

BOOKS

Aspirin for our spiritual hangover

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Contemporary poetry (to misquote *Blackadder*), is a lot like sex. Tons of it about, but I just don't get it. So I was a little nervous when I gave *Apocrypha* a go. But I'm happy to say I quite liked it (I seem to remember the same thing about sex, come to think of it).

Apocrypha is an entertaining collection of poems about those twilight zones of the modern imagination where the sacred meets the mundane. It's about the experience of living with religious stories we no longer believe in literally, but which we can't forget.

Its best poems drop biblically named characters into the less glamorous corners of the British way of life; "Adam lay miraculous,/ unconscious with drink"; "Barabbas came to Butterstone,/ found his chalet, unpacked"; "Abraham wielded a watering can". Many of these poems open with familiar Old Testament images which reminded me of stained-glass windows in serious Victorian churches (especially "Moses horned, lantern-jawed/ down from his mountain"). These poems repeatedly pull off the disconcerting trick of making you think you're about to read a poem about Adam in Eden, only to find out it's actually about Adam the rough-tongued and heartbroken whiskey connoisseur.

I call it a trick and it is – but it's one that's used well and to good effect. The first poem really is about Old Testament times when everything seemed sacred and there was "a god/in evidence everywhere". This is the perspective *Apocrypha* keeps on tricking you into applying to mundane modern Britain, before jerking you back to reality. Because whilst the ancient Israelites really could believe that God was in a cloud, we can not. But, as *Apocrypha* shows, we still know the old stories, and we're still tempted to try to apply them to the world. When we realise they won't fit with the way we see the world, we're left with an uneasy feeling that things are out of joint, that we're stretched between two worlds.

At his best, Jackson is able to compress this into the language of individual lines. His puns create double senses which are sacred on one hand and mundane on the other. He gives us, for example, a “risen Elvis” who “rolls away his rhinestone”. Elvis is turned into Jesus by the image, but he is still Elvis (trademark rhinestones and all). In an MTV world where pop-stars are called Madonna and televangelists look like pop-stars, the sacred and the mundane feed-off each other and are sometimes hard to tell apart. *Apocrypha* is what the world looks like when you’ve got a spiritual hangover.

The collection as a whole, it must be admitted, is uneven. One poem imagining a modern Jezebel at an open mike night in “Brixton, not Babylon” doesn’t really do very much with itself. Occasionally (but not often), Jackson is too clever for his poetry’s good. I couldn’t, for example, un-riddle “Daniel stormed a lion’s enclosure/ armed with a roast chicken”. There are good lines (“Self-battered with sun lotion”), but some which are more striking than they are effective (“Love breezed in/ like Jesus Christ in a kiss-me-quick hat”, which is imaginative but mostly meaningless). And overall, I think I’d have to say that *Apocrypha* is bigger on ideas than it is on words. There are few lines which burrow into my memory, and fewer yet which I’d roll around my mouth for their sheer beauty.

Apocrypha offers an enjoyably wry look at a culture which thinks it is secular but is saturated with 1500 years of Christianity. Which makes the decision to include two poems on Palestine brave, and misguided. Should one, I wonder, be comfortable approaching the Palestinian conflict with detached wry humour? The tone works well for discussing the place of the religious imagination in Britain, but is troubling when applied to modern Israel.

The last poem is well written. It’s set in Gethsemane and features special forces who “interrogated molehills”, children who “followed a loop of new law”, and “a scrambled air command, a sole / surviving god, his wow and flutter”. Well written. But right? Gods may have slipped from their pedestals in modern Britain, but they’re a very real presence for Hamas and Israeli conservatives. Scripture isn’t unforgotten narrative in the Middle East, but living and deadly truth.

Apocrypha, I think, is about post-religious societies. It helped me understand Britain. That’s where Jackson’s vision is clearest.

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