

Review of Ellen A. Robbins, *The Story Teller and the Garden of Eden*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock, 2012.

Judith E. McKinlay, Dunedin

Could the storyteller ever have imagined the seemingly endless stream of writers, at work producing fresh, provocative and challenging readings of his tale?! The Garden tale is a long favourite of mine so I was keen to read Ellen Robbins's appraisal of the Storyteller and his Tale. The back cover states that she has taught a course on the Garden of Eden for many years, and as I read her book I felt as if I was there in the class listening as she revealed the storyteller's narrative artistry, piece by piece. This is a teacher addressing those who come to the text without knowledge of Hebrew language and syntax and who need a guide in order to appreciate the fine storytelling skills that make this tale so effective. But there is the rub: what has been its effect? It is not only that the storyteller could not have imagined his story's survival, but that he could not have imagined that his ongoing audience "would have let him down...over the long history of (mis)interpretation" with little or no appreciation of the irony and verbal wordplay, or that "the ambiguities that he left in the story would provide the occasion for radical misreading" (p. 144). This sets Robbins' agenda: the defence of the storyteller and the righting/writing of his tale.

The introductory chapter, "Zeno in the Garden of Eden," sets out her foremost challenge: to counter the traditional "Fall" reading of the tale. While her assertions, that "no one has managed to come up with a way to read it that differs in its entirety from the Fall of Man" (p. 1) and that her own approach will "differ from previous interpretations in its focus on the story's unique use of language," (p. 15), are more than somewhat sweeping,¹ her attempt to provide her own "different" reading is carried through, detail by detail, in the following chapters. Chapter two, "Introduction to the Text," thus begins, "[i]n the pages that follow we'll read the story ... in its own terms, steering clear of the major lines of interpretation that have persisted since antiquity."

¹ Lyn M. Bechtel, in both "Rethinking the Interpretation of Genesis 2.4B-3.24," in Athalya Brenner (ed), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 77-117, to which Robbins indeed refers at several points, and "Genesis 2.4b-3.24: A Myth about Human Maturation," in *JSOT* 67 (1995): 3-26, is only one of an increasing number of scholars offering alternative readings. More recently, Theodore Hiebert, in his entry "Genesis," in the *Theological Bible Commentary*, edited by Gail R. O'Day and David L. Petersen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 3-25 (10-11), sets out as two opposing interpretations, the Christian Fall reading, following Paul, influenced by Sirach and 4 Ezra, and that of J "and Jewish theologians who have inherited his legacy," the latter very much in line with Robbins' reading. Ellen van Wolde's study, in *Words Become World: Semiotic Studies of Genesis 1-10* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) to which Robbins also refers, pays detailed attention to "the story's unique use of language."

A quote from Samuel Beckett, “In the beginning was the pun,” heads chapter three, “What’s in a Name?” With its illustrations of how the “plays on words are not only pervasive ... [but] are the building blocks” in the “composition” of the story (pp. 27-28), this is one of the clearest discussions of Hebrew wordplay, and its accompanying use of assonance, that I have encountered. This chapter alone I would recommend for any class studying Hebrew narrative. Again it comes with a mix of chatty engagement and the conviction that hers is the right path: “[w]hen we get a good handle on the ways in which words are the focus of the story, many of the problems of interpretation simply vanish” (p. 23).

The interpretation of 3:16b is a notably knotty issue, and the discussion in this chapter is nicely nuanced, setting it in parallel with the man’s “punishment” in that both are a matter of return and subservience. Bill Loader is referenced here, but I missed any discussion of Carol Meyer’s suggestive interpretation.² The issue returns in chapter four, headed “Crime and Punishment in Eden.” Once again there is the sweeping statement: [v]arious attempts by modern scholars to “depatriarchalize” Genesis 2-3 have not proven successful” (p. 62), which spoils an otherwise thoughtful and persuasive discussion. In line with others, such as Mieke Bal, Robbins understands the resulting hardships described in 3:15-19 as etiologically based, being “what the Storyteller set out to explain” (p. 63).³ Yet there is still talk of the woman’s role “in violating the prohibition,” and of her “greater responsibility for bringing about a state of affairs opposed to God’s wishes” (p. 67). While the Storyteller is the culprit, yet, according to Robbins, he recognizes and is critical of his society’s male domination. So was taking the fruit a violation? There seems to be a yes and no. The “etiological function of the story” (p. 78) requires it, and yet “human intellectual capacity is not something that God wants us to have” (p. 79). So “[t]he crime was not disobedience but rather breaching the boundary that God had established between human and divine.” And the punishments? They were to “reinforce the boundary ... by bedeviling [the humans] in the very work for which they were created” (p. 80). I found this a little curious. It also seems to overlook the fact that the narrative plot, which begins with the lack of an *’adam* to care for the *’adamah* (2:5), requires a capable human couple out in the world, equipped with a knowledge of good and bad. In which case, the pivotal irony would seem to be that this is a God who requires disobedience. Perhaps even a trickster God? But Robbins does not go that far.

While she is acutely alert to the ironies that abound, yet I wonder if she is not attempting to put a fence around God. Despite the emphasis on the tale’s literary nature, there seems a reluctance to see God as a narrative character. Indeed all pronouns relating to God are capitalized, and masculine, with the punishments being “His punishments” (p. 80). There also seems some ambivalence about the nature of these, for in the following chapter, “Mortal or Immortal?”, talk of etiological interpretation is replaced by talk of a “purpose”, which is “to reduce

² Carol Meyers, “Gender Roles and Genesis 3:16 Revisited,” in C. L. Meyers and M. O’Connor (eds.) *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 1983), 337-354. Reprinted in Athalya Brenner (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 118-145, and *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 116.

³ Mieke Bal, “Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow: The Emergence of the Female Character (A Reading of Genesis 1-3).” *Poetics Today* 6/1-2 (1985): 21-42 (36)

the humans' stature in the world" (p. 96). And the purpose is God's: "the line dividing human and divine is ordained from the beginning and the humans are punished for crossing it" (p. 98). Yet there is the irony that "[t]hrough disobedience we became "like gods." "That," Robbins declares, "is the most original aspect of the story, and we owe it all to the woman" (p. 99). After a nicely detailed discussion of the significance of "dust," the chapter moves to the expulsion, with its Tree of Life motif, that fulfils the major etiological function of explaining our mortality.

Chapter six returns to the snake, and the matter of *'arûm*. As Robbins writes, "the way in which we approach the story hangs on how we understand this one word" (p. 110). Her own choice of "judicious"⁴ signals her challenge to any demonic interpretation. And those pivotal words to the woman? Once again Robbins is countering no opposition to her view: "[o]nly rarely is the truthfulness of the snake's statement recognized" (p. 117). Indeed the snake is "the agent that initiates" humanity's gaining the knowledge whereby we became "like gods ... despite God's efforts to the contrary." And the resulting enmity with humans? That was "a kind of union-busting on God's part" (p. 119)! Background material includes references to other biblical usages of *'arûm*, as well as to some of the earliest interpretations of the snake.

Chapter seven, "On the Characters and Their Motivations," begins with some astute observations on how readers read, and how the subtlety of the Garden story requires close attention to hints and clues. Robbins finds further irony in that while the story's focus "is on God's reaction to human 'godlikeness', the portrayal of God is notable for God's humanlikeness" (p. 123). And the woman? Following the observation that "in a generally androcentric text the unusual agency of a female character demands attention" (p. 130), the attention Robbins gives is full and detailed, recognizing that "the etiological center around which the story revolves" is how we as humans gained the knowledge of good and bad (p. 135). And once again there is irony, in that the woman's excuse that the snake deceived her contradicts the narrator's comment (3:6) that she had already recognized the tree was desirable. Finally, Robbins returns again to the snake: "admitting that [it] is just a snake and that it spoke truthfully is a game-changer for interpreting the story." There are no villains and "no villainy either ... God is simply maintaining the order He created" and "[t]he human beings act the way human beings do, trying to make life better at their own peril" (142-143). One senses the unspoken – or unwritten – question: so what's the problem?!

The final chapter returns to "The Storyteller and His Story," with readers encouraged "to find the joy of storytelling and story-hearing" (p. 145). In line with noting, once again, "the long history of (mis)interpretation" (p. 144), Robbins' final sentence is that "[i]t is long past time to recognize the Storyteller for the social critic and literary master that he undoubtedly was" (p. 155).

Her own translation of the text follows, and as well as a comprehensive bibliography of mostly English language works there is an index of Hebrew Words and Phrases, as well as those of subjects and authors.

⁴ Following the OED's sense of "forming correct opinions or notions; sound in discernment; wisely critical" (110-111).

Throughout the book Robbins argues her case with forthright clarity. Whether readers will agree with the interpretations presented here, or with all its finer points, will, of course, depend not only on the force of the argument but on many external factors as well. They will, however, at the very least, be challenged to consider fresh possibilities. While its chatty style assumes a general, rather than a scholarly, readership, the plus of the book is Robbins' literary sensitivity, so alive to the role of irony and humour in the tale's telling. I am both pleased to be able to add this work to my shelf, and to recommend it warmly to others interested in the Storyteller's Garden of Eden tale.



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