

### James L. Crenshaw

*Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013.  
Pp. x + 170.

Upon his retirement from Duke University Divinity School, James L. Crenshaw moved to Nashville and became affiliated with Vanderbilt University's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, which offers courses for retirement-age adults who find joy in learning for its own sake. Reflecting the breadth of topics he had studied (among them the Russian revolution, the Mayan civilization, health reform, social protest, and great singer-songwriters), Crenshaw invokes a lifetime of knowledge to make *Qoheleth* relevant and understandable to modern audiences. In his "lover's quarrel with *Qoheleth*" (7), Crenshaw marshals Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Pete Seeger, physicist Niels Bohr, Gertrude Stein, and the Buddha. A mirthful attitude and an interdisciplinary perspective propel the energetic and provocative book.

As part of the series *Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament*, of which Crenshaw himself is series editor, the monograph concerns *Qoheleth*, the man who claims authorship of the book of *Ecclesiastes*. Explaining the choice to focus on individuals, Crenshaw asserts that personality studies illuminate how the ancients understood God. Crenshaw imagines *Qoheleth* winking ironically and smiling cerebrally while delivering his message, inviting the reader to explore the inconsistencies, gaps, and contradictions in the material. Like a grandfather who mixes fact and fiction while telling an elaborate story, who then winks at the listening child to say, "but you and I know the truth," *Qoheleth* wants the reader to think that he or she alone interprets the work correctly.

Irony surrounds Crenshaw's study, which explores the philosophy of and attributes motives to a fictional character. The royal *Qoheleth* is the literary creation of an anonymous thinker whose historical and social setting is obscure. I would consequently extend Crenshaw's imagery, arguing that the wink belongs to an author wearing a mask. Is it the mask that winks, the author, or both?

Crenshaw begins by exploring *Qoheleth*'s deceptive – or at least enigmatic – name, pondering whether *Qoheleth* breaks the tradition of anonymous biblical writers out of a Greek-inspired pride of authorship, to tease the reader, or most likely to allow himself to gain credibility by referencing personal experiences. By selecting a name that conceals more than it informs, however, *Qoheleth* chooses deliberately to be elusive.

*Qoheleth*'s rhetorical strategy of internal debate and inconsistency illustrates the absurdity and futility of attaining knowledge and of existence itself, Crenshaw argues. (*Qoheleth*'s word to describe this futility, רבב, Crenshaw

proposes translating differently depending on the instance: “transience,” “sickness,” or “insubstantiality” [36]). Qoheleth was not the only writer to view the world as *הבל*, as Crenshaw shows in an intertextual exercise focusing on Psalm 39. What sets Qoheleth apart, though, is that his proclamations of life’s futility led him to a desire to enjoy life.

Questions often catalyze the discussion, such as when a description of Qoheleth’s historical context follows the question, “What was there for Qoheleth to see?” (53). The inquiries are creative and thought provoking: Why does Qoheleth so often discuss eyes and seeing when wisdom is traditionally associated with ears and listening? Does Qoheleth ever change his mind about the futility of life? Despite a thorough description of the intellectual, religious, economic, political, and familial realities of Qoheleth’s day, Crenshaw declines to date the author’s activity any less broadly than to the fourth or third century BCE.

As important as the deconstruction of Qoheleth’s teachings is the examination of what the author leaves unsaid. He does not discuss idols, prophets, priests, or angels, which Crenshaw finds surprising given the text’s historical context. Crenshaw also explores Qoheleth’s unstated assumptions about God, including his awareness that “God’s footprints left no sign in the sand” (69). Since God cannot be studied empirically, cultural assumptions supplement the empirical data.

Addressing whether Qoheleth is indeed an empirical thinker as past critics have remarked, Crenshaw points out that Qoheleth makes broad claims about things he cannot know. When Qoheleth states that no man on earth is so righteous that he never sins (Eccl. 7:20), Crenshaw rebuts that the ancient sage was in no position to know this information. “True, Qoheleth may have failed to see anyone who in his judgment qualified for the label ‘good,’ but he surely made a claim he could not support with conclusive evidence” (62). While Crenshaw’s point is insightful and correct, I would argue that Qoheleth’s use of rhetorical devices such as hyperbole should not damage so severely his reputation as an empiricist. Relatedly but conversely, Crenshaw notes that someone who depends on his eyes alone to observe the world will miss the “motives [that] lie beneath the surface” (60). Qoheleth chooses vocabulary of sight to frame his observations, but this too might have been a literary device. We need not conclude that he eschews other methods of obtaining knowledge.

This book will be of most interest to the layperson, though knowledge of biblical Hebrew grammar would be an asset. Those looking for a technical discussion of the biblical book or its literary genre would be better served by Crenshaw’s Old Testament Library commentary (*Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* [OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987]) or his popular textbook on

ancient Israelite Wisdom texts, which rightly has a place on many university syllabi (*Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 3rd edn, 2010]). To contextualize Qoheleth's writings, Crenshaw draws broadly from other books in the Hebrew Bible, deuterocanonical and Egyptian wisdom texts, Akkadian and Ugaritic myths, Stoic philosophers, the New Testament, rabbinic sages, and modern thinkers of all varieties. To my mind, the strength and immense value of this work lies in Crenshaw's interpretive commentary. One of the greatest scholars of wisdom in the ancient world presents, in part, a perspective on life. Crenshaw equals Qoheleth's erudition and beauty when he muses, "We are sojourners in a dangerous land, and against our will we have been suspended over our final resting place while day and night eat away at our lifeline, the time we have been allotted on earth by genetic disposition, choice, and pure luck or lack of it" (70). He is referencing Dostoyevsky in service of elucidating Qoheleth's allegory of time, yet Crenshaw seems sympathetic to the sentiment. In other words, a man of wisdom has once again collected the sayings of others, organized and evaluated them, and used them to teach us about God and our place in the universe.

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