ALSO BY RACHEL HELD EVANS

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WHOLEHEARTED FAITH

RACHEL HELD EVANS

with Jeff Chu

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often annoying God seems rather adamantly committed to putting to death my notion that this life is all about being right—and especially that my life is all about me being right. Even as I still believe that God calls us to help change the world, to make it more just, to make it more equitable, to make it more loving, I also believe that God empowers the world to help change us, to make us more just, to make us more equitable, to make us more loving.

The stubbornness of my cynicism, it turns out, is no match for the resilience of God's love or for the steady work of living water.

10

MANY VOICES, MANY MASKS

Writing has taught me a special kind of patience that I am finally learning to apply to my faith. I find myself repeating the same mantras on a day of doubt that I repeat on a day of writer's block: *Be patient. Don't rush it. Live the questions. Let this play out.*

I think you can apply the same principles to reading. I consider myself fortunate that I was an English major. Studying literature teaches you that there is often nothing "plain" or "clear" about a text. It was always written in a particular context, almost always for a particular context. Interrogation is part of the work. So is empathy—for the writers as well as for other readers.

It puzzles me that it should be any different with the Bible. If we respect this holy book, should we not ask *more* questions of it, not fewer? Do we not engage more deeply with those—and those things—we love, not less?

For so many people, though, the Bible transforms from sacred text into stumbling block once they start interrogating it. It reminds me of my son, who has been in that phase of responding to every single thing out of my mouth with one word: "Why?" (Somehow my answers never seem as compelling to him as Daniel Tiger's.)

Your confidence in the veracity of Scripture might collapse under the accumulated weight of too many whys. But your confidence isn't your god—and Scripture isn't your god either. Scripture tells us about God and points us toward God and testifies about others' encounters with God, but it doesn't contain the entirety of God or even of the story of God. And God, I have to believe, *can* handle a million whys and more. In fact, God invites them, because there's something beautiful about wholehearted pursuit of truth and something hopeful about the earnest desire to understand the One in whom we find our source and our sustenance.

I remember the sense of invitation and joy I felt when I learned that the word "disciple" doesn't mean "expert" or "preacher," "lecturer" or "leader." Instead, it derives from the Latin word *discere*—"to learn." We're learners. We're all in process, all just partway through our studies, all nowhere near the completion of our educations. And it gives me no small amount of comfort to witness how patient Jesus was with his

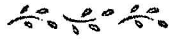
hapless disciples—Thomas, who doubted, and Nathanael, who was sharp-tongued; fickle Peter and finance-challenged Philip ("Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little," he said, as Jesus prepared to feed the five thousand[1]). We're called to be learners at the feet of the Master Teacher, slowly beginning to understand exactly what the life of faith means.

Our God is the Word made flesh, not the word printed on the page. And we commit a grievous error when we confuse what we consider to be divinely inspired text with the divine itself. People have been harmed by Christians' treatment of Scripture as a hermetically sealed box, to be opened only gingerly and carefully by those approved (it's worth asking by whom) to handle its contents. Lives—spiritual but also physical—have been lost because of mistaken ideas about biblical claims and idolatrous allegiances to "Scripture-based" systems.

In college, I read Alfred, Lord Tennyson. His poem "In Memoriam A. H. H." is a particular favorite of mine. Tennyson wrote it amidst tremendous grief, after one of his close friends, Arthur Henry Hallam, died unexpectedly at the age of twenty-two from a brain hemorrhage.

In the aftermath of Hallam's death, Tennyson wrestles in this poem with his own doubts and his own despair. It's a remarkable, extended, and public journey through difficult emotional and spiritual terrain, examining friendship and faith. While the poem is most famous for the line "'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all," it's this little collection of verse that I find especially timely:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.



For better or worse, the stories of Scripture are interwoven with my story, right down to my very name. In Sunday school when I was seven, the teacher pulled out a big book of names, searching for each of ours. I was informed that my name means "ewe." I went home from church crying that day, crushed by the conviction that my parents had taken one look at my naked newborn body and declared it disgusting. Learning a ewe is simply a female sheep did little to lift my spirits, especially because I had also found out that my friend Sarah's name meant "princess."

The truth was much more mundane and much less dramatic. (Welcome to my relationship with my long-suffering parents.) As my dad tells the story, he and my mom just liked the sound of the name Rachel. Because our last name, Held, is short and monosyllabic, they also wanted a slightly longer first name that was unlikely to be shortened. ("Naturally," he says, "it was affectionately shortened to Rach.") My middle name, Grace, came from my great-grandmother and also honored the biblical notion of grace.

Still, whatever my parents' inspiration, there's no escaping the fact that the name Rachel is a biblical one. So rather than trying to sever the threads of my life from those of the sacred

text, I hope to embrace and understand how they might be interwoven.

Sometimes I read the biblical account of Rachel, and even as I thrill at her rich and complex character, I shy from any direct comparisons to her. I certainly would never have settled for being anyone's junior wife, even if some readings of the text suggest that she was Jacob's preferred partner.

One of my favorite details about Rachel is one that most of us miss: When we meet her in Genesis 29:9, she's a shepherd. Only one other named woman in Scripture (Zipporah, who will become Moses's wife) tends flocks, even though it was customary in many ancient Near Eastern cultures for girls to help with the livestock. It's an inconvenient detail for those advocates of biblical womanhood who would rather keep the wife indoors, tending the hearth and making home.

The Rachel of my imagination enjoys a remarkable degree of autonomy, at least in comparison to the conservative stereotype of the biblical wife. I picture her holding a rough-hewn staff, walking through meadows of ryegrass and clover, goats braying and sheep bleating as they trail after their guardian. She hums a little tune to herself as she lifts her tanned face toward the warmth of the sun. From a patch near her sandaled feet, she plucks a stem of wild fenugreek, its fresh herbaceousness giving her nose a break from her gamy flock. Occasionally, she tucks herself into the shade of an old oak tree, guzzling water from the pouch slung across her hips. Out here in these hills, Rachel is free—free to dream, free to wander, free to question, free to be.

She's willful and resourceful. She trades her sister access to

Jacob for some of the mandrakes that Leah's son Reuben has collected; in ancient times, the cousin of the potato was believed to enhance fertility.

She's prone to a little drama: "Give me children, or I shall die!" she says to her husband.[2] And later, even as she names her first son, she's already asking for another.

She has an ambiguous relationship with God, as the womanist biblical scholar Wil Gafney points out. The text most often identifies God as Jacob's God, her husband's God, as if Rachel held this God at arm's length. Scripture records that God blesses her and remembers her. But she speaks about God only three times, making observations about divine favor. If she ever directly addressed God—if she ever prayed—we never learn about it. But Scripture does tell us that "God heeded her," opening her womb. "God is involved in Rachel's life in the most intimate way, granting her the desire of her heart," Gafney writes, "even though she does not turn to God for help."[3]

I find something profoundly liberating in Gafney's reading of Rachel and deeply moving in the biblical depiction of someone so vibrantly, unquestionably human.

Rachel dies giving birth to her second child, a son. With her last breath, she names the boy Ben-oni: "son of my sorrow." In what might be read as an ancient act of toxic positivity and enduring patriarchy—she was obviously all in her feelings, right?—Jacob disregards Rachel's voice and instead calls him Benjamin: "son of the right hand."[4]

There are so many entrancing weirdnesses in Rachel's story as it's recorded in Scripture. Susan Niditch, a scholar of the

Hebrew Scriptures, highlights Rachel's theft of her father's teraphim—the little objects that some versions translate as "household gods" and other scholars believe to be representations of venerated ancestors. Rachel hides the teraphim under the saddle of her camel, sits on said camel, and then claims she can't rise to greet her father because "the way of women is upon me." She uses a distinctly female power to control the situation, in a stunning instance of antipatriarchal direct action. Citing Rachel's "clever exploitation of that which makes her most markedly female," Niditch identifies this as a rare and unusual instance in which "covert woman's power . . . dominates man's overt authority."[5]

So much of Rachel's story happens off the page, from how she actually manages the tricky relationships with her sister-wives to what those quiet moments with Jacob were like. But I imagine that the shrewdness evident elsewhere in the text pervaded all her interactions.

When we're reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, often people amplify the echo in the metaphor of David, the unlikely young shepherd who conquered a giant and started a kingdom. I like to think, too, of Rachel, the unlikely young shepherd who strategized with her entire body, loved with a passionate fury, and then gave her life for her child.

The bigger point here is that there are different ways to read a text, different angles from which to perceive it. It's like a gemstone that captures, catches, and reflects different light.

No facet can represent that gemstone in its entirety. It has to be turned and regarded from various directions for us to begin to glimpse the beauty of the whole.

The late French philosopher Jacques Derrida had a wonderful phrase, "impoverishment by univocality," that he deployed to call for a kind of reading (or listening) that seeks instead to amplify the richness of multiple perspectives. When we try to make a text univocal, reducing it to one voice, we fail to recognize the full possibility of what it can offer. To interpret a piece of writing with the goal of "getting to the point" is to fail to recognize the wealth within and beyond it, because it takes on new life and new layers when it's interpreted through the diverse lens of the many. To understand the Bible and its meaning as "clear" and "plain" is to diminish its relevance to peoples across time and space and to fail to recognize that the Bible is anything but univocal.

The same can be said of how we see, describe, and attribute action to God. We impose masks on God, choosing to emphasize particular perspectives and downplay others, lifting particular understandings while minimizing others. Some of these masks ended up written down in Scripture, while others are lost to memory; some are more literary in nature, while others can be seen as more historical. The literary masks of God—at least the ones that ended up in the Bible or in other religious writings—do have a historical dimension to them, for each bears witness to the way God has patiently accommodated people's fallen and culturally conditioned conceptions of the divine at a particular moment in history. But I say that

these masks are primarily literary, not historical, because I refuse to believe that God engaged in or commanded the violence that some Old Testament authors ascribe to God.

All this might sound complicated, but it's not, not really. We all wear our own masks, which to varying degrees represent who we are as well as who we imagine ourselves to be as well as who we aspire to be. Even the more fictitious ones can tell us something. We can learn from what lurks in the shadows.

In *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen writes about the masks of the world—or, rather, about liberating yourself from them. "You have to keep unmasking the world about you for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry, and, in the long run, destructive," he writes. "The world tells you many lies about who you are, and you simply have to be realistic enough to remind yourself of this."[6]

The world tells us many lies about who God is too. And my hope in calling us to take care with how we read stories about God, about God's people, and about ourselves and our communities, is ultimately that we will not give those lies more power than they deserve, which is to say, not much power at all.

It seems too good to be true that God redeems all things, and yet this is the hope that has been written for us. No matter

which angle I perceive this from, it just seems . . . good. Hard but good. Unbelievable but good. Weird but good.

To return to Tennyson:

> Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
> Will be the final end of ill,
> To pangs of nature, sins of will,
> Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;
>
> That nothing walks with aimless feet;
> That not one life shall be destroy'd,
> Or cast as rubbish to the void,
> When God hath made the pile complete.

11

WILDERNESS

The path from unquestioning certainty to wholehearted vulnerability looks less like a wide, paved, flat boulevard than a winding, sometimes barely discernible track through steep hills and debris-strewn valleys. In other words, it looks a lot like a forbidding journey through the wilderness.

I've written before about the wilderness, which in Scripture is both a literal destination and a metaphorical trope. I like a little bit of controlled wilderness every now and then—a hike in the hills with my family, taken with the hope of a hot shower after a successful day out, or a (very) brief camping trip that comes with the promise of AC and cable TV at its conclusion. That is obviously not how the biblical or spiritual wilderness works.

Wilderness can be at once a place of refuge and a space of