, or if you have questions about the consistency of the Biblical story, Inspired is an accessible introduction, providing a starting point from which to dig deeper.