RBL 12/2009

Ruprecht, Louis A., Jr.

God Gardened East: A Gardner's Meditation on the Dynamics of Genesis

Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2008. Pp. xi + 172. Paper. $21.00. ISBN 9781556354342.

David Maas
Liberty University
Cincinnati, Ohio

As a lot, theologians lack literary flair, but Louis A. Ruprecht Jr.'s *God Gardened East* offers a rare exception to this rule as he artfully uses gardening as a metaphor to discuss faith and politics against philosophical vignettes taken mostly from early biblical patriarchs such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Isaac. Like a *Lost* episode, he jumps back and forth in time, developing characters in the past to speak to philosophical issues in the present and even to the future. Although the eclectic nature of Ruprecht's work allows for a number of trajectories, this review will center on how Ruprecht uses a variety of characters, ancient and modern, to tease out philosophical and theological issues.

In the preface (1–15) and chapter 1, Ruprecht handles a cornucopia of issues and people in a few short pages. He first considers the importance of numbers in the modern and then the ancient world through the eyes of Plato and the Hebrew Bible, the surprisingly unsympathetic international reaction to the tragedy of 9/11, the accidental rather than intentional nature of empires in general and America in particular, Hodgson's characterization of Muhammad, Abraham as the father of three religions, the Platonic view of art, a history of gardens, the travails of being an Atlanta Braves fan, and the slowed-down nature of time in a garden. While this may look like a bizarre stream of

This review was published by RBL ©2009 by the Society of Biblical Literature. For more information on obtaining a subscription to RBL, please visit http://www.bookreviews.org/subscribe.asp.

consciousness on the surface, Ruprecht seamlessly transitions from one character or topic to the next.

In chapters 2–3, Ruprecht alters the Edenic landscape by mixing into it other cultures and perspectives. Chapter 2 weds ancient Hebrew and Greek culture through the figure of a Greek mythological character from the east, Cadmus, whose name resembles the Hebrew word for "east," where God places the garden of Eden. Cadmus functions to synthesize Hebraic-Greco learning, "if we bring their stories into conversation" (38). In chapter 3 the dueling settings for creation in the spring or fall represented by the Hellenized Jew, Philo, and the fundamentalist Protestant Ussher again allows a chance for mutual learning.

Chapter 4 finds Ruprecht taking a more polemical than collaborative tone. He advocates for a fresh look at the concept of "original sin," less dominated by the views of Saint Augustine. He questions the inherent justice behind God's prohibition against the tree, for, "Lacking the knowledge of good and evil, it is hard to see to see how the first couple could conceive of wrong doing, disobedience, or sin" (58). Later he compares it to a "pink polar bear" that once raised cannot be forgotten, for, "Once its fruit was forbidden, it would be all the two humans could think about" (59). He cites both Elie Wiesel and Mark Twain to argue that the sin resulted in greater maturity for humankind, since "their act of primal defiance is also ironically an act of growing up—not merely of acting out" (59). From the traditional view of Eve's sin, he explores its significance for gender studies, concluding: "Like most other empires, patriarchies simply happen; once they become self-conscious, then they are perpetuated, often by cruel design. It is for this very reason all the more important to listen to those they happened to. What is it like to be conquered, occupied, dominated?" (64–65). However conceived, the expulsion results in the most severe consequence possible, as "Adam's family has lost its roots, and ceased to garden—wandering aimlessly instead, in the east" (68).

Moving from Adam and Eve, chapters 5–6 discuss scenes from the lives of Noah and his sons and end by introducing Abram. In the aftermath of the flood, "Human beings do next what human beings perhaps do best. They start over; they begin again" (76). Noah becomes a second Adam, but with a postflood covenant (75–76). Ruprecht spends the most time on the "castration-tale," largely ignored by ancient writers, including the biblical writer who focuses more on the cursing of Canaan, a concept later erroneously used to support racism (78–79). Chapter 6 sees Ruprecht focusing on the genealogy of Noah until it narrows down on Abram. Abram's significance can be seen in his reversal of the textual flow from east to west, which he parallels with Christianity's own westward movement: "It was Abram who doubled back and headed west, obeying God's mysterious command. Christianity amplified and intensified this westward trend" (89–90).

This review was published by RBL ©2009 by the Society of Biblical Literature. For more information on obtaining a subscription to RBL, please visit http://www.bookreviews.org/subscribe.asp.

Chapters 7–9 center on events surrounding Abram, now become Abraham. Ruprecht argues that God's judgment on Sodom arose not from its traditional association with homosexuality but "the egregious and shocking face of inhospitality" (97), since ancient people put much more of a premium on hospitality than sex. In the Akedah Ruprecht finds, with Kierkegaard, an Abraham rotely intent on sacrificing his own son, largely inaccessible as a flat, one-dimensional character (108–9). In Abraham's grief over his wife Sarah, Ruprecht discovers a much more relatable Abraham, especially in his elaborate purchase of her burial place (112–17). Ruprecht ends with a story of his own grandfather, a man, like Abraham, who lost a wife yet learned to love again.

Chapter 10 describes Abraham's generations in Isaac and Jacob largely in terms of immigration issues. This chapter begins with the story of Novatus Lee Barker, whose hitching post resides in Ruprecht's garden. Ruprecht blends Novatus's "story of exile, an almost primal sense of dislocation" (140), in with the biblical patriarchs and their story of being strangers or becoming residents in a new land. In the three biblical generations, Ruprecht sees Abraham in the old world, Isaac in neither world, and Jacob in the new world he can call home. Evidence of this gradual acclimation can be seen in Isaac's need to retrace "old ground" and the greater freedom in marital choices for Isaac's sons (144).

Chapter 11 returns to Abraham, focusing especially on the quality of his relationships. Ruprecht argues that Abraham had no true friends, only kin. From this, he springboards to the friendless nature of empires such as America. To cultivate friends in the world, Ruprecht contends that the United States must understand its perception by the world and form policies that are "unblinking, honest, thoughtful, and more careful" (155). An appendix outlines Genesis against the backdrop of a dualist, predestinarian, and Karmic worldview, opting for the latter, where rewards and punishments become contingent on human behavior.

From beginning to end, Ruprecht displays his prodigious literary skills. Each chapter opens with a pleasant stroll in Ruprecht's own garden before he takes on weightier and at times more controversial topics. The eleven chapter headings mix garden imagery such as soil, sun, water, and grafting with more abstract concepts such as east, generation, sleep, and waking. The headings tantalize more than they tell. A librarian might be hard pressed to know where to place Ruprecht's book on the shelf (garden? politics? philosophy? classics? travel? history? essays on biblical patriarchs?); much less would a teacher know how to use it as a textbook in a class. While Ruprecht demonstrates his eruditeness in facilely traveling among these diverse categories, from a functional standpoint, the book would have wider use if he had chosen only one of these fields.

This review was published by RBL ©2009 by the Society of Biblical Literature. For more information on obtaining a subscription to RBL, please visit http://www.bookreviews.org/subscribe.asp.

Overall, Ruprecht seeks to bridge alternate traditions by the neglected art of listening. For example, he favorably juxtaposes Jewish and Islamic views of paradise (33). However, on this same page and elsewhere it becomes obvious that conservative Christianity does not receive this same courtesy, perhaps because he feels "there does seem to be a lingering Christian bias in our not-so-secular culture" (33).

Even though he goes on to describe Christianity as a formative influence in his own life, it seems Ruprecht wants to bring Christianity down a notch to even the playing field. His placement of the gnostic Gospels on the same tier as the New Testament or his attribution of "original sin" as a later invention of Augustine fits within this category of his desire not to let the dominant voice drown out other voices (57). Similarly, right-leaning politics also receive his scourge, particularly at the end of the book, where he scolds the Bush administration over their failures properly to understand anti-American sentiment abroad (155–61). Certainly a parade example of Democratic excess would have lessened the partisanship.

A more mundane criticism concerns Ruprecht's use of pictures. Opposite his title page he has two beautiful pictures, presumably profiling his own garden. Unfortunately, he renders them in black and white rather than color. Additionally, a couple of pictures illustrate historical places and people. Since they come from an earlier era, the black and white format makes much more sense, but the selected pictures are of a poor quality in any age. For instance, distracting weeds obscure a picture of "Dr. Barker's Hitching Post" (132). No pictures would have been preferable to offering ones of poor quality. Yet, despite these poor pictures or skewed perspective, Ruprecht provides a reflective and fresh look at faith and politics.

This review was published by RBL ©2009 by the Society of Biblical Literature. For more information on obtaining a subscription to RBL, please visit http://www.bookreviews.org/subscribe.asp.