

Ellen Jane Powers

Book Review: *Questions for Ecclesiastes* by Mark Jarman

After returning home from an overseas trip, my mother told my brother and me that she had flown through the clouds. Being almost six years old, I was surprised that she had been up that high, so asked her if she had seen God. My mother bent down to me and said, while pointing to my heart, "No. God lives within you." I didn't understand the answer at the time, but I knew, with a child's faith, that it must be true, and accepted God as a natural and integral part of my life. A compelling question might be what has happened to that childhood faith after experiencing many decades of the tribulations that life has to offer.

The book of Ecclesiastes, known for its beautiful verse beginning "To everything there is a season," is also known as "The Preacher," and is a book that wonders aloud about the value of life because "all is vanity and vexation of spirit." Mark Jarman's book of poems, *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, does not question that preacher, but rather questions the nature of the God that preacher believes in. Unlike other poems of this genre, these are not a dialogue with the Divine; they are an indirect challenge to God to reveal Itself as something other than judgmental and cruel. Ecclesiastes accepts God even though life is unkind to the wicked as well as the righteous; Jarman does not.

Although we should never equate the speaker of a poem with the poet, these poems are autobiographical in nature, and so we learn that Jarman is himself the son of a preacher. "Ground Swell," which is a poem outside the five sections of the book, starts the volume with a strong narrative, beginning with the poet's memory of when he turned sixteen, and then moving to the memory of an acquaintance that died in Vietnam. Why should we be interested in reading about these memories? Because, he tells us,

that's my ground swell. I must start

Where things began to happen and I knew it.

This is where, and when, it all started: the questioning of God's judgment, the realization

we suffer despite a belief in God, and the loss of faith in God's unconditional love.

There is a long poem for each section of the book, though the third and middle section consists solely of twenty sonnets, "Unholy Sonnets", as Jarman calls them, an obvious play on Donne's "Holy Sonnets." Each long poem contributes to the arc of the book, the questioning of belief, beginning with "Transfiguration," to the title poem, to the sonnets, to "The Past From The Air," to the closing poem, "The Worry Bird", which is the only poem of the last section and which will leave the reader still wondering whether Jarman, like the preacher of Ecclesiastes, has resolved his relationship to God, because God appears to remain "Only an idea, if at all."

The sequence "Transfiguration," with its long biblical-like lines, interweaves the discourse that Jesus might have had with Moses and Elijah during the transfiguration witnessed by several of the disciples, with the stories of those suffering bodily afflictions. In each of the seven parts we are shown suffering and pain, and even when "they talked about light," they were talking about suffering. An effective line break, one which shows the tension between the laws of God and the condition of humankind, occurs in the sixth part, when those who go to an

"authority" to diagnose their "feeling" are told
That for them alone there waits a suffering in accordance

X
with the laws
Of their condition...

In the last part, a narrator "I" appears, and hopes that the whole experience of the transfiguration, the illumination witnessed by the followers of Jesus, was a result of Jesus questioning the words given to him by Moses and Elijah, telling these two that "too much was being asked / and too much promised." It is this questioning that then resulted in the transfiguration, because Jesus "was embarrassed to

learn how he and they [the disciples] were / going to suffer." The narrator desiring that this witnessed light be the light of love for one's fellow human beings, not that of acceptance of God's will.

The title poem, "Questions for Ecclesiastes," is a prose poem with the first six stanzas beginning "What if," and relates an account of parents being comforted by a preacher, both parties unknown to one another, because the parent's daughter has committed suicide. The preacher advises them, with words akin to Ecclesiastes, "to be not rash with thy mouth and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God." The heaviness of the topic is made visible in the last stanza, where "the fog, like the underskin of a broken wave, made a low ceiling that the street lights pierced and illuminated." Then the poem turns to God Itself, to the same harsh one that Ecclesiastes embraced in the end: "And God who shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." But Jarman doesn't embrace this God; instead he continues to question a God "who could have shared what he knew with the people who need urgently to hear it," but didn't. This god offered nothing to a grieving family, not even to the preacher, his father, who finally found "the strength to say he had visited these grieving strangers and spent some time with them." No, instead, "God kept a secret."

The appeal of the bible book Ecclesiastes is that it tells it like it is; that life isn't easy, but that we should make the most of it despite those hardships and the lack of reward. But we're also drawn to its poetry and wisdom for living. Jarman, a poet of the school of new formalism, doesn't use traditional form, meter, and rhyme until the mid-point of the book, as if by setting a narrative stage to begin the questioning, the rhythmic lines that follow will form a harp-like song that will make that questioning as natural a course as the rhythm of life itself. However, I particular found the sonnets, though masterful in form and ranging from traditional, like the Petrarchan sonnet, to the invented, where end words are repeated, rather tight and uninspiring.

From sonnet 8:

Two forces rule the universe of breath
And one is gravity and one is light.
And does their jurisdiction include death?

And sonnet 20:

If God survives us, will his kingdom come?
But let's row out to sea and ship the oars
And watch the planet drown in meteors.

I enjoyed the progressions in "Proverbs," a take-off on the biblical lines "Three things are too wonderful for me; Four I do not understand." The descriptors in "Drought Rain" were fresh: "cat-on-screen-door clawings;" "flammable eucalyptus;" "lawn-lush strip of mildew;" and "wind-flanneled." I did not like, however, the poet's voice telling me "those spectacular hillside cave-ins" are "making the rich homeless, too." It detracts from the poem, and tells, rather than shows the reader something that is already implied.

In "Patience," an adult, after being unable to answer her child's question as to why God does not speak to her after her prayer, presents the challenge: "*If God does not exist, describe his absence.*" The poet answers with an allusion from the Gospel of John: "No word. No word. No word. No word. No word. No word." Does the poet mean there is no word to describe our existence without a god, or, without God there is no Word, where no Word means no God, and no God means we would not exist? Or, perhaps Jarman believes it is through language that humans created God, and that, without us, God would not exist? It remains open-ended, and thus, God must live on.

And what of that child whose mother unquestioningly pronounced that God lives within one's self? Perhaps she finds herself at the same intersection that Ecclesiastes and Jarman both found themselves in and for which they made a choice; however, which way she decides to go is not the point. The point being, after all, is to be in conversation with God, regardless of whether you question or not.