
**A Review of Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband "Master."*
Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012. 352 pp. \$15.99.**

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It seems that Rachel Held Evans and I have a lot in common. The cover of her book boasts a picture of Evans sitting on the roof of a house. Back in my college days, my roommate Michelle and I spent our free time sitting on our porch roof, listening to the Beatles, drinking coffee, and making up stories about the neighbors. Even after I graduated and married I still couldn't resist climbing out of the upstairs bathroom window onto my new, perfect roof spot for a different perspective.

But as I read her book, I discovered Evans and I 'roof-sat' for different purposes. For Evans, it was a time of penance based on her interpretation of Proverbs 21:9, "It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife."

Impressive Style, Slanted Interpretation

Rachel Held Evans is an engaging writer. The more I read, the more I understood her popularity among women. She tells a great story, and I really appreciate her witty observations and inability to small talk.

The chapters in Evans' book are topics that every woman struggles with in her Christian walk. Topics relating to our roles, virtues, behavior, and lifestyle are important for each one of us to examine against Scripture. And this is what Evans claims she will be doing for one year.

I vowed to spend one year of my life in pursuit of *true* biblical womanhood. This quest of mine has required that I study every passage of Scripture that relates to women and learn how women around the world interpret and apply these passages to their lives. In addition, I would attempt to follow as many of the Bible's

teachings regarding women as possible in my day-to-day life, sometimes taking them to their literal extreme. (xxi)

And there is the kicker. With all the research that Evans does, she seemingly doesn't understand the basic principles of biblical hermeneutics. Literal interpretation, i.e., reading the Bible literally, always discerns the different genres that are involved. More specifically, faithful interpretation pays attention to both the grammar and redemptive historical setting of the passage in question. That is, we read Scripture in its historical and linguistic context, with the final revelation of Christ's fulfillment in all its words.

This is painfully missing in Evans' book. Instead, she playfully uses what I call an "Amelia Bedelia" method of Scripture interpretation to try and prove that the traditional view of biblical womanhood is nonsense. In these popular children's stories, when Amelia Bedelia sees a date cake on the Christmas baking list, she tears out actual days from the calendar and mixes them into the batter. You can use your imagination for what she does when told to "steal home plate."

In Evans' case, she does something similar with the Bible. In her chapter highlighting valor, she goes through Proverbs 31. Here are some of the assignments she gives herself to pursue "literal" biblical womanhood (77, 78):

- Work out those arms—"She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong." (v. 17)
- Knit a red scarf and/or hat for her husband Dan—"When it snows, she has no fear for her household, for all of them are clothed in scarlet." (v. 21)

- Praise Dan at the city gate—“Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.” (v. 23)

To fulfill that last one, Evans holds a sign that reads, “Dan is Awesome” in front of the “Welcome to Dayton” billboard at rush hour. Is this the way that anyone reads Proverbs 31? And yet Evans is inferring that this is what reading the Bible literally means. She does this chicanery in each chapter, gives the reader a lesson of what she *really* learned, and comes to her own conclusion about the value of each virtue once it’s rescued from “literal” interpreters.

Where Is the Gospel?

While she does do some valuable research that can certainly shed more light on some of the verses at hand, Evans continually misses the opportunity to present these particular passages in their redemptive-historical context and demonstrate how they lead us to the gospel. For example, after failing at many of her attempts to emulate the Proverbs 31 woman, Evans consults her new Jewish friend, Ahava. Her friend explains how her Jewish husband actually serenades her weekly with the poetic words of Proverbs 31 at the Shabbat table. Ahava concludes, “I know that no matter what I do or don’t do, he praises me for blessing the family with my energy and creativity. All women can do that in their own way. I bet you do that as well” (88).

Evans is blown away that in Ahava’s case, it is the men who memorize Proverbs 31 to sing a blessing to their wives in the presence of family and friends. “*Eshet chayil* is at its core a blessing—one that was never meant to be earned, but to be given, unconditionally” (88). And so I tell myself, even though this is the fourth chapter and she still hasn’t presented the gospel, “Wait for it...”

But alas, the message of the gospel does not come. Evans misses yet another opportunity to point us to our Savior. Jesus Christ, our Bridegroom, does this exact thing for his bride, the church. He declares us righteous! Although we insist on earning our own way to God with our self-righteousness,

Jesus died for us while we were still his enemies. It was our perfect Bridegroom who lived the righteous life of valor on behalf of his beloved. He took all of our guilt, all of our shame, and bore the curse for our sin. Now he is seated at the right hand of the Father interceding for us, until all enemies are put under his feet, when he will return for his bride. What glorious song will he greet his bride with?

Do you see the difference? It is very helpful to gain more understanding of how the Jews would read this Scripture, but tragically they do not see Jesus in it. By comparison then, one interpretation says, “It’s okay if you’re not perfect, we are all doing our best and our husbands recognize that.” And the other says, “God demands perfection, but he loves us so much that he has sent his very own Son to represent his bride. And because of his work, women of faith really are being transformed into what he has declared us to be: perfectly righteous, *eshet chayil!*”

Liberation Comes Through Submitting to a Higher Authority

Without explicit attention to the gospel, Evans misses the beauty of true biblical womanhood. But there is more. She concludes, “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” (296). Evans believes that we read what we are looking for in Scripture, that it really is like a wax nose. Therefore, she encourages readers to read with a prejudice of love rather than power, self-interest, and greed. Ultimately, I’m afraid that my concerns move beyond Evans’ problems with interpretation, and straight to her view of Scripture itself. For her, authority lies with the reader, not the Word of God. This is very troubling.

Evans reads Scripture with the predisposition that a loving God would never keep women in a submissive role. And she is right when she challenges those who believe submission is a card that your husband can play, as if women have less value and contribution. I agree with many of her arguments that oppose caricatures of complementarianism. But Evans attacks caricatures, not biblical complementarianism.

Submission takes the greatest strength, and it is something that you offer voluntarily in love. A submissive disposition is a recognition that you are married to a man that has been called to lay down his life for you, as Christ has done for his bride. Women are to submit to their husbands as unto the Lord. Rather than sabotage God's beautiful design for marriage, I want to thankfully receive it in my valuable role as a helper.

Do I submit to God's great love for me in Christ? Do I submit to the beautiful design he has fashioned for me, to my husband that he has appointed for my care and nurturing in his Word? Unfortunately, too often I do not. But the truth is that God's Word is not a book of laws that enslave me as a woman. Rather, it points to the One who has freed me to live for his glory and my good. I look forward to that day of consummation when I will be the perfect woman in union with Christ for eternity. I will see the grand picture of all God's people, in our biblically proclaimed manhood and womanhood, in all our diversity, living in complete harmony with the Son. Unfortunately, I missed this message of the truly liberated woman in Evans' book.