
Pro Rege

Volume 18 | Number 1

Article 18

September 1989

Stranger in a Strange Land (Book Review)

James C. Schaap

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (1989) "Stranger in a Strange Land (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 18: No. 1, 29 - 31.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol18/iss1/18

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

woman, the initial “good” character of the creatures, the discontinuity of creation-week events, the Fall into sin, and Christ’s place in redemption. A summary chart in the last chapter lists the essential differences between the two extreme positions.

From the text it is clear that the Genesis account and the theistic evolution position are incompatible and therefore the authors press for a clear choice. They urge full adherence to the teaching of Scripture and distinct separation from the teachings of both secular and theistic evolutionists.

Clear in its purpose and mincing no words, the book is supportive to those who hold to the historic understanding of Genesis, but it will make theistic evolutionists unhappy, as well as those who sympathize with the latter.

By clarifying the issues from a theological perspective, the book is helpful, but it will probably not bring greater peace in the denominational arena. Clarity may be more

important than peace in this instance.

Because of the intent of the book the authors do not go into any details from the natural sciences, possibly assuming that the reader knows those details. To include an adequate account of the various pertinent technical aspects from cosmology, biology, or other disciplines in this particular treatment would have changed the complexion of their presentation entirely.

The perspective from which the issues are treated is most basic, placing heavy emphasis on the reliability and centrality of Scripture and its final authority in these matters. Although this naturally causes limitations, the authors are definitely making a positive contribution to the ongoing debate by centering the spotlight on the incompatibility of the evolutionistic approach to ultimate origins with what God says in Scripture. The great divide is there. People must choose: either Christianity or evolution.

Fables for God’s People, John R. Aurelio (New York: Crossroad, 1988). \$8.95, 129 pp. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

Some theologians assert it was in his parables that Christ most vividly described the nature of his Kingdom. His use of the narrative form—of character and setting and plot—prompted his listeners, as it still prompts us today, to create word pictures of the truth he wished his hearers to own—pictures worth a thousand words. Because of parables, “the Good Samaritan” virtually embodies the idea of love—the point of the sermon.

John R. Aurelio’s latest collection of tales, *Fables for God’s People*, is a kind of descendant of Christ’s storytelling. Like Christ’s own narratives, these stories often are parables (as I learned in Sunday School), earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Although Aurelio’s stories are not gifted literally with “heavenly meaning,” in almost every case they reach for truth itself. They point at idea, as parables always do.

The art of parable telling or writing is in creating the fabric of the story itself. Twin dangers are always present: flat stories will bore the reader/listener, making the truth itself a bore; however, highly compelling narratives can overpower or obfuscate the idea which motivates the story and dissolve the fable into ordinary fiction. The end becomes lost in the means.

Aurelio’s tales achieve at different levels. Some are quite memorable, others merely cute; some reach toward magic, others seem only artifice. Some run several pages

long, offering the opportunity for a much more complex narrative. Others finished in less than a page have clearly visible ideas. Even Christ’s parables, of course, were substantially different: think, for instance, of the depth of detail in the Prodigal Son as compared with the brevity of the Mustard Seed.

But one doesn’t read a collection of tales like this for mere pleasure. Aurelio’s little stories move readers in and out of setting and characters with dizzying speed, and the effect, in essence, cheapens what he does. Page after page of parable becomes tedious, and finally makes one weary of the natural subterfuge of the parable form.

Parables such as these live most colorful lives when they exist to make concrete a more expository presentation of ideas—whether that be through Christ’s own lifetime of miracles and preaching, or, today, in a sermon in worship.

This book’s most obvious use is as a sourcebook for preachers who often find themselves searching for the kind of story which will, in a way that is both amusing and fitting, carry the burden of their sermon’s ideas. Any number of Aurelio’s tales could be used effectively in sermons. In fact, any number of these fables could easily become fascinating children’s sermons by themselves.

In the context of a sermon, many of Aurelio’s parables would vividly open the Word for listeners.

A Stranger in a Strange Land, Leonora Scholte (Des Moines, Iowa: State Historical Society, 1938). Reprinted by Inheritance Publications, Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada T0G 1R0, \$7.95, 120 pp. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

Richard Ostling, the religion editor of *Time*, once explained to me some of the uniqueness of Dutch Reformed

people in the family of North American evangelicals by pointing at the historical roots of their sense of culture

and political power. Those who subscribe to the Kuyperian "worldview" stand unique among North American evangelicals, he said, in that their view of society has been heavily influenced by their having once controlled the dominant culture in the Netherlands—specifically, when Abraham Kuyper was Prime Minister. The vast majority of American evangelicals, whether or not they are linked with an ethnic past, come from traditions which have never come close to such authority. Most evangelical sub-cultures have their roots in dissidents or persecuted minorities.

To put the case simply, if you've once actually ruled a nation, you're going to view the legitimacy and importance of political activity in a vastly different way than you would if you had always suffered persecution at the hands of the ruling elite.

Leonora Scholte's recreation of the history of the H. P. Scholte family in her book *A Stranger in a Strange Land* reminds us again that Abraham Kuyper was the intellectual patriarch of only some Dutch-Americans in the Calvinist tradition. To the earliest immigrants, Pella's Scholte and Holland's Van Raalte offered the guiding hand; but these men had not been government leaders. They were church men, and, unlike Kuyper, rebels and dissidents.

Scholte quotes the letters of Dominie Scholte's first wife, who describes the treatment of Scholte's own church members when state forces broke up an illegal worship service.

Once again the Burgemeester asked the crowd to depart, but no one went. Dominie [Scholte] announced the 119th Psalm—verses 65, 87, and 88. We began to sing, and at once the soldiers came to the wagon on which we were seated. They rushed towards the crowds with unsheathed swords and began beating the people cruelly; and then came the mounted dragoons. We thought our wagon would be upset. The people remained sitting between the wheels of the wagon to be near us; but they were dragged away by force—and the way the soldiers brandished their swords was terrible. One man who sat behind us on the wagon was also beaten, so that he would get down; and the cursing and swearing at the Dominie was terrible.

Scholte, Van Raalte, and others led thousands of *kleine luyden* to this country in the early and mid-nineteenth century. The sense—perhaps even definition—which those immigrants held of *culture* was undoubtedly different from the view of those who came in the later part of that century, when (or after) Kuyper himself ruled the Netherlands; and, it is likely, vastly different from those who arrived after World War II.

Such a legacy of persecution—and the counter-cultural stance of his people—may even explain why Scholte appears to have been so readily absorbed into the American mainstream culture—why, for instance, his church met with such a sad fate, dissolving into extinction after he refused to affiliate with either of the established Dutch Reformed denominations. Or why he so quickly married his own interests with those of American baptists who were interested in establishing a college in Pella. He may well have found an easy kinship with a religious sub-culture who had, as he had, previously suffered minority status.

This is speculation of course, and it is only tangentially related to Leonora Scholte's family reminiscence. *A Stranger in a Strange Land* is not a new book, and the Scholte story is already widely known. Fifty years ago this book was published by the Iowa State Historical Society. Pella's own annual Tulip Time celebration, I'm sure, finds delightful ways to tell the story itself.

But no matter how often it's told or written or republished, the story of Pella, Iowa, is wonderful. Hundreds of Hollanders, following Scholte, made the long trek over the ocean, then half way across a continent broader than they ever could have even imagined, only to set themselves down on an ocean of prairie grass, a desolate but untarnished spot in the American wilderness where few white men had tried to live before. Pella, once, was only a name on a sign in front of a single log cabin.

In fact, even before Scholte arrived, real estate interests and political leaders had already caught wind of the army of Hollanders on the way west with, they thought, gold spilling from their pockets. Those first settlers were not rich, with the exception, of course, of the learned and powerful Scholte himself.

Leonora Scholte's book tells that story adequately, but her real interest is not with the immigrants, or even with the Dutch settlement. Rather, it is with her mother-in-law, and Mareah Scholte deserves the attention.

Literature of what Hamlin Garland called "the Middle Border" (that area west of the Great Lakes and east of the Rockies) is full of stories of men with dreams and women in agony. The prairie was treeless, shockingly so. While men looked on opening virgin soil as a great adventure, often their wives felt alone and exposed, even naked, beneath an open sky in a land where there were no shadows. No schools stood ready for children. No church bells rang. The summers were hot, and the winters were killing. The culture was the plow and oxbow.

But Dominie Scholte's wife Mareah wasn't just any immigrant wife, just as her husband was not simply another immigrant. Just a few years before her husband carried her from the wagon over the doorstep of their first prairie loghouse, she'd sat at the Grand Opera House in Paris and listened to Liszt on the concert piano. She had per-

formed herself for elegant audiences, attended and graduated from the best finishing school, and learned her manners well. She was a child of luxury and good breeding, a devotee of art. One might say she wasn't trained to work.

There may well be better histories of the Pella settlement. Leonora Scholte's *A Stranger in a Strange Land* is really the story of the very aristocratic Mareah Krantz Scholte, whose fate fell, romantically, with a man with a vision for a new Amsterdam where his people could worship God freely. It was rather unfortunate, but Mareah Scholte was out of her element on pioneer Pella's mud streets, just as her dress and music proved alien to the people her husband loved and served. She lived for fine

Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence, Jon D. Levenson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). 182 pp. \$18.95. Reviewed by Gary Shahinian, Visiting Lecturer in Philosophy.

Those who read the title of this book and expect to uncover a penetrating analysis of the problem of evil in the understanding of Judaism will be sorely disappointed. The author, Jon Levenson, professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago Divinity School, gives us instead an interpretation of the way that Yahweh relates to the chaotic malevolent forces at work in the world, based on an exegesis of a few key passages in the Old Testament and a comparison of other ancient Near Eastern sacred writings. Levenson attempts to demonstrate from the exegesis of these Hebrew texts, rooted as they are in older religious documents of neighboring peoples, that the prevailing view of the divine *creatio ex nihilo*, promoted by both Jewish and Christian theologians throughout history, is mistaken, as it fails to take seriously into account the actualities behind the rich mythological imagery these passages depict.

Levenson brashly remarks that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the belief that God created the world out of nothing, is no longer generally accepted as an adequate understanding of the Hebrew scriptures. Amazingly, he does not even attempt to defend this remarkable claim by appeal to any noted biblical scholars. This overstatement of the discredited status of *creatio ex nihilo* in the absence of any solid evidence—biblical, theological, or philosophical—has become characteristic of the scholarly trend today whereby one cannot show sensitivity to misery and suffering without advocating some variation of Process theology. Evil forces are deemed to reside eternally alongside (or even within) God so that he must struggle against them to bring good out of evil, order out of chaos. Joining the chorus of those who seek to find the source of evil in a cosmic struggle between God and uncreated realities, Levenson seeks to defend from a biblical analysis the thesis that God's creation of the heavens and

things when the reality of life on the prairie meant making coffee from brome grass.

If you enjoy Dutch-American history and don't yet know this story, you should. Mareah Scholte's life on what some called the Great American Desert is surely one of the great stories of Dutch people in this country.

This old story has been republished by Inheritance Publications, of Neerlandia, Alberta. Reportedly, Scholte's gently written history is the first of its planned publications. It's more than a shame when a people lose track of their own stories. Inheritance Publications deserves support in its quest to help us understand who we are on the basis of who we have been.

the earth is a primordial act of conquering pernicious powers that attempt to thwart the formation of an environment conducive to habitation by finite humans.

The central concept of divine creation, according to Levenson, is *mastery*. God is not the lone sovereign being from all eternity, as the traditional theologies have always dogmatically asserted. Rather, God becomes the sovereign ruler of the world through his waging battle with primeval forces, subsequently triumphing over them. By means of God's subjugation of these evil forces, he fashions the creation into an orderly realm. Thus Yahweh gains mastery over these chaotic powers, transforming them into order; he does not possess mastery over the world from the very beginning. Thus Levenson interprets the water of Genesis 1:2 as primordial, not having been created. This idea makes sense only if Genesis 1:1 is translated as an introductory clause to v. 2, such as in the following way, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth...the wind of God was moving over the face of the waters" rather than as a complete sentence, as most translations have it, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." As an introductory clause, the first verse of Genesis does not indicate an extraordinarily terse summary of the comprehensive act of creation, but instead, signals the beginning of God's waging war on the malevolent powers that threaten everlasting chaos and emptiness, symbolized by the waters. Levenson claims that the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 has steadily fallen out of favor since the medieval period, but, incredibly, given the scores of theologians who still maintain it, mentions only Claus Westermann as one biblical scholar who seeks to defend that interpretation. Yet in a footnote dealing with Westermann's views, Levenson is impelled to remark that "it must be conceded that a resolution of this old controversy is probably