



BOOK REVIEW

A Most Courageous Book

A Poetic Bildungsroman with God as Protagonist

Jay Ramsay, with Martin Palmer, *The Dangerous Book: The Bible As You've Never Seen It*, Fitzrovia Press, Glastonbury, 2018, 531 pp, £20.00, ISBN 978 0 9570722 4 4

Reviewed by Faysal Mikdadi

In 'Anamnesis', Jay Ramsay writes:

Traveller: stop a moment.
It is time to stop time, to step inside.
Come into this house of quiet
And let it take your mind. Can you?

In his rewriting of the Bible, Ramsay invites his reader to go through a similar process. Ramsay's version of the Bible convinces us that God is 'the playwright, its director and dreamer'. God lives through a bildungsroman during which He receives a spiritual education. He goes from being an angry, jealous and vindictive God to becoming the God of Love.

Where men and women have embraced the literal story of the Bible, they have eschewed the central leitmotif of Love.

Throughout his poem (with some prose), Ramsay uses the Greek mythological formula of Pandora's Box: e.g. 'Tribal stupidity is born'; variously jealousy, incest, patriarchy, irony, sin, lies, forgiveness, music 'came into being'.

This approach allows Ramsay to shift the emphasis from a literal to a figurative interpretation. As a result the Bible mirrors rather than prescribes 'what it means to be human'.

This highly successful approach, coupled with much evocative and memorable poetry, reminds us of Christ's intention: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' and 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you', i.e. the often-forgotten Golden Rule. Forgotten because we live in a world wherein the fates of the obscure many are whimsically determined by the privileged few who are happy to abuse God for their own ends. This is reinforced when the *Book of Revelation* clearly politicizes faith in order to vest the few with control over the many.

There are many ways in which Ramsay – supported by Martin Palmer – overwhelms his reader / listener (I use 'listener' because much of the poetry is clearly intended to be read aloud). Let me give but a few examples of how Ramsay's approach works so brilliantly.

This is the Bible narrative as metaphor (not to be taken literally, for that way lies the corruption of God's intent, i.e. to make us better through Love).

In his 'Introduction to the New Testament', Martin Palmer encapsulates Ramsay's intent:

God's own journey is revealed in the Books from a tribal god to the God of universal love... – is God learning too, or is it that God simply lets us understand, little by little, the true nature of God?

The question is not directly answered, although the implication is clear, as inferred when Palmer writes about Jesus learning from the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30).

Occasionally, Ramsay links Biblical stories to today's world – for example, when he talks about 'Israel, Syria, Yemen: one insanity...'. He goes further towards the end of the book when he tells us that 'Life had become no longer reasonable. Maybe it never had been – maybe we were fooling ourselves. But Rome was a pretty easy place to be; it was tolerant, we were tolerant.' Perhaps, towards the end of his life, Ramsay was talking to the many buffoons who harken back to an idyllic, non-existent past.

Jay Ramsay died of cancer on Sunday 30 December 2018. There is a delicious irony that would have brought a smile to his face as poet, psychosynthesis therapist and healer, when he puts his last few words into Magdalene's mouth. She says it all in these supremely simple words which

transcend all the cant and hypocrisy that politicising faith can bring about: '...all he meant was Love, being all we are when the rest has been crucified and transcended'.

It is interesting to read Ramsay's reference to Khalil Gibran's *Jesus the Son of Man* as 'offering the same emphasis' as *The Dangerous Book* with its deliciously ironic title:

...who we are is also a reflection of each other, no man is an island. Jesus says that who we are in essence is the Kingdom, which is also what unites rather than divides us: this is a story that means all of us.

Ramsay's poetry – mellifluous, deeply haunting, memorable and transcendently spiritual – has echoes of Gibran's *The Prophet*. Its aim is to unite us through our common humanity.

Ramsay succeeds in doing precisely that. This work is worth reading for its poetry and for its enlightened tolerant humanist vision of our love for each other as our only binding human spiritual force.