

PRAISE FOR *INSPIRED*

“Besides being such an intelligent, often whimsical teacher on something as complicated as the Bible, perhaps the best endorsement I can give Rachel’s book *Inspired* is that before I was even halfway through, I told my teenagers I wanted to read it with them. This is the Jesus and the Scriptures I want them to love. This is a brilliant, beautiful offering.”

—Jen Hatmaker, author of *New York Times*
bestsellers *Of Mess and Moxie* and *For the Love*

“Rachel Held Evans models a spiritual journey that many are yearning to take: growing into adult readers of the Bible without feeling as though they are leaving the faith of their youth in the process. With her characteristic honesty and warmth, Rachel gives many the language and permission they desperately need to leave behind their guilt and fear, and to read the Bible anew with the joyful anticipation the sacred book deserves.”

—Peter Enns, author of *The Bible Tells Me So*

“Rachel Held Evans has taken the stodgy, ancient bundle of work we call the Bible and makes it accessible without trampling its ancient origins or cultural contexts. In doing so, she subverts the strange, modern assumptions we too often bring to its pages. *Inspired* is both delightful and essential.”

—Mike McHargue, cofounder of *The Liturgists*, host of *Ask Science Mike*, and author of *Finding God in the Waves*

“*Inspired* is a love letter to scripture. Evans takes what has been weaponized against so many of us and she beats it into a ploughshare. She shows us how to love the Bible; how to see its flaws, beauty, strength, and spirit at the same time. That’s love. Not worship. Love. I’m so grateful for this expertly written, timely book.”

—Nadia Bolz-Weber, pastor and author
of *Pastrix* and *Accidental Saints*

INSPIRED



INSPIRED

SLAYING GIANTS,
WALKING ON WATER,
AND LOVING THE BIBLE AGAIN

RACHEL HELD EVANS



NELSON
BOOKS

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For my mother-in-law, Norma Evans

Did he believe that God wrote stories with only one kind of meaning? It seemed to me that a story that had only one kind of meaning was not very interesting or worth remembering for too long.

—CHAIM POTOK, *DAVITA'S HARP*



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INTRODUCTION

“ONCE UPON A TIME . . .”

Once upon a time, there lived a girl with a magic book. Like many other books, this one told tales of kings and queens, farmers and warriors, giants and sea monsters, and dangerous voyages. But unlike any other, it cast a spell over all who read it so they were pulled into the story, cast as characters in a great epic full of danger and surprise. From the book the girl learned how to be brave like the shepherd boy David, clever like the poor peasant Ruth, and charming like the beautiful queen Esther. She memorized the book’s proverbs, which were said to hold the secret to a rich and happy life, and she sang the book’s ancient songs, just as they’d been sung for thousands of years. She learned that with enough faith, you could topple a giant with a slingshot, turn water into wine, and survive three days in the belly of a great fish. You could even wrestle an angel. She learned, too, how to defend the book against its enemies, those who said its story wasn’t true. She could fashion the book into a weapon if she wanted, and wield its truth like a sword. Rumor had

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it the book was divinely inspired, and she believed it, for every word she read echoed with the voice of God.

When the girl met a teacher named Jesus in the story, she heard that voice even louder than before, so she promised to love and follow him forever. Jesus taught her to care for the poor, be kind to the lonely, forgive the bullies, and listen to her mother. He healed the sick and raised the dead and said those who followed him would do the same. The girl never healed the sick or raised the dead, but still she believed.

Then, one day, the story began to unravel. The girl was older now, with a mature and curious mind, and she noticed some things she hadn't before. Like how God rewarded the chosen patriarch Abraham for obeying God's request that he sacrifice his own son. Or how God permitted the chosen people of Israel to kidnap women and girls as spoils of war. After the famous walls of Jericho came a-tumblin' down, a God-appointed army slaughtered every man, woman, and child in the city, and after Pharaoh refused to release his slaves, a God-appointed angel killed every firstborn boy in Egypt. Even the story of all the earth's animals taking refuge in a giant ark, once one of the girl's favorites, began with a God so sorry for creating life, he simply washed it all away. If God was supposed to be the hero of the story, then why did God behave like a villain? If the book was supposed to explain all the mysteries of life, why did it leave her with so many questions?

Deep down she knew there was no such thing as crafty serpents and talking donkeys, and that you could never fit every kind of animal on earth on a boat. Science proves the earth wasn't made in seven days, nor is it held up by "great pillars" as the book claimed. There were contradictions in the various accounts of King David's reign, and even the stories of Jesus' famous resurrection didn't read like reliable newspaper reports.

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Perhaps, the girl reasoned, the story wasn't true after all. Perhaps, she feared, her book wasn't magic.

With each question, the voice of God grew quieter and the voices of others grew louder. These were dangerous questions, they said—forbidden questions, especially for a girl. They told her to fight against her doubts, but her sword grew heavy. They told her to stand strong in her faith, but her legs grew weak. Words that once teemed with life nettled her mind, and stories that once captured her imagination triggered her doubts and darkest fears. It was as if the roots of beloved and familiar trees had risen up to trip her on the path. There was no map for a world suddenly rearranged, no incantation to light the road ahead.

She was lost.

And yet the spell remained unbroken. The characters, many more sinister now, wandered in and out of her life just as before, interrupting her work, her relationships, her plans. Old stories continued to be told. Old battles continued to be waged. She couldn't get the ancient songs out of her head.

She was still caught in the story. Like millions before her and millions after, she couldn't run away. In her unguarded moments, she found herself wondering, *Is the magic of the book really divine blessing, or is it, in truth, a curse?*

And that's when the adventure really began.



Controversial. Sacred. Irrelevant. Timeless. Oppressive. Embattled. Divine.

The Bible conjures all sorts of adjectives among modern-day readers, and yet its “magic” is indisputable, for every time we tease about “forbidden fruit” or praise a good Samaritan, we betray

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our fascination with this ancient collection of stories and poems, prophecies and proverbs, letters and laws, written and compiled by countless authors spanning multiple centuries and cited by everyone from William Blake to Beyoncé. The Bible has been translated into more than two thousand languages, its tales inspiring the art of Shakespeare and Steinbeck, Zora Neale Hurston and Blind Willie Johnson. Its words are etched into our gravestones, scribbled onto the white posters we carry into picket lines, and strategically incorporated into our dating profiles.

Civil rights activists quoted heavily from biblical texts, as did the Christian segregationists who opposed them. The Bible's ancient refrains have given voice to the laments of millions of oppressed people and, too often, provided justification to their oppressors. Wars still rage over its disputed geographies.

Like it or not, the Bible has cast its spell, and we are caught up in the story.

My own life got grafted in the moment I first drew breath at Saint Vincent's Hospital in Birmingham, Alabama, and was named *Rachel*. In Scripture she is the beautiful shepherdess who stole Jacob's heart, defied her father, nursed a bitter rivalry with her sister, and begged God to give her children right up until the birth of her second took her life. In Birmingham, Alabama, in the hairspray haze of the Reagan era, this Rachel was an intense and imaginative kid with severe eczema, knock-off Keds, and political opinions. When I first learned in Sunday school, at age seven, that my biblical name means *ewe*, I came home crying, certain my parents had taken one look at my naked baby body and declared it *gross*. Learning a *ewe* is simply a female sheep did little to cheer me, especially when my friend Sarah's name meant *princess*.

As a child, I imbibed the stories of Scripture as a fish imbibes the sea. The evangelical subculture of the eighties and nineties

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produced no shortage of Bible-themed books and videos, so along with the cast of *Sesame Street* and a relentless cavalcade of Disney princesses, the figures of Moses, Miriam, Abraham, and Isaac marched through my imagination. My first Bible was one of those Precious Moments volumes that boasted blond, doe-eyed David on the cover, two baby lambs resting in his arms, and a sparrow perched on his staff, the shepherd boy blissfully unaware that in a few short years he'd be delivering two hundred Philistine fore-skins to his father-in-law as a bride price. Inside were all my favorite biblical heroes and heroines depicted as children. (Well, almost all of them. The artists failed to include Jael, whose precious moment involved assassinating a general by driving a tent peg through his skull.) These characters occupied a similar space in my brain as Abraham Lincoln, Bear Bryant, and dead relatives whose antics were conjured up at family gatherings from time to time. They were mythic yet real; true yet more than true. The Bible's stories were the ones in which every other story belonged, the moral universe through which all of life's dramas moved. So convinced was I that I inhabited the same reality as Lot's wife, I refused for years to look out the rear window of our Chevy Caprice for fear of turning into a pillar of salt.

By the time my family relocated to one of the most famous notches of the Bible Belt—Dayton, Tennessee, home of the famous Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925—my evangelical roots ensured I drank deep from the waters of Scripture. I'd memorized large portions of Psalms, Proverbs, and Romans before entering high school, where I served as president of the Bible Club and a leader in my church youth group. (You know you've found your place in the world when you make it to the homecoming court . . . representing the Bible Club.) The pages of my *Ryrie Study Bible* bled yellow, orange, and green from highlighting, and I never missed my morning "quiet time" in the Word. If the Bible of my childhood functioned primarily as a

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storybook, then the Bible of my adolescence functioned as a handbook, useful because it told me what to do. I turned to it whenever I had a question about friendships, dating, school, body image, friendship, or any number of adolescent concerns, and it never failed to provide me with a sense of security and direction.

Every evangelical teenager was expected to choose a life verse, and mine was Philippians 3:8: “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ” (NASB). (It’s funny now to think that the words in a two-thousand-year-old letter from an imprisoned ex-Pharisee to the members of an obscure religious sect convinced a sixteen-year-old girl in 1997 to choose going to a Bible study over seeing *Titanic* in the theater, but such is the strange power of our biblical text.)

No one was surprised when, after graduating from high school, I enrolled in the English literature program at a conservative Christian college that promised to teach every discipline—from psychology, to history, to economics—from a “biblical worldview perspective.” If the Bible of my childhood functioned as a storybook and the Bible of my adolescence a handbook, then the Bible of my young adulthood functioned as an answer book, or position paper, useful because it was *right*. The Bible, I learned, was the reason Christians voted for Republicans, rejected evolution, and opposed same-sex marriage. It was the reason I could never, as a woman, be a pastor, the reason I should always, as a woman, mind my neckline. A biblical worldview, my professors assured me, would prepare me to debate atheists and agnostics, and would equip me to engage the moral confusion of postmodern culture still reeling from September 11, 2001. The more I learned about Scripture, they said, the more confident I would grow in my faith and the better I would be at answering the world’s questions.

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But their assurances, however sincerely intended, proved empty when, as a young adult, I started asking those questions for myself. Positions I'd been told were clearly “biblical”—young earth creationism, restrictions on women's roles in the home and church, the certainty of hell for all nonbelievers—grew muddier in the midst of lived experience, and the more time I spent seeking clarity from Scripture, the more problems I uncovered. For example, why did my church appeal to Paul's letter to Timothy to oppose women preaching from the pulpit, but ignore his instructions to the Corinthians regarding women covering their heads (1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 11:6)? How could we insist the Bible is morally superior to every other religious text when the book of Deuteronomy calls for stoning rebellious children, committing genocide against enemies, and enslaving women captured in war (Deuteronomy 20:14–17; 21:18–21)? What business do I have describing as “inerrant” and “infallible” a text that presumes a flat and stationary earth, takes slavery for granted, and presupposes patriarchal norms like polygamy?

It was as if the Bible had turned into an unsettling version of one of those children's peekaboo books. Beneath the colorful illustration of Noah's ark was—surprise!—the violent destruction of humanity. Turn the page to Joshua and the battle of Jericho and—peekaboo!—it's genocide. Open to Queen Esther's castle and—look!—there's a harem full of concubines. Gone was the comforting storybook of my childhood, the useful handbook of my adolescence, and the definitive answer book of my college years. The Bible of my twenties served only as a stumbling block, a massive obstacle between me and the God I thought I knew.

My parents responded to my questions with compassion, but the evangelical community around me treated them like a wild-fire in need of containment. Friends, professors, and Sunday school

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teachers rushed to offer explanations, often referring me to Gleason Archer's massive *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, a five-hundred-page tome that promised answers to all the Bible's most challenging puzzles, but which proved less than helpful to a reluctant skeptic previously unaware half of those puzzles existed in the first place. The harder my fellow Christians worked to minimize my objections, the more pronounced those objections became. Beneath all the elaborate justifications for Israel's ethnic cleansing, all the strange theories for where Cain got his wife and how Judas managed to die in two different ways (he hanged himself and *then* fell headlong onto the ground), I sensed a deep insecurity. There was a move-along-nothing-to-see-here quality to their arguments that only reinforced my suspicion that maybe the Bible wasn't magic after all, and maybe, deep down, they knew it. Instead of bolstering my confidence in the Bible, its most strident defenders inadvertently weakened it. Then when a pastor friend asked me what personal sins might have triggered my questions—"sexual immorality, perhaps?"—I saw that my journey through these doubts would be a lonely one.

I would leave my faith a dozen times in the years following, only to return to it a dozen more. I got married, became Episcopalian, voted for Barack Obama, and discovered the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. Armed with a library card and a blog, I delighted in informing people whose life verse was Jeremiah 29:11 ("For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future") that those words were directed at the nation of Israel during the Babylonian exile, *not* high school seniors, and I made sure to interrupt references to the Bible's epistles with the knowing caveat, "*if* Paul authored the letter to the Colossians," to the wry chuckles of other readers in the know.

In short, I became something of a Bible bully.

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While the scholarship I'd encountered was sound, I used it to render the Bible into little more than a curiosity, an interesting religious artifact to study for sport. Beneath the incessant hum of objections, corrections, and clarifications lay a terrible silence wherein the Bible still fascinated me but no longer spoke to me, at least not with the voice of God. The Bible remained a stumbling block, but a fixture now cold and mute.

My journey back to loving the Bible, like most journeys of faith, is a meandering and ongoing one, a story still in draft. And like all pilgrims, I am indebted to those who have gone before me, those saints of holy curiosity whose lives of faithful questioning taught me not to fear my doubts, but to embrace and learn from them.

Memoirist Addie Zierman writes an online advice column, "Dear Addie," for people who have left legalistic religious backgrounds. Recently a reader named Megan asked for advice on how to engage the Bible when it comes with so much baggage, when it tends to trigger more doubts than it resolves. Zierman advised Megan to think of the Bible not as one of those *Magic Eye* books, which, with enough squinting and studying, reveal a single hidden image, but rather as a song that can be covered and remixed by a variety of artists. "Find your cover artists," she wrote. "Find the voices that help you hear the same songs differently."¹

Over the course of the last decade, I have discovered my cover artists—those scholars and poets, traditions and practices, that help make the Bible sing. From the rich history of Jewish interpretation, I learned the mysteries and contradictions of Scripture weren't meant to be fought against, but courageously engaged, and that the Bible by its very nature invites us to wrestle, doubt, imagine, and debate. Liberation theology (which views the Bible through the lens of becoming free from unjust conditions) and feminist biblical interpretations showed me how the stories of Scripture could be wisely

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appropriated for social good by pointing us to justice. The spiritual practices of *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian meditation, which invite contemplative engagement with the text, helped me recover a devotional element to Scripture reading that had long ago gone missing.

Through their faithful example, my parents continue to remind me the whole purpose of biblical devotion is to be “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17); and Old Testament scholar Peter Enns, whom I count as both a mentor and friend, has encouraged me to approach Scripture with a new set of questions, questions like, “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?”²

These questions loosened my grip on the text and gave me permission to love the Bible for what it is, not what I want it to be. And here’s the surprising thing about 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. The ancient rabbis likened Scripture to a palace, alive and bustling, full of grand halls, banquet rooms, secret passages, and locked doors.

“The adventure,” wrote Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky in *Reading the Book*, lies in “learning the secrets of the palace, unlocking all the doors and perhaps catching a glimpse of the King in all His splendor.”³

Renowned New Testament scholar N. T. Wright compared Scripture to a five-act play, full of drama and surprise, wherein the people of God are invited into the story to improvise the unfinished, final act.⁴ Our ability to faithfully execute our roles in the drama depends on our willingness to enter the narrative, he said, to see how our own stories intersect with the grander epic of God’s redemption of the world. Every page of Scripture serves as an invitation—to wonder, to wrestle, to surrender to the adventure.

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And so, at thirty-five, after years of tangling with the Bible, and with every expectation that I shall tangle with it forever, I find myself singing Psalm 121 to my baby boy each night. “*He who watches over you will not slumber,*” I sing into his sweet-smelling wisp of hair, as many thousands of mothers and fathers have done before. “*He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*”

I am teaching my son the ancient songs and hearing them again for the first time. I am caught up in the story, surrendered to its pull.

Citing G. K. Chesterton, author Neil Gaiman often noted, “Fairy tales are more than true—not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”⁵ In those first, formative years of my life, before I knew or cared about culture wars or genre categories or biblical interpretation, this is what Scripture taught me: that a boat full of animals can survive a catastrophic flood, that seas can be parted and lions tamed, that girls can be prophets and warriors and queens, that a kid’s lunch of fish and bread can be multiplied to feed five thousand people.

At times I wonder if I understood my sacred text better then than I do now or ever will again.

My aim with this book is to recapture some of that Bible magic, but in a way that honors the text for what it is—ancient, complicated, debated, and untidy, both universally relevant and born from a specific context and culture. I write with two audiences in mind: first, those who share my evangelical background and find themselves navigating the great chasm between Scripture as they learned it and Scripture as what it actually is, and second, those who share my present affiliation with progressive mainline traditions and are itching to explore more deeply the background, significance, and relevance of the texts sampled in the liturgy each week. I hope to show how the Bible can be captivating and true when taken on its

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own terms, avoiding both strict literalism on the one hand and safe, disinterested liberalism on the other.

I've arranged the book around various biblical genres, alternating between short, creative retellings of familiar Bible stories ("The Temple," "The Well," "The Walls," and so on), and more in-depth explorations of those genres ("Origin Stories," "Deliverance Stories," "War Stories," and so forth). Woven throughout are reflections from my own life and invitations for readers to consider how their stories intersect with those of the Bible.

I tackle this subject not as a scholar, but as a storyteller and literature lover who believes understanding the genre of a given text is the first step to engaging it in a meaningful way. My focus is on the Bible as a collection of stories, stories best able to teach us when we appreciate their purpose. For the scholarship, I rely heavily on the work of Peter Enns, as well as the writings of Walter Brueggemann, Ellen Davis, Delores Williams, Nyasha Junior, Amy-Jill Levine, Soong-Chan Rah, J. R. Daniel Kirk, Scot McKnight, Glenn R. Paauw, and N. T. Wright. I'm more grateful than ever for the faithful contributions of these fellow pilgrims.

A book about the Bible by a memoirist may seem like an odd undertaking, but anyone who has loved the Bible as much as I have, and who has lost it and found it again, knows how a relationship with the Bible can be as real and as complicated as a relationship with a family member or close friend. For better or worse, my story is inextricably tethered to the stories of Scripture, right down to my first name. Rather than attempting to rend the threads of my life from those of the sacred text, I hope to better understand their interconnectedness and, perhaps, to step back far enough to see a tapestry emerge.

The Bible never refers to sacred Scripture as "magic," which is understandable since the term carried even more cultic baggage

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in the ancient world than it does today. Instead, the author of 2 Timothy 3:16 declares, “All Scripture is inspired by God” (NASB). Here the writer has created a new word—*theopneustos*—a combination of the Greek *theo*, meaning “god,” and *pneo*, meaning “to breathe out” or “to blow.” *Inspiration*, both in the English language and in its ancestral languages, is rooted in the imagery of divine breath, the eternal rhythm of inhale and exhale, gather and release. The book of John describes the breath of God as blowing wherever it pleases. “You hear its sound,” the text says, “but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (3:8). It’s the invisible power of wind in sails, the strange alchemy of air on embers. You couldn’t track it down even if you tried.

Inspiration is better than magic, for as any artist will tell you, true inspiration comes not to the lucky or the charmed but to the faithful—to the writer who shows up at her keyboard each morning, even when she’s far too tired, to the guitarist whose fingers bleed after hours of practice, to the dancer who must first learn the traditional steps before she can freestyle with integrity. Inspiration is not about some disembodied ethereal voice dictating words or notes to a catatonic host. It’s a collaborative process, a holy give-and-take, a partnership between Creator and creator.

While Christians believe the Bible to be uniquely revelatory and authoritative to the faith, we have no reason to think its many authors were exempt from the mistakes, edits, rewrites, and dry spells of everyday creative work. Nor should we, as readers, expect every encounter with the text to leave us happily awestruck and enlightened. Inspiration, on both the giving and receiving end, takes practice and patience. It means showing up even when you don’t feel like it, even when it seems as if no one else is there. It means waiting for wind to stir.

God is still breathing. The Bible is both inspired and inspiring.

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Our job is to ready the sails and gather the embers, to discuss and debate, and like the biblical character Jacob, to wrestle with the mystery until God gives us a blessing.

If you're curious, you will never leave the text without learning something new. If you're persistent, you just might leave inspired.



THE TEMPLE

Where is your brother?”

Even in the soft glow of the lamplight, Mama’s features look worn with worry. The challah has been baked, prayers have been said, and Papa has put down his tools and is bouncing little Hanan on his knee. Sabbath has officially begun, with or without Hannah’s delinquent younger brother.

She’d done her best to track him down. As the sun receded over the vast Babylonian territory, she ran up and down the river Chebar, shouting Haggai’s name and knocking on nearly every door of their dusty little town known as *Al-Yahudu*, “the village of the Jews.”¹

“He knows the way home,” Hannah says, the familiar scents of home soothing her into blithe resignation. “He’s not a baby anymore, Mama. He’ll be an archer in the army in just two or three years.”

Mama mutters something under her breath about cold desert nights and loose Babylonian women.

Not two minutes after Hannah collapses at Papa’s feet, eager for another of his evening stories, Haggai bursts through the front door like a hungry puppy.

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“Sorry I’m late!” he shouts, breathless. “I was in the city.”

“Just as I’d feared,” Mama says.

Haggai moves with the restless energy of someone with news, someone with a story to tell.

“They were celebrating the Akitu festival,” he says. “You wouldn’t believe all the food and drink! Women everywhere were dancing. They gave me figs and olives. And they told the most amazing story, Papa, the story of how Marduk became the most supreme god and established his throne in the great temple.”

Mama and Papa exchange looks.

Haggai, paying no mind to the tension in the room, straightens up, clears his throat, and with the authority of a wizened elder, relates to them the tale:

“In the beginning, before the heaven and earth were named, there lived two wild and capricious gods: Tiamat, goddess of salt water, and Apsu, god of freshwater. These two gods mingled together to produce many other gods, filling the whole cosmos with clamor and chaos. Nothing was in its right place.

“When the younger gods grew so noisy that Apsu couldn’t sleep, he resolved to kill each one of them. A battle ensued, but instead of quieting the noise, Apsu faltered and was killed by Ea, father of the great Marduk.

“Enraged, Tiamat advanced on Marduk and his forces, backed by a massive army of demons and monsters, hurricanes and hounds.

“But Marduk was a valiant warrior, so he challenged his great-great grandmother to do battle alone with him. The two fought and fought until Marduk captured Tiamat in a net and drove a great wind into her mouth so that she became bloated and slow. Marduk shot an arrow into Tiamat’s belly, cutting through her insides and puncturing her heart. Then he split her body into two pieces, flinging half of the corpse into the heavens to hold back the waters

THE TEMPLE

behind the firmament, and the other half to the earth to hold back the waters that rage below. From her hollowed eyes flowed the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

“Then Marduk made the stars and moon and assigned the gods to various duties. He put everything in order—sky, land, plants, and animals. Among the gods he took the highest place, and from the blood of his enemies he created humanity to serve as their slaves. Finally, Marduk saw that a great temple was made in his honor, a temple from which he could rule and rest.

“He lives in the temple, right here in Babylon, to this day,” Haggai concludes. “And the king is his emissary.”

Haggai takes a bow.

The house is quiet for a few minutes. Only the crackling fire joins Hanan in his cooing. Mama and Papa look sad.

Finally, after what seems like a very long time, Papa invites the whole family to gather around him. “I have a story too,” he says, a twinkle returning to his eye, “one told to me by my father, which was told to him by his father, which was told to him by his father. It is an old story. So listen carefully.”

“In the beginning,” he says, “before heaven and earth were named, there was *Elohim*—there was God.

“Now the cosmos was formless and void. Nothing was in its right place. But the Spirit of God hovered over the chaotic waters and said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light, and it was good. God separated the light from the dark, calling one *day* and the other *night*. This is what God did on the first day.

“Then God said, ‘Let there be water above and water below.’ So God made the firmament, a great dome to hold back the waters of the sky, and it, too, was good. God separated the waters, calling all that was above *heaven*, and all that was below *earth*. This is what God did on the second day.

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“Then God separated the land from the seas, and God said, ‘Let the land produce all kinds of plants—fruit and flowers, wheat and willow trees.’ And sure enough, the land sprouted. Grass grew. Grapes ripened. Trees stretched out their arms and dug in their roots. Lilies bloomed. All of this God did on the third day, and it was very, very good.

“On the fourth day, God pinned the lights to the firmament: sun, moon, and stars. ‘Let these lights serve as timekeepers,’ God said, ‘to mark the days and years and special seasons.’ And God saw that the lights were good, each one in just the right place, each one with a special assignment.

“Then, on the fifth day, God said, ‘Let the waters below teem with living creatures and let birds soar through the sky.’ So God stocked the oceans with sharks and eels and seahorses and fish, and God filled the sky with eagles and sparrows and hummingbirds and owls. The whole earth was swimming and flying, swarming and soaring, but still it wasn’t enough. So on the sixth day, God created all the animals of the land: cattle, camels, sheep, snakes, mighty stags and timid field mice, ferocious lions and wise little ants. And God separated all the creatures into families and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply! Fill up the earth!’ But still it wasn’t enough.

“So God said, ‘Let there be people. And let them rule over my creation as my emissaries, little kings and queens, created in my image and of my nature.’ So God made people on the sixth day, and God told them to be fruitful and to multiply, to use all the plants and animals for their good and to be responsible with the world.

“When God reached the seventh day, God saw that creation was in order. Everything was in the right place. The work was finished, and all of it was good. So on the seventh day God rested, which is why we rest today.

THE TEMPLE

“It is a holy day,” Papa says, “set apart to remember our good and sovereign God.”

Their home is quiet for a moment.

“You mean there was no great battle?” Haggai asks.

“No battle,” Papa says.

“No grandmothers getting split in two,” Mama adds.

“And all people are God’s emissaries, not just the king?” Haggai asks.

“Yes. All people are God’s emissaries,” Papa says. “We are each created in God’s image, charged with watching over creation. We are not slaves, my son.”

Haggai thinks for a moment.

“But what about a temple? If Marduk lives in the temple, then where does *Elohim* live? We don’t have a temple for him.”

Hannah lowers her head to avoid catching her parents’ eyes. She knows this is a sensitive subject throughout Al-Yahudu, for once her people boasted a beautiful temple, one renowned throughout the world. But the Babylonians destroyed it. The God of the Jews has no place to live.

But Papa doesn’t grimace. Instead, he says, “Ah, that is what makes our God so great, Haggai. Our God doesn’t need a temple of stone from which to rule and rest. Our God’s home is the whole earth. God rests and rules *everywhere*. There is a song that puts it well. It goes:

“‘Heaven is my throne,’ says the LORD, ‘and the earth is my footstool.

“‘Do you think I need a house to be at home? Have I not made everything you see? The whole universe is my abode!

“‘The only thing I want,’ says the Lord, ‘are people with humble and contrite hearts, people who observe my ways. In the presence of those people I will make my home.’”²

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Hannah is surprised to see that Mama is crying. Haggai, too, looks somber.

“I’m sorry I was late for Sabbath prayers,” he says.

“It’s all right, little king,” Papa says, tousling his hair. “God is slow to anger and quick to forgive . . . Now, let’s get on with supper.”



1

ORIGIN STORIES

Our Bible was forged from a crisis of faith. Though many of its stories, proverbs, and poems were undoubtedly passed down through oral tradition, scholars believe the writing and compilation of most of Hebrew Scripture, also known as the Old Testament, began during the reign of King David and gained momentum during the Babylonian invasion of Judah and in the wake of the Babylonian exile, when Israel was occupied by that mighty pagan empire.

One cannot overstate the trauma of this exile. The people of Israel had once boasted a king, a temple, and a great expanse of land—all of which they believed had been given to them by God and ensured to them forever. But in the sixth century BC, King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, destroying both the city and its temple. Many of the Jews who lived there were taken captive and forced into the empire's service. Others remained, but without a king, without a place of worship, without a national identity. This catastrophic event threw everything the people of Israel believed

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about themselves and about their God into question. Many assumed their collective sins were to blame and that with repentance their honor might be restored. Others feared God had abandoned them completely. Priests wondered how to conduct rituals and sacrifices without a temple or an altar, and parents worried their children would grow enamored by the wealth and power of Babylon and forget their own people's most cherished values.

The words of Psalm 137:1–6 capture the agony:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.

It should come as no surprise to any writer that all this emotional suffering produced some quality literature. Jewish scribes got to work, pulling together centuries of oral and written material and adding reflections of their own as they wrestled through this national crisis of faith. If the people of Israel no longer had

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their own land, their own king, or their own temple, what *did* they have?

They had their stories. They had their songs. They had their traditions and laws. They had the promise that the God who set all of creation in order, who told Abraham his descendants would outnumber the stars, who rescued the Hebrews from slavery, who spoke to them from Mount Sinai, and who turned a shepherd boy into a king, would remain present with them no matter what. This God would be faithful.

Today we still return to our roots in times of crisis; we look to the stories of our origins to make sense of things, to remember who we are. The role of origin stories, both in the ancient Near Eastern culture from which the Old Testament emerged and at that familiar kitchen table where you first learned the story of how your grandparents met, is to enlighten the present by recalling the past. Origin stories are rarely straightforward history. Over the years, they morph into a colorful amalgam of truth and myth, nostalgia and cautionary tale, the shades of their significance brought out by the particular light of a particular moment.

Contrary to what many of us are told, Israel's origin stories weren't designed to answer scientific, twenty-first-century questions about the beginning of the universe or the biological evolution of human beings, but rather were meant to answer then-pressing, ancient questions about the nature of God and God's relationship to creation. Even the story of Adam and Eve, found in Genesis 2 and 3, is thought by many scholars to be less a story about *human* origins and more a story about *Israel's* origins, a symbolic representation of Israel's pattern of habitation, disobedience, and exile, set in primeval time.¹

My friend Kerlin, an Episcopal priest with blue hair, once said the thing she loves most about the Bible is that it sweeps her into an epic story in which she is *not* the central character. As much as

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we may wish them to be, our present squabbles over science, politics, and public school textbooks were not on the minds of those Jewish scribes seeking to assure an oppressed and scattered people they were still beloved by God. To demand that the Bible meet our demands is to put ourselves and our own interests at the center of the story, which is one of the first traps we must learn to avoid if we are to engage the Bible with integrity or care.

Indeed, one cannot seriously engage the origin stories of the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—without encountering ancient and foreign assumptions about the nature of reality. The first creation account of Genesis 1, for example, presumes the existence of a firmament, a vast dome into which the stars and moon were affixed, believed by the Hebrews and their ancient neighbors to keep great cascades of water above the earth from crashing into the land below. An entire day is devoted to the creation of this “vault between the waters” (Genesis 1:6), with no mention of the fact that modern science proves no such atmospheric contraption exists.

In addition to sharing a cosmological worldview with their neighbors, the Jewish scribes who compiled the Hebrew Scripture shared literary sensibilities with them. If, like me, you read the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in college, you already know there are striking similarities between that Akkadian poem, which likely predates Genesis, and the story of Noah. Both involve a worldwide flood and a noble character who builds a boat, rescues the earth’s animals, releases birds to see if the waters have subsided, and eventually survives when the boat comes to rest on a mountain. Questions regarding which community borrowed from which are less important than simply acknowledging the fact that Israel shared a conceptual world with its neighbors and used similar literary genres and stories to address issues of identity and purpose.

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“It is a fundamental misunderstanding of Genesis,” wrote Peter Enns, “to expect it to answer questions generated by a modern worldview, such as whether the days were literal or figurative, or whether the days of creation can be lined up with modern science, or whether the flood was local or universal. The question that Genesis is prepared to answer is whether Yahweh, the God of Israel, is worthy of worship.”²

You don’t have to be a biblical scholar to recognize these genre categories for what they are. In the same way we automatically adjust our expectations when a story begins with “Once upon a time” versus “The Associated Press is reporting . . .,” we instinctively sense upon reading the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah’s ark that these tales of origin aren’t meant to be straightforward recitations of historical fact. The problem isn’t that liberal scholars are imposing novel interpretations on our sacred texts; the problem is that over time we’ve been conditioned to deny our instincts about what kinds of stories we’re reading when those stories are found in the Bible. We’ve been instructed to reject any trace of poetry, myth, hyperbole, or symbolism even when those literary forms are virtually shouting at us from the page via talking snakes and enchanted trees. That’s because there’s a curious but popular notion circulating around the church these days that says God would never stoop to using ancient genre categories to communicate. Speaking to ancient people using their own language, literary structures, and cosmological assumptions would be beneath God, it is said, for only our modern categories of science and history can convey the truth in any meaningful way.

In addition to once again prioritizing modern, Western (and often uniquely American) concerns, this notion overlooks one of the most central themes of Scripture itself: God stoops. From walking with Adam and Eve through the garden of Eden, to traveling

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with the liberated Hebrew slaves in a pillar of cloud and fire, to slipping into flesh and eating, laughing, suffering, healing, weeping, and dying among us as part of humanity, the God of Scripture stoops and stoops and stoops and stoops. At the heart of the gospel message is the story of a God who stoops to the point of death on a cross. Dignified or not, believable or not, ours is a God perpetually on bended knee, doing everything it takes to convince stubborn and petulant children that they are seen and loved. It is no more beneath God to speak to us using poetry, proverb, letters, and legend than it is for a mother to read storybooks to her daughter at bedtime. This is who God is. This is what God does.

While the circumstances of the exiled Israelites may seem far removed from us today, the questions raised by that national crisis of faith remain as pressing as ever: Why do bad things happen to good people? Will evil and death continue to prevail? What does it mean to be chosen by God? Is God faithful? Is God present? Is God good?

Rather than answering these questions in propositions, the Spirit spoke the language of stories, quickening the memories of prophets and the pens of scribes to call a lost and searching people to gather together and *remember*:

Remember how in the beginning, God put everything in order and made the whole cosmos a temple? Remember how we are created in God's image, as stewards, not slaves? Remember how Adam and Eve disobeyed, how Cain and Abel fought, how all the people of the earth grew so rebellious and cruel that God regretted creating the world in the first place? Remember how one family's faithfulness was enough to save them from the Great Flood?

Remember how God promised an elderly Abraham his descendants would outnumber the stars? Remember how Sarah laughed? Remember how God chose a peopleless nomad, a

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second-born son, a stuttering runaway, and a little shepherd boy to create, liberate, and rule a nation? Remember how that nation is named for a man who limped from wrestling with God?

Remember how God saw the suffering of the banished Hagar, the unloved Leah, and the oppressed Hebrew slaves? Remember how Pharaoh's mighty army drowned in the sea?

Remember the desert? Remember the manna? Remember the water from rock?

Remember how it is our God who said, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1 NRSV)?

Remember how this God has been faithful?

This collective remembering produced the Bible as we know it and explains why it looks the way it does—foreign yet familiar, sacred yet indelibly smudged with human fingerprints. The Bible's original readers may not share our culture, but they share our humanity, and the God they worshipped invited them to bring that humanity to their theology, prayers, songs, and stories.

And so we have on our hands a Bible that includes psalms of praise but also psalms of complaint and anger, a Bible that poses big questions about the nature of evil and the cause of suffering without always answering them. We have a Bible that says in one place that "with much wisdom comes much sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18) and in another "wisdom is supreme—so get wisdom" (Proverbs 4:7 HCSB). We have a Bible concerned with what to do when your neighbor's donkey falls into a pit and exactly how much cinnamon to add to anointing oil. We have a Bible that depicts God as aloof and in control in one moment, and vulnerable and humanlike in the next, a Bible that has frustrated even the best systematic theologians for centuries because it's a Bible that so rarely behaves.

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In short, we have on our hands a Bible as complicated and dynamic as our relationship with God, one that reads less like divine monologue and more like an intimate conversation. Our most sacred stories emerged from a rift in that relationship, an intense crisis of faith. Those of us who spend as much time doubting as we do believing can take enormous comfort in that.

The Bible is for us too.



I come from mountain people. In the shadow of Grandfather Mountain, forty winding miles from the closest city and ensconced in a cold Appalachian holler, lies a graveyard where most of my extended family is buried. The dates on the tombstones stretch back to before the Civil War, and the inscriptions conjure memories of Christmases at my great-grandmother's farmhouse when a baffling mix of aunts and uncles, cousins, and neighbors told stories about my ancestors—Dewy, Buck, Wick, Ethel, Tarp, Cordi, Freddie, and Toots—whose legends were as strange as their names.

Take Uncle Wick and Aunt Ethel, for example. As the story goes, one hot July morning, Uncle Wick and a gaggle of local boys got themselves some discount fireworks from an out-of-towner's tent in Bakersville. Aunt Ethel did not approve. The daughter of a coal miner, she respected explosives too much to abide anyone horsing around with them, so she told Uncle Wick he'd have to toss all those Roman candles and bottle rockets in the creek if he expected to get any supper that night. But Uncle Wick, being stubborn, and probably a little sexist, waved her off and went about his scheming. That evening, as the moon rose and the drinks flowed, he filled the front lawn with friends and family and put on a fireworks show worthy of the National Mall.

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Sure enough, not ten minutes into the revelry, Uncle Wick came charging into the kitchen, a bloody handkerchief pressed to his hand, screaming, “Ethel! Ethel! I done blowed my finger off!”

Without even looking up from her sink of dishes, Aunt Ethel replied, “Well goody, goody.”

That response became so enshrined in our family parlance, I heard it every time I fought my mother on wearing a jacket to school only to come home complaining about the cold bus, or looked for sympathy after flunking a test for which I refused to study, or spent a weekend nursing a sunburn, having lied about wearing sunblock. Mom would give me a wry smile and say, “Well goody, goody,” just like her mother and her mother’s mother before that. I rolled my eyes, but the joke reminded me I belong to a long line of unflappable southern women.

Even my middle name, Grace, harks back to my great-grandmother, a woman whose dry wit charmed all but the crustiest farmhands, and whose picture in the family photo album shows her frowning in front of the smokehouse, holding a hog’s head by the ears. Grace was the first woman in Mitchell County to drive a car, and her daughter, my grandmother, was one of the first to go to college. I once scaled a small boulder to get a picture of a dewy leaf for Instagram, so clearly the legacy of valor continues.

Origin stories take all sorts of forms, from the story of why the women of my family say “goody, goody,” to the explanation for why there’s a rusty toilet seat hanging from your grandfather’s barn door, to the legends that urge us to idealize our nation’s founders, to the reason your Jewish neighbors dip celery in salt water at their Passover meal each year. So ubiquitous they can blend into the scenery, origin stories permeate our language, our assumptions, our routines.

An eighteenth-century English naval officer once raised a telescope to his blind eye to ensure he’d miss the signal from his superior

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ordering him to withdraw from battle, and two hundred years later, we still talk about politicians “turning a blind eye” to corruption. My friends and I drink at a place called Monkey Town Brewery because eighty years ago our town prosecuted a substitute teacher for presenting the theory of evolution to a biology class, bringing the “Trial of the Century” to Dayton, Tennessee. The ghosts of old gods haunt our calendars—Thursday marking “Thor’s Day”—and the heroes of centuries past still hunt and battle and dance across our night sky. Cultures worldwide treasure their creation myths, those passed-down tales that orient a people in the universe and explain how it all began, whether it was from a lotus risen from the navel of Vishnu (Hindu), or out of the belly of the Rainbow Serpent (Aboriginal), or from the Spider Woman guiding the lost to a new world (Hopi). Americans love stories about billion-dollar companies that started in garages and superheroes bitten by radioactive insects.

Origin stories sometimes serve to protect us from uncomfortable truths, like the way nostalgia for the first Thanksgiving tends to charm white folks out of confronting our ancestors’ mistreatment of indigenous people. Or they can offer dignity and hope to the suffering the way recounting Israel’s deliverance from Egypt has comforted the Jews through exiles and diasporas and African Americans through slavery and the civil rights movement. Good therapists encourage clients to engage their “storied selves,” as research shows people who can construct the events of their lives into redemptive narratives have healthier outcomes. You can pay a consultant several thousand dollars to help your organization determine its “guiding story.”

“Whenever humans try to make sense of their experience,” wrote Daniel Taylor in his book *Tell Me a Story*, “they create a story, and we use those stories to answer all the big questions of life. The stories come from everywhere—from family, church, school, and

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the culture at large. They so surround and inhabit us that we often don't recognize that they are stories at all, breathing them in and out as a fish breathes water."³

"Every people has a story to tell," wrote theologian James Cone in *God of the Oppressed*, "something to say to themselves, their children, and to the world about how they think and live, as they determine and affirm their reason for being. The story both expresses and participates in the miracle of moving from nothing to something, from nonbeing to being."⁴

Origin stories tell us who we are, where we come from, and what the world is like. They dictate the things we believe, the brands we buy, the holidays we celebrate, and the people we revere or despise. Sometimes we construct our present realities around our stories of origin; other times we construct our stories of origin around our present realities; most of the time it's a little of both. How I understand myself as an American, a Christian, a woman, a mother, a daughter, an introvert, a southerner, a Held, an Evans, and an Alabama Crimson Tide football fan depends largely on the stories I've heard and inherited, and the stories I've told myself. Spiritual maturation requires untangling these stories, sorting fact from fiction (or, more precisely, truth from untruth), and embracing those stories that move us toward wholeness while rejecting or reinterpreting those that do harm.

Activist and theologian Monica Coleman engaged in this untangling in her stunning memoir, *Bipolar Faith*. The memoir begins by locating Coleman's own story of trauma and depression within the context of her family's story, particularly the story of her great-grandfather, a sharecropper from South Carolina who, after the death of his wife, hanged himself in a shed. No one from the family ever took down the noose, so it remained swinging from the rafters for thirty years.

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“When I think of growing up in that setting,” Coleman wrote of her orphaned grandmother, great-aunts, and great-uncles, “I begin to understand. Every time they played in the shed, they saw the rope. Ten times a day. At least once a week. They got used to it; it became normal—part of their days. And a heaviness hung over each life, and the sadness remained. Like a heavy fog.”⁵

No one diagnosed Coleman’s great-grandfather with depression—“Who can stop to think of a clinical illness when the children need to be fed?”—but to come to terms with her same diagnosis, Coleman had to reckon with the shadow of that noose and how it taught her early on that “sadness can own you. You can die of grief.”⁶

For Coleman, liberation is a tenuous dance, aided by faith, medication, therapy, and supportive relationships. “Now I dance for my own ancestors,” she wrote. “I dance for Grandma and Great-Granddaddy. I dance for my great-aunts and great-uncles who lived with the noose. . . . I will dance their tears and their ability to live through them. . . . I will dance the legacy they left me, and the freedom I can eke out.”⁷

Coleman’s story reminds us there are demons in our stories that can only be cast out when we call them by name.

Indeed, my own Appalachian heritage isn’t all folksy bluegrass ballads accompanied by clawhammer banjos. That cold mountain creek crawled through plenty of mobile home parks strewn with broken toys and beer cans, and the blight of alcoholism felled some of my dearest cousins. It was in this community of aunts, uncles, cousins, and great-grandparents that I first heard the N-word muttered with disdain. It’s important to identify and unpack these stories—the good and the bad, the true and the half-true—for they explain so much of what we believe and how we behave.

When faced with the decision to hold on to that empty coffee canister or toss it out, my husband, Dan, can recall with gusto a litany

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of tales from relatives who survived the Great Depression and war rationing to give every item they owned a second or third life. Just yesterday, while lamenting a friendship that had fallen by the wayside, I told myself a story about how I “chose a career over having friends.” What an elaborate little tale I’d spun to explain a forgotten birthday! We’re all creative writers, you see, dabbling with a bit of fiction here and a bit of nonfiction there to try and make some sense of our lives.

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Joan Didion famously wrote. “We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.”⁸

When we understand the function of origin stories, both in our culture and in our lives, we can make better sense of those found in Scripture. The creation account of Genesis 1, in which God brings order to the cosmos and makes it a temple, is meant to remind the people of Israel, and by extension, us, that God needs no building of stone from which to reign, but dwells in every landscape and in the presence of the humble will make a home. Should all other identities or securities be thrown into tumult, should nations be fractured and temples torn down, this truth remains—God is with us and God is for us. It’s a story as true now as it was then.

Of course, we miss all this when we insist the Bible’s origin stories are simply straightforward recitations of historical fact, one scientific discovery or archaeological dig away from ruin. What both hardened fundamentalists and strident atheists seem to have in common is the conviction that any trace of myth, embellishment, or cultural influence in an origin story renders it untrue. But this represents a massive misunderstanding of the genre itself.

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It's a bit like this: Imagine if, for your birthday, your entire family gathered—parents and siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends—and in celebration of the anniversary of your birth, presented you with a formal reading of your birth certificate.

May 1, 1984. 10:05 a.m. 6 lbs, 14 ounces. Tupelo, Mississippi.

That's it. No dinner. No homemade cards. No cake and ice cream. No long, candle-lit evening retelling those familiar, exaggerated stories about how your dad nearly wrecked the car on the way to the hospital, or how you pooped all over that fancy take-home dress your grandmother made, or how your uncle kept flirting with the nursing staff. No laughter-filled debates over which you said first, "Mama" or "Dada." No internet searches for where the Olympics were held that year and who ran for president. No reminders that you were named after a beautiful shepherdess from the Bible and a stubborn schoolteacher from Appalachia.

Just the facts.

That would be weird, right?

We know who we are, not from the birth certificates and Social Security numbers assigned to us by the government, but from the stories told and retold to us by our community. Should the time of birth on your certificate be off by a minute, or should it be lost altogether, it wouldn't change what's truest about you—that you matter and are loved.

Literary scholar Barbara Hardy said as long ago as 1968, "We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative."⁹

We meet God in narrative too.

The origin stories of Scripture remind us we belong to a very

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large and very old family that has been walking with God from the beginning. Even when we falter and fall, this God is in it for the long haul. We will not be abandoned.



When I was in second or third grade, the Bible college that employed my father moved locations, converting a recently vacated church building in Birmingham into a campus of offices, dorm rooms, and classrooms. In the moving process, my dad scored all kinds of secondhand finds from those old Sunday school rooms—books, art supplies, boxes of expensive wooden building blocks—treasures he brought home to two adoring little girls every afternoon after work. One day he walked through the door with one of those giant flannelgraph boards used for telling Bible stories. Mounted on a wooden easel, the flannel-covered board could be affixed with sandpaper-backed paper cutouts of biblical characters from the Old and New Testaments, characters like Noah, Abraham, Rachel, Ruth, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the colors of their robes faded from years in storage.

My little sister, Amanda, and I spent many barefoot hours in our living room with that board and those cutouts, together reenacting the tales of Abraham's family and Jesus' miracles, often filling in the narratives with our own imaginative stories. (I remember I created a rather dramatic and detailed backstory for the little boy whose lunch of fish and loaves Jesus turned into a meal to feed five thousand, complete with an argument with his mother that morning, an attempted runaway, and a moment of repentance and redemption as he volunteered his lunch for the sake of the gospel.) We invented conversations between Abraham and Isaac as they descended Mount Moriah. We embellished the details of Ruth's

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courtship with Boaz. We imagined what happened to Zacchaeus after the “wee little man” from our Sunday school song climbed out of his sycamore to follow Jesus.

Little did we know that we were participating in a long tradition of creative engagement with the biblical text, one dating back thousands of years.

Christians can learn a lot about Scripture from the people who have had it the longest. I came to this realization a few years ago when a writing project around the women of the Bible introduced me to *midrash*—those imaginative explorations and expansions of Scripture that serve as the most common form of biblical interpretation in Jewish traditions. These writings, some ancient and some modern, alerted me to details in the text I’d never noticed before, and offered both playful and instructive interpretations of those details that animated the biblical characters in fresh new ways.

For example, the Bible’s reference to Leah’s “weak eyes” is explained in some midrashic traditions as a sign that Leah’s eyes were weak from weeping, for she feared she would be forced to marry the wild scoundrel Esau. The two bracelets Isaac gave to his bride-to-be, Rebekah, are imagined to represent the two tablets upon which the Ten Commandments would be chiseled, a sign of the momentous nature of this union, which would bring the people of the Torah into the world. Abraham is given a colorful backstory by the rabbis who composed midrash, including a famous tale in which, as a boy, he smashed the idols in his father’s shop, told his father the mess had been created by the idols fighting one another, and then cleverly exposed the emptiness of idolatry when his father insisted inanimate objects could not war with one another. Even the donkey that accompanied Abraham and Isaac on their fateful trip to Mount Moriah gets a detailed pedigree in one midrash, which suggests the ass descended from the donkey created on the sixth

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day of creation and is the same animal that spoke to the prophet Balaam, carried Moses as he descended into Egypt, and will one day be mounted by King David when he returns in triumph during the messianic age. That's a busy donkey.

Wilda Gafney, an Episcopal priest and biblical scholar whose book *Womanist Midrash* offers a midrashic interpretation of biblical women rooted in the African American preaching tradition, explained, "Midrash interprets not only the text before the reader, but also the text behind and beyond the text and the text between the lines of the text. In rabbinic thinking, each letter and the spaces between the letters are available for interpretive work."¹⁰

Midrash, which initially struck me as something of a cross between biblical commentary and fan fiction, introduced me to a whole new posture toward Scripture, a sort of delighted reverence for the text unencumbered by the expectation that it must behave itself to be true. For Jewish readers, the tensions and questions produced by Scripture aren't obstacles to be avoided, but rather opportunities for engagement, invitations to join in the Great Conversation between God and God's people that has been going on for centuries and to which everyone is invited.

I suspect I resonate with midrashic interpretation because it helps me recover some of the curiosity and wonder with which I approached the Bible as a child. It gives me permission to "play" a little with the stories. It also gives me permission to indulge my questions and confront my doubts. For example, it wasn't until I encountered the volumes of midrash around the story of the binding of Isaac that I realized I wasn't alone in my misgivings about that tale in which God tests Abraham by instructing him to sacrifice his only son on an altar, only to send an angel to stay his hand just before Abraham plunges the knife into his son's chest. Readers ancient and modern have struggled with that story, positing

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different possibilities for why God would ask Abraham to do such a thing. *Was God using Abraham to make a point against the practice of child sacrifice, common among the pagans? Or did Abraham only imagine he heard the voice of God? Was God disciplining Abraham for his treatment of Ishmael? Would Abraham himself have finally relented, before actually committing the act, and would disobedience have ultimately been the right and ethical thing for him to choose? How should parents understand the moral of this unsettling tale?*

As it turns out, Jews believe these questions are up for debate, instructive not only when we arrive at an answer, but when the ensuing discussion reveals something important to us about our faith, our community, and ourselves. While Christians tend to turn to Scripture to *end* a conversation, Jews turn to Scripture to *start* a conversation.

A Jewish friend of mine told of a dinner party in which her husband, a rabbi, invited a group of fellow rabbis, scholars, and friends over for conversation.

“We were debating application of Torah long into the night,” she told me. “Everyone brought a different point of view, no one could exactly agree, shouts of hearty agreement and fierce dissent woke the baby twice, and we nearly ran out of food.

“For a group of Jews,” she said with a laugh, “it was the perfect evening.”

Her story reveals how the biblical text comes alive in the context of community, its endless shades and contours revealed in the presence of a diversity of readers—young and old, learned and unlearned, rich and poor, historic and contemporary, living and dead. This style of engagement not only brings us closer to Scripture’s many truths, but closer to one another. The sacred text becomes a crucial point of contact, a great dining room table, erected by God and set by God’s people, where those who hunger for nourishment and companionship can gather together and be filled.

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“The Bible creates community,” wrote Timothy Beal in *The Rise and Fall of the Bible*, “by providing space for community to happen. It offers storied worlds and theological vocabularies around which people can come together in conversation about abiding questions. It calls for creative, collaborative participation.”¹¹

This attitude stands in stark contrast to the winner-take-all posture in many fundamentalist Christian communities, which positions the solitary reader as objective arbiter of truth, his “straight-forward” reading of the text final and exclusive. The refrain goes something like, “The Bible said it; I believe it; that settles it,” which is not exactly the sort of conversation starter that brings people together.

Midrash, with its imaginative engagement of the Bible’s stories, reminds us that biblical interpretation need not be reduced to a zero-sum game, but rather inspires endless insights and challenges, the way a good story does each time it is told and retold. Our relational God has given us a relational sacred text, one that, should we surrender to it, reminds us that being people of faith isn’t as much about being right as it is about being part of a community in restored and restorative relationship with God. This is how Paul engaged Scripture, after all, and Jesus—both of whom were Jews.

The narrative tradition of Jewish interpretation is supported by the colorful cast of characters that comprises Israel’s family of origin, characters whose antics, in the words of Rabbi Visotzky, unfold in the book of Genesis like “the longest-running family soap opera in history.”¹² Aunt Ethel and Uncle Wick have nothing on Father Abraham and Mother Sarah—and the children, grandchildren, in-laws, and enemies who populate some of Scripture’s most memorable scenes.

As the story goes, God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising to bless him with enough descendants to make a great nation, one whose population would grow to outnumber the stars and

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would bless every other nation on earth. But Abraham and his wife Sarah are childless and elderly, and rather than trusting God with their fertility, they give Abraham an Egyptian slave named Hagar to impregnate, the result of which is Ishmael, a boy who would grow to be “a wild donkey of a man” (Genesis 16:12). As tensions between Hagar and Sarah escalate, God renews his promise to Abraham to give him a son with Sarah, urging him to remain blameless and upright and to signal his commitment by circumcising his children and their descendants. Sure enough, after many years of waiting, Sarah gives birth to Isaac, who is promptly circumcised.

Sarah dies. Isaac grows up. Abraham arranges for his son to get a good wife, a woman named Rebekah. Isaac and Rebekah give birth to twins—Jacob and Esau—whose epic rivalry begins at delivery, as the younger, smooth-skinned Jacob grasps the heel of the older, hairy Esau on the way out of the birth canal. It’s a bit baffling that God would favor Jacob, a quiet and conniving mama’s boy who tricks his older brother out of his inheritance rights and deceives his aging father into compliance, but Hebrew Scripture has a soft spot for scrappy underdogs, so he grows into the unlikely hero of Israel’s origin stories.

After provoking Esau’s rage, Jacob flees to his uncle Laban’s home in Paddan Aram, where Jacob falls in love with Laban’s beautiful daughter, Rachel, who herself has a complicated relationship with her own sibling, Leah. Laban promises to give Jacob Rachel’s hand, but only after he works for his uncle, breeding and tending sheep for seven years, because apparently Jacob is something of an ancient Mesopotamian sheep-whisperer. The wedding day arrives, and of course there is much dancing and drinking and merry-making, but when Jacob wakes up the next morning to kiss his new bride, “behold, it [is] Leah!” (Genesis 29:25 NASB). The con artist has become the mark. Laban eventually gives Jacob Rachel in exchange

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for seven more years of work, and predictably, an intense rivalry brews between the sisters. With the help of a couple of handmaids, they give Jacob twelve sons and a daughter. Meanwhile, Esau builds an army.

When twenty years of Laban's hijinks become too much, Jacob decides that an angry brother with an army is better than an opportunistic father-in-law with a bunch of sheep, so he gathers his enormous family, with all their livestock and belongings, and leads them to the desert to return to Canaan.

In this wilderness, between one bad situation and another, Jacob encounters a mysterious stranger.

While camping alone on the river Jabbok, Jacob is roused by what appears to be a man—and a strong one at that—intent on a fight. The two wrestle all through the night, each one gaining the upper hand at one moment only to lose it the next. As dawn breaks and it becomes clear this stranger is no mere “man” but rather the very presence of God, Jacob musters the gall to demand a blessing from his opponent. God relents and delivers a blessing to Jacob in the form of a name change. From now on, Jacob will be known as Israel, which means “He struggles with God.” The fighting ends, but not before Jacob sustains an injury to his hip, one that leaves him walking with a limp for the rest of his life. Jacob goes on to make peace with his brother. His twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The significance of this story of family origins to the people of Israel cannot be overstated, for it demonstrates how the dynamic, personal, back-and-forth relationship between God and God's people is embedded in their very identity, their very *name*—*Israel*, “because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (Genesis 32:28).

“Israel's self-understanding is one of being in a locked battle

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with God,” wrote Peter Enns and Jared Byas in *Genesis for Normal People*. “This is not a people who see themselves as triumphant tops on the food chain, but as a wandering, wondering people who—to use the vernacular of our day—struggle with their faith.”¹³

This understanding of themselves as a people who wrestle with God and emerge from that wrestling with both a limp and a blessing informs how Jews engage with Scripture, and it ought to inform how Christians engage Scripture too, for we share a common family of origin, the same spiritual DNA. The biblical scholars I love to read don’t go to the holy text looking for ammunition with which to win an argument or trite truisms with which to escape the day’s sorrows; they go looking for a blessing, a better way of engaging life and the world, and they don’t expect to escape that search unscathed.

“Perhaps we need the angel to start grappling with us,” wrote Madeleine L’Engle in *A Stone for a Pillow*, “to turn us aside from the questions which have easy answers to those which cause us to grow, no matter how painful that growth can be.”¹⁴

If I’ve learned anything from thirty-five years of doubt and belief, it’s that faith is not passive intellectual assent to a set of propositions. It’s a rough-and-tumble, no-holds-barred, all-night-long struggle, and sometimes you have to demand your blessing rather than wait around for it.

The same is true for Scripture. With Scripture, we’ve not been invited to an academic fraternity; we’ve been invited to a wrestling match. We’ve been invited to a dynamic, centuries-long conversation with God and God’s people that has been unfolding since creation, one story at a time. If we’re lucky, it will leave us with a limp.



THE WELL

Most of the time, God does the naming.
Abraham. Isaac. Israel.

Just one person in all your sacred Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was I, Hagar—foreigner, woman, slave.¹

I do not wish to be remembered as powerless, for power is the currency of men; but before the wilderness, before the naming, my station ranked me among the invisible. Dark skin and foreign tongue curried little favor in Beersheba, land of the Seven Wells, where warring tribes marked moments of peace by digging together for water.

I belonged to a woman blessed with all the things a woman wants—wealth, nobility, legendary beauty, and divine favor—but not the thing a woman in an unsettled territory needs: a womb that can carry a boy. Sarah wore her laugh lines like jewelry. She told stories better than anyone I've ever known. The desert wind sent her white hair dancing and carried her unmistakable peals of laughter through the arid atmosphere like rain. Old and young, men and women, slave and free ventured to her tent for advice on breeding

goats, arranging marriages, spicing food, and offering prayers. And yet, in our world, they called this woman *barren*.

I had the misfortune to belong to a woman who believed the wrong name.

So she gave my body to Abraham. Long as I live I will never forget how casually she informed me of my duty, rattled off at the end of a list of linens to gather and food to prepare. You will think me callous for not being more angry, more resistant to the charge before me, but bearing the child of a tribal leader, even in another woman's name, carried with it the possibility of more freedom, or at least a challenge to my expendability. The moment the old man rolled away from me—he never once looked me in the eye—I begged the gods of Egypt for a boy. If I survived the birth, I might even live to see him marry. Oh, I begged to every god in every language I knew.

A baby's movements don't begin as kicks, but as subtle, enigmatic flutters; they don't tell you that. So I doubted right until the morning when, lying on my side after another night of fitful dreams, I placed my hands on my belly and felt the sudden, certain impression of a heel. No woman can prepare for the awe of it, the overwhelming surge of joy and fear. Instinctively, I looked around for someone to tell, but of course, no one was there. Then came a second nudge, this one longer and firmer, as if to say, "*Don't you dare think yourself alone, Mama; we're here in this world together.*" My baby had yet to take a breath of air, and already we shared a secret. That must have been the moment I started singing, little fractures of the lullabies I remembered from my mother—a woman whose skin, I think, smelled of saffron, and whose voice, I think, was soft and deep as a dove's. (The memories of slaves are dappled ones.)

Perhaps I sang a bit too loudly. Perhaps I carried myself with more confidence than before. Your scribes will say I grew contemptuous of my mistress, but your scribes never asked for my view of it.

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The only thing I know is that for every day my belly grew rounder, Sarah's spirit grew stormier, a wind-assailed reed about to break. A slave expects harsh words and withheld rations, but the physical abuse surprised me. Taunts turned to slaps, barked orders to mule whips to the back. I would not have fled had she not threatened the baby's life; I want you to know that. I would not have taken the risk of running into the desert in the dead of night with only a jug of water and some stolen bread to sustain me had I not feared the worst. Abraham did nothing, of course; my mute idols even less. *Did they even notice? Could they even see?*

Your scribes will remember it as a silly women's spat, an anecdote to explain how this cursed land grew populated, but your scribes never carried a baby through the desert. Your scribes never knew the singular desperation of counting the hours from the last assuring kick.

I took the road to Shur, the closest thing I knew to home. But as the sun rose like a great unseeing eye over the fifth or sixth mile, and the weight on my pelvis numbed my legs, I collapsed into the dust.

Water gone, food regurgitated, blood streaking down my thighs, I waited there to die . . . or to deliver . . . or both. *Who will find my body? I wondered. And what story will they tell of it?*

Then, on the rippling horizon: a well!

I crawled to it, plunged my face in. I think I must have fainted there, or slept.

All I know is when I opened my eyes, a stranger stood beside me—a presence neither male nor female, neither Egyptian nor Hebrew, neither safe nor threatening—and in a voice that sounded like my mother's, spoke:

“Hagar, slave of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?”

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This stranger knew my name.

“I am fleeing from my mistress,” I answered. What could I say of where I was going?

“Go back to Sarah,” the stranger said. “But do not be afraid. Not only will this child live, but through him I will give you a whole nation of descendants, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, too numerous to count.”

I cannot tell you why, but immediately I believed. This stranger with the voice of a dove spoke with the authority of God.

“Your son will grow into a fighter,” God said, “a wild donkey of a man. But even as he struggles, he will survive. Call him Ishmael, for it means ‘God hears,’ and God has heard you in your misery today.”

In spite of everything, I smiled at the part about the donkey, for already I knew how that boy kicked. Every mama is something of a prophet.

You may think a prophecy of struggle and strife would dishearten a pregnant mother, but a slave does not struggle or strive; a slave only obeys. If the prophecy was true, it meant this boy, my Ishmael, would be free.

With what force I could muster, I rose to face God, the brightness of the sun obscuring both our faces. I knew it was the God of my mistress, whom she called Yahweh, but if I was to be the mother of a nation, I would need to give this God a new name.

“You are a God who not only hears, but also sees,” I said, surprised by the strength in my voice. “I have seen the One who sees me.”

So I named God as I named the well: El Roi, the God Who Sees.

And it was a name remembered, for as your Scripture reports, “That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi. It is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.”

Many of my sisters would draw from that well: the Hebrew

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midwives who defied Pharaoh by delivering the babies of slaves, the despised Samaritan who scandalized a town for daring to speak to the Messiah, the young women ripped from their homes in West Africa and shipped like livestock across the sea, the mamas who saw their boys lynched and the grandmas who saw their grandsons gunned down, the millions of black and brown people whose names the world has forgotten but whose God never failed to see, the fierce female prophets and preachers who rose from the ashes of their suffering and dared, like me, to survive and to name. I, too, would return to it, years later when Sarah banished me to the wilderness again, this time with a little boy clinging to my legs.

My faith, like Abraham's, was tested. But my faith, unlike the patriarchs, was not immortalized in Caravaggio's reds or Chagall's blues for later generations to view, nor was it remembered in the litany of Hebrews or in the genealogies of your New Testament.

Yet just one person in all your sacred Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was I, Hagar—foreigner, woman, slave.

Don't you dare forget.

