

Rachel Held Evan's Year of Biblical Womanhood

Reviewed by Ashleigh Bailey

Proverbs 21: 9 says that “It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious wife.” While sitting on one’s rooftop is not technically a prescribed punishment for a woman’s belligerence, Rachel Held Evans decided that a minute of roof time per contentious remark of the previous month was an appropriate penance. Because she is accused of making a mockery of the Bible with her new book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband Master*, one might think Evans would be the epitome of the contentious woman, but I, in fact, found the opposite to be true. While undoubtedly bold, Evans is about as gracious as they come, and her book celebrates womanhood rather than promoting division.

About two years ago Evans, a popular blogger and author of the memoir *Evolving in Monkey Town*, embarked on a twelve-month project of trying to follow the Bible’s instructions to women as literally as possible. Picking themes such as “valor,” “modesty,” “fertility,” and “silence” for each month, she attempted to practice values considered “biblical” for women in various Christian and Jewish contexts. To the confusion of her neighbors, the now-31-year-old Dayton, TN resident refrained from cutting her hair all year. One month, she spent her period outside in a tent. Another month, in an effort to get in touch with her maternal side, she adopted a fussy computerized baby doll intended to discourage teen sex. At other points throughout the year she wore head coverings, focused on cooking and cleaning, cared for the poor, and celebrated several Jewish holidays.

From the beginning, the purpose of Evans’ project was to serve as material for her book, which encourages readers to consider the importance of hermeneutics in how we apply Scripture to our lives. It’s understandable that her book has provoked controversy since she discourages literalistic approaches to the Bible in favor of interpretations and applications more aware of each passage’s literary and historical context. Her conclusions are unapologetically egalitarian, and this fact alone is enough to upset some readers. However, Evans deserves a great deal of credit, even from those who disagree with her conclusions. As much as she hopes to free women from unrealistic or unhealthy expectations that often accompany the idea of “biblical womanhood,” she is not on an angry tirade against complementarianism. In fact, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* consistently displays the quality of “gentleness”—one of Evans’ month-long themes.

Evans has struck a magnificent balance, managing to challenge the status quo in evangelicalism without arrogantly dismissing women who understand their faith differently from her. For example, she maintains dialogues with other women throughout the book, learning what she can from Amish and Old Order Mennonite women, Orthodox Jewish women, and Quiverfull families. Similarly, as

Evans goes about her year, she could engage in various practices simply to prove the point that women *shouldn't* typically be doing so, but instead she seems genuinely open to what she might learn about God, herself, and others by only wearing skirts, changing the dynamics of her marriage, or refraining from speaking in church.

While some Christians will dismiss the book without reading it or hold a prejudice against Evans for her egalitarianism, there is a humble, invitational quality to the book for those willing to engage with its ideas. In this way, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* has a great deal to offer Christians from all points on the spectrum: To the complementarian willing to listen, Evans shares the joys of her egalitarian marriage, her appreciation for women of the Bible like Huldah the prophet and Junia the apostle, and her research and reflections on significant passages of Scripture. To the egalitarian willing to listen, Evans is a model of honest searching and respectful conversation, encouraging us to not become embittered towards the complementarian majority in evangelicalism but rather to continue to maintain relationships and thoughtful engagement, fueled by faith, hope, and love.

ASHLEIGH BAILEY grew up in southeastern Ohio and the North Carolina piedmont, attending churches from a wide variety of denominations as a child and adolescent, exposing her to various Christian views on gender roles. She is an alumna of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, holding an M.A. in Theology and M.A. in Family Studies. Ashleigh originally found CBE through an Internet search at age sixteen, and her concern for gender equality in the church sparked her initial explorations of biblical studies, theology, and other social justice issues. She currently lives in Durham, NC with her husband Jeremiah, a Duke Th.M. student, and her son Ambrose, who was born in June 2012. They are happy to be a part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship network of churches, which affirms women in ministry.

Website: <http://www.wtjblog.com>