

An exploration of **Inspired**, by Rachel Held Evans

Week 1 - Introduction

Ok, did you read the introduction section of the book yet? And, if you did, what were your immediate reactions to it?

Now, let's consider this quote from Rachel:

"If the Bible of my childhood functioned primarily as a storybook, then the Bible of my adolescence functioned as a handbook, useful because it told me what to do. ... The Bible of my young-adulthood functioned as an answer book or position paper, useful because it was *right*. ... [When I got older and studied the Bible more academically], the scholarship I'd encountered was sound, [but] I used it to render the Bible into little more than a curiosity, an interesting religious artifact to study for sport."

Do you relate to Rachel's stages of change as she viewed the Bible at all?

How has your relationship to the Bible changed across the stages of your life?

How do you view the Bible now?

What are passages of scripture or stories of scripture that have been particularly inspiring for you?

What are passages of scripture or stories that have been particularly challenging for you?

Have you ever had an encounter with someone whose beliefs about scripture were different than yours? Describe that interaction or experience - was it a positive or negative experience for you?

What do you know about the way Jews approach the interpretation of scripture in their faith?

How would a more traditionally Jewish approach to scripture benefit how Christians interact with each other when it comes to the way we talk about the Bible?

Is absolute agreement among people's interpretation of scripture necessary in order for scripture to be considered inspired by God?

Think about this quote from Peter Enns: "What if the Bible is just fine the way it is? Not the well-behaved-everything-is-in-order version we create, but the messy, troubling, weird, and ancient Bible that we actually have?"

Week 2

“The Temple” and Chapter 1: Origin Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s story, “The Temple,” about the family living in exile in Babylon telling stories about creation? What did you learn from that story?

Do any of you have stories about generations before you that have shaped part of who you are, or have shaped characteristics of your family?

Read Genesis Chapter 1

- How have you seen interpretations of this text used in different ways?
- For those of us growing up in the church starting as children, what are your memories regarding origin stories or the stories of the patriarchs as a part of your early spiritual education?
- Why do we think the Genesis 1 story is so important for everyone to know? Why are the stories of the patriarchs given so much time and attention in children’s education curriculum?
- What do these origin stories tell us about how the early Jewish people interacted with and related to God?
- What do these origin stories tell us about where we come from as Christians?

Read Genesis 32:22-32

- What do you think about the fact that Jacob challenged God to a wrestling match, and then didn’t let him go until he received a blessing?
- Do you think that Jacob was challenging God’s authority?
- If you met Jesus today, would you challenge him to arm wrestle? How do you think people in the church would react to you if you did that?
- What do you think it means for us to wrestle with God?
- Are we wrestling with God when we try to understand a difficult passage of scripture?

Jacob walked away with a limp from his wrestling match with God. What do you think the significance of that detail from the story might be?

- Does wrestling with scripture have consequences?
- Is it always safe?
- Does it cost us something?

Think about this quote from Rachel: “While Christians tend to turn to scripture to end a conversation, Jews turn to scripture to start a conversation. ... This style of engagement not only brings us closer to scripture’s many truths, but closer to one another.”

Week 3

“The Well” and Chapter 2: Deliverance Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s story, “The Well?” Let’s compare Rachel’s version to **Genesis 16**. How is Rachel’s interpretation of this story in the Well different from the narrative in Genesis 16?

Do you have a time in your life that you would describe as a “wilderness?”

- What brought you to that wilderness?
- What lesson did you learn in the wilderness that you still carry with you?
- How did you encounter the presence of God during your time in that wilderness? Did you feel the presence of God at all?
- Did you get out of that wilderness, or are you still in it?
- What eventually brought you out of that wilderness?

What does Rachel mean when she introduces the term “sacred appropriation” in this chapter?

- Think about this quote from Allen Dwight Callahan: “African Americans found the Bible to be both healing balm and poison book. They could not lay claim to the balm without braving the poison.... The antidote to hostile texts of the Bible was more Bible, homeopathically administered to counteract the toxins of the text.” How did the African American community engage in sacred appropriation of the Exodus story?
- What is an example of sacred appropriation from your own life? Is there a passage of the Bible that has taken on deeper personal meaning for you?
- Are there limits to how we should use sacred appropriation with passages in the Bible? Are there places where Christians insert themselves where they shouldn’t?

What does Rachel mean when she introduces the term “dislocated exegesis”, and says “where you read changes how you read?”

- Let’s try this. Read **Psalms 63:1-8**. How might your interpretation of this psalm change if you read it in the thick of the wilderness vs. looking back on a wilderness experience?
- Are there other passages in the Bible that change their meaning depending on how you read them?

When we talk about the Law in church, what is your initial reaction? Is it positive or negative?

- What was the law originally intended for?
- How have passages from the law been used to hurt or oppress others?
- Read **Matthew 22: 37-40**. According to Jesus, what is the purpose of the Law?

What do you think Rachel means when she says the following: “For those who count the Bible as sacred, interpretation is not a matter of *whether* to pick and choose, but *how* to pick and choose. We’re all selective.” Do you agree or disagree?

Week 4

“The Walls” and Chapter 3: War Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s thoughts about war in her brief passage, “The Walls?”

What are your thoughts about this quote from Rachel? “If you really want to understand what makes a community or culture tick, ask the people in it what they believe is worth dying for, or perhaps more significantly, worth killing for.”

What do you think when you hear the term “text of terror?” What texts would you identify as “texts of terror” in scripture?

Let’s look at **Joshua 6**.

- What is the importance of the Jericho story to the narrative of the conquest of Canaan?
- What do you think about verse 21?

Next, let’s look at **Joshua 11:19-20**.

- Is this a command to commit genocide?
- What sort of justifications and explanations have you encountered over the years regarding Israel’s conquest of Canaan? Have you found explanations satisfying? Why or why not?

Let’s look at **Judges 11:29-40**.

- What is your immediate gut reaction to this story?

Is cultural context important when reading these passages?

- Do you think that the authors are embellishing the language used in these passages to emphasize their own importance in these stories?
- Are these stories just hyperbole, or what Joshua Ryan Butler called “ancient trash talk?”

What can we take from these stories about the authors or the people who wrote them?

- What would military victories mean for the nation of Israel and Joshua as a new leader?
- What does the vow that Jephthah makes tell us about how he interpreted his recent military victory? How did this affect his subsequent actions?
- Consider this quote from Peter Enns: “Writing about the past was never simply about understanding the past for its own sake, but about shaping, molding and creating the past to speak to the present.... The Bible looks the way it does because God let his children tell the story.”

Let’s look at **Philippians 2:6-11**.

Rachel says: “The last thing I know is this: If the God of the Bible is true, and if God became flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ, and if Jesus Christ is – as theologian Greg Boyd put it – “the revelation that culminates and supersedes all others,” then God would rather die by violence than commit it.... At the heart of the doctrine of the incarnation is the stunning claim that Jesus is what God is like.”