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# Trembling at the threshold of a biblical text

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## Trembling at the Threshold of a Biblical Text

James L. Crenshaw

Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994

viii + 167 pp.

Crenshaw, who is Prof. of Old Testament at The Divinity School, Duke University, has been teaching Bible since 1964, including a 17-year stint at Vanderbilt. This long career may explain the somewhat peculiar character of this book. While principally a collection of his sermons (98 pp.), here is also a seemingly random collection of "Meditations" (39 pp.), as well as a sampling of his prayers (9 pp.); all together, a fitting subtitle might be, "Fragments from a Scholar's Life"

The fragments, however, add up to a remarkable portrait of a remarkable scholar, teacher, and human being. One is struck at once by his encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible (in his early years he also taught N.T.) and biblical scholarship, and by his extraordinarily eloquent style. It is always—even in his sermons—a scholar's style: we are in the classroom and in the seminary chapel; it is assumed that the hearers can and will think, and think critically; it is assumed that the hearers are profoundly engaged in preparation for and ardent reflection upon ministry in a less than friendly world. But Crenshaw is revealed as more than an eloquent scholar. He has made a long journey from a childhood in which theology and faith were a "tidy system of security" against the very real "flames of hell" (p. 45) to a post-modern maturity in which Ecclesiastes is his favorite biblical author (p. 23) because Ecclesiastes is "the most liberated book in the Bible" (p. 30). One detects some weariness, and perhaps even a hint of regret. In his childhood, he writes, "we knew everything there was to know about God, and Christians were secure in the divine arms" (p. 45); now God, though God is "Fashioner of the Universe, Giver and Sustainer of Life, Source of All Wisdom" (p. 163), "Source of Infinite Wisdom" (p. 159), "Possessor of Infinite Wisdom" (p. 158), "merciful Parent" (p. 155), and even "Father" (p. 157), God is also the "Silent One" (p. 164), the "Ever Silent One" (p. 160). Our world of holocausts has ripped away confident assertions of "Almighty God", and faced us with the hugely troublesome silence of God. Crenshaw stands humbly in a deconstructed world and a deconstructed Bible. He writes,

The sermons in this book give voice to my own understandings of reality. That much is certain. They make no claim to derive from God. Still, I have honestly and attentively listened to the biblical text, hoping to discover in it a voice that has been silent for as long as I can recall. My goal has been to recover that voice, if only as an echo, and to translate it into contemporary language. I have meditated deeply about vexing theological problems, and I have tried to give voice to my deepest spiritual longings (p. 167).

The experience of the silence of God can lead to un-faith. Instead, it has prompted Crenshaw to attend more and more closely to the scriptural

text. "I endeavor to describe what actually happened back then or the symbolic/fictive world of Israel, thus enabling students to experience for themselves the religious meaning of that report at various stages of the canon" (p. 137). In doing so he discovers that God always does the unexpected, even the contradictory, that which is "beyond human calculation"—as in the astonishing assertion that God "repents" of wreaking intended vengeance (cf. especially, "God and the Unexpected" on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17a). God refuses to be enslaved by the human drive toward tidiness—in theology as in everything else.

The exquisite attention to the text is an integral part of Crenshaw's defiant yet humble *NEVERTHELESS* of faith. In a fine study of Habakkuk ("When God's Silence is Better than Speech") he comes to the gripping "Even if..." passage: "Even if the fig tree fails to bloom and no fruit appears...the produce of the olive fails...small animals are cut off...and cattle are missing...yet I will exult in Yahweh, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation." Crenshaw comments, "The prophet who has just had his religious convictions shattered by reality speaks the unspeakable, utters the great 'nevertheless' of faith. I may have no food in the pantry and no prospects of any, yet I will still praise the Lord—nay, more than that, I will truly experience joy in the God who defies human understanding" (p. 82).

It is the "nevertheless" that, I believe, the church as a whole needs to learn to utter in an age when God is an option. Crenshaw can be a model of such a stance, and a model too for the quiet, persistent, and personal nature of such an apologetic.

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### **A Season of Saints: Sermons for Festivals and Commemorations After Pentecost**

John P. Rossing  
Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., Inc., 1992  
105 pp.

During a time in the church when narrative theology and the use of story-based sermons is growing, this book of sermons is an important contribution to the resources of the church. It is especially so for the season after Pentecost, when, as the author correctly points out, most congregations assume declining participation and attendance over the summer, and miss out on the celebrative nature of this season of 'green' growth in the liturgical calendar as well as creation.

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