

Rain From a Rainless Sky

A WORK OF THEOLOGICAL BOTANY

BRENDAN O'DONNELL



FOREWORD BY DOUGLAS JONES

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I LOVED APPLES



Five black horses and one white strain forward against the harness. They drag a farmer on his plow across a stretch of the central Washington plain. He sits on his brush-busting blade, his hands at the reins. Behind him, four more horses—three black, one white—follow the team of six, lugging another farmer atop a disc tiller. A gaunt brown dog slinks alongside the work. Torn, shredded, uprooted sagebrush lie in tatters on either side of the plow's course.

The caption to the side of the black-and-white photograph says that they are clearing the sagebrush from “would-be farmland, circa 1915.” Ranging all the way to the long, low ridge of black hills miles behind them lies the land, crusted with the bramblish tree. The vast, grey plain mirrors the sky above, a brooding, threatening, rainless wash. The land looks hard, unpromising, fruitless. The men, their horses, and the photographer are surrounded. The caption to the side calls the men, “determined but probably doomed.”

Deep inside a book called *Flora of the Great Plains*, I found something that said:

Artemisia tridentata Nutt., big sagebrush.
Erect, branching shrub 4-20(30+) dm, tall,
aromatic and finely appressed-pubescent.
Principal leaves narrowly cuneate at the base
and tridentate at the apex, up to 5 cm long.
Inflorescence of numerous near-sessile heads in
a loose panicle; involucre pubescent, 2-4 mm
tall; receptacle naked; florets all perfect. (n=9,
18) Jun-Sep. Open dry plains and hills; w 1/8
GP, w ND, &e MT, extreme nw NE, e CO, &
apparently isolated in extreme nw TX; (abun-

dant in w. N. Amer. from GP w to B.C. 7 Baja Calif.).

David saw a tree planted by rivers of water. It brought forth fruit in its season, and its leaf did not wither. And he sang to Yahweh his God, saying that the man who walked not in ungodly counsel, who stood not in the paths of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the scornful, but whose delight was in the good law of Yahweh, would be like that tree.

David took a military census, against the command of Yahweh his God, and Yahweh sent a plague on the sheep to punish the shepherd. David, repentant, built an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, and offered a sacrifice, to propitiate the wrath of God away from the people. And God relented. On the threshing floor, David saw the chaff, and the wind blew it away. "Therefore," he sang, "the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous."

"With cheers and applause, the Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson became the ninth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire on Sunday, March 7, 2004. The election of Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion, has created tremendous debate within the worldwide church." The New Hampshire diocese of the ECUSA installed Bishop Robinson before a crowd of 700 at St. Paul's Church in Concord. He made many front pages that day.

I stare at the photograph again, recalling my own disbelief at seeing Eastern Washington for the

first time. As a kid in New York City, I ate a lot of apples. New York State had apple trees, somewhat to the north of the city, and the orchards there were as green as I had ever imagined anything could be. The apples in the store, however, came from somewhere across the country. I peeled a lot of stickers off the hard shiny skins with words like “Yakima” and “Wenatchee” printed above a red-delicious outline wrapped in a banner that said “Evergreen State.” I loved apples. They were filled with the taste of sweet, clear, refreshing waters. I always wanted to see the green, rain-drenched land that made so many apples.

When I moved to Idaho, I found myself next to Eastern Washington, and I took a drive one day to survey the land where the green orchards were. But the hills of wheat fields disappeared into dry, brown desert. The sky was a hard, distant blue. Not a single apple tree to be found, nor a drop of rain to water them. Just a quiet, barely-peopled land of dry streams, presided over by grey basalt cliffs. And interminable stretches of country where the closest thing to a tree was the sagebrush.

I came expecting fruit trees—and all I found was the sagebrush! I held the other features of the land in soft focus next to it. I stared at it as if at a car wreck, at once repulsed and fascinated by the twisted branches, the lifeless leaves, the tortured profile. It spoke of starvation, loneliness, rainless skies. It spoke of land without the shelter of trees. I hated the story it told.

I wondered that day, and I have kept wondering, whether it is good or not to hate sagebrush. For

I was not sure what name to give to the indistinct thing that sat in my stomach, that thing that only dissipated when I left the desert. Every word I seized upon—suspicion, hostility, sorrow, loneliness—described some edge or corner of it, but left the great, massive center of the thing utterly undescribed. I finally decided it was hate, an inarticulate, inchoate hate that nevertheless had many sharp edges.

But why hate it? Is it not just a wayside shrub? Does God hate it?

God is love. But God's Spirit, writing through David, said uncomfortable things. "I hate them with perfect hatred." The God who is love also hates, but His hatred is love—"outraged love"—love outraged by the disintegration of righteousness into wickedness. The God who hates also destroys what He hates, because He is holy, and holiness hates with unmeasured fury. But never does His anger overwhelm God the way a wave overwhelms a man who stretches out his hand to hold it back. For God is also patient, and He waits and deliberates, even hundreds of years—even so that the Amorites might complete their iniquity! How God hates wickedness, and what a tension He holds it in—for His patience restrains its hot outbursts, yet His patience also allows it to grow ever hotter.

He hates false teachers. He would have them castrate themselves. He calls them late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. He hates apostates. He cuts the fruitless branches

from the vine, gathers them in a bundle, and burns them.

And in some ages, the angered God gives them the pre-eminence in the church.

Bishop Robinson told the assembled 700 that, “If you dare to preach a God who is so loving and forgiving that no one is beyond God’s embrace, you’ll get into trouble.” Does God love this man, who has turned His grace into lewdness? Why does God let such a one have such stature in His church?

God spoke the world into being, and Jesus holds it aloft by the power of His word. Sagebrush is a spoken word, a word in a story. Is it good to hate sagebrush? Does the angered God speak certain words in order for us to hate them?

Bibliographical Acknowledgements

The genesis of this work is in a phrase Peter Leithart uttered in a lecture when speaking of the limitations of systematic theology, which didn't seem to have a place for, as he put it, "theological botany." I read through James Jordan's *Through New Eyes* and David Chilton's *Paradise Restored* with this phrase in mind, and armed with DeLorme's magnificent *Washington Atlas and Gazetteer*, I set out across Eastern Washington to sort out what I saw there. Other books set up the theological superstructure I tried to frame everything inside: Jordan's *Primeval Saints and Creation in Six Days*, not to mention copies of his old newsletter, *Trees and Thorns*; David Bruce Hegeman's *Plowing in Hope: Toward a Biblical Theology of Culture*; Leithart's *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel*, *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament*, and the astonishing *Against Christianity*, which everyone in the world should read; and Ralph Smith's *Trinity and Reality: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*. Bible quotes are from the New King James translation.

Much of the science in this work came out of some very frustrating books. David Alt's *Glacial Lake Missoula and Its Humongous Floods* is useful in presenting a timeline and the outlines of Bretz's theory, but remains a poorly written and arrogant piece of modernist geology. The following, despite their evolutionist assumptions, proved invaluable in helping sort out one plant from another, and also to learn their

biology: Ronald J. Taylor's Sagebrush Country: A Wildflower Sanctuary, Hugh Mazingo's Shrubs of the Great Basin: A Natural History, Farrel A. Branson's Vegetation Changes on Western Rangelands, and Jack L. Carter's (et.al.) Common Southwestern Native Plants: An Identification Guide. The poetically-titled Thomas R. Vale article from the Journal of Range Management—"Presettlement Vegetation in the Sagebrush-Grass Area of the Intermountain West"—provided quotes from the early explorers of the Inland Northwest.

Speaking of the Inland Northwest, most of what I know about it comes from D.W. Meinig's Environment and Settlement in the Palouse 1868-1910 and the almost-incomparable The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910. Carlos Schwantes' magnificent Railroad Signatures Across the Pacific Northwest was a deep mine for all sorts of information, some of which made it into this work. On page 191 of his book, you will find the Asahel Curtis photograph that riveted my attention at the beginning of the work. Other railroad background came from George H. Drury's The Historical Guide to North American Railroads.

I pieced together Gene Robinson's story from a variety of sources: newspaper articles from all over the country, a segment on CBS' 60 Minutes, and various statements available from the ECUSA and New Hampshire diocese websites—www.ecusa.anglican.org and www.nhepiscopal.org—neither of which do I recommend to the faint of heart or the easily aggravated. Philip Jenkins' book The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, another book which

everyone (in North America and Europe, at any rate) should read, helped me put his Atlantic Monthly article on Peter Akinola, “Defender of the Faith,” into context, and www.anglican-nig.org provided more historical background.

Other odds and ends came from Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* and a couple dozen articles from *Trains* magazine. I consulted Doug Jones’ many writings on sentimentality and metaphor whenever things got stuck; and his coaching and encouragement are one of the top three reasons this thing was written at all. Gordon Wilson was my New Saint Andrews thesis adviser, and he taught me, among other things, which end of the plant is up. Remy Wilkins, of Monroe, Louisiana, the Deep South, made lots of snide comments about this when I asked him to proof-read it, some of which were incorporated into what you have in your hands.

My wife, Sharon, is also to thank—she so strongly disagreed with my initial thoughts on the wiry little tree that I was forced to rethink most everything. She is proving to be a tree desirable to make one wise. Blessed be God for not forbidding me from her.



God speaks the world into being, by His Word, by His Son. What do we do, then, when we hear words we can't stomach?

Sagebrush is a word of God that evokes desolation, loneliness, and drought. On even deeper levels it speaks of fruitlessness, the bitterness of exile, and of apostasy. The closer one bends his ear towards the sagebrush, the starker and grimmer the story. So, too, with certain places in the church, where some of the branches on the vine have become so dedicated to fruitlessness that they install as Bishop of New Hampshire an open homosexual, Gene Robinson.

On a drive through Eastern Washington, the author finds himself surrounded by the giant sagebrush, the dry land it grows in, and the brazen sky above it. Wondering at the story God is telling in the desert—in both Eastern Washington and New Hampshire—he drives farther, because the God who raises the dead never lets death have the final word.

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