
This book is a profound treatment of the biblical book of Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes. It is the fruit of decades of study of the work by a scholar who charts his way with ease across the rest of the canon of Scripture, and beyond into other cultures and cultural pathways. It is primarily a thematic treatment of this intriguing book of the Old Testament, covering different passages within the context of discussions of key themes such as time, death, joy, creation, and so on. The writing has a poetic quality of its own, its prose beautifully constructed, its style readerly and accessible, and its depth of engagement with and love of Ecclesiastes clear for all to see. Crenshaw has a knack for arresting titles for his books (cf. Whirlpool of Torment on Job) and this one is no exception—one has to wait until the end of the book to really discover what ‘the ironic wink’ means. In his introduction Crenshaw conveys the profundity of the contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities that have made this book so enigmatic for interpreters, suggesting that the term ‘ironic’ challenges the reader to ponder these contradictions and that a ‘wink’ suggests acknowledgement of the right answer.

Even Crenshaw’s chapter titles cleverly convey the parameters of his discussion. The first chapter is entitled ‘authorial deceit’, where he draws out the ironies throughout the book—the irony of the hidden authorship and of the blending of Solomon’s persona with the enigmatic name or title ‘Qoheleth’, itself a ‘tease’. The second is ‘veiled truth?’. On this Crenshaw writes, ‘To be convincing, the author’s deliberate personalizing of his insights required the exposure of his identity while their unorthodox nature demanded an element of subterfuge’ (p. 23). He sees the very use of the superlative ‘utter futility’ as ironic and a dialogue of disclosure and concealment as a deliberate rhetorical technique disguising the author’s real intent. His third chapter,
on ‘elusive essence’, draws out the many meanings of some of Qoheleth’s keywords, which in itself adds to the elusiveness of the message. This author’s contradictions also highlight the futility of all knowledge in that everything is relative. Crenshaw’s fourth chapter is entitled ‘ocular deception’, and here he draws out different meanings of ‘to see’ and the importance of personal observation to this author. He finds hints of a context in the world of the Persian ‘big brother’ in the fourth to third centuries and possible links to Hellenistic thinkers such as the Stoics, but he does not commit himself too far in that direction. His chapter 5—‘surreptitious givens’—considers whether Qoheleth is the first ‘empirical thinker’. Crenshaw shows how Proverbs precedes Qoheleth in lessons in observation. Crenshaw airs the view of God as creator in the wisdom literature and how that differs from Genesis and elsewhere in the canon. He looks at ideas of ‘giving’ from the human and divine sides—God’s ‘givens’ are secretive, surreptitious even. Chapter 6 delves into the concept of ‘victorious time’, where he looks at the interplay of the themes of time and death and the role of chance in that conundrum. He looks particularly at the poem in 12:1–7 here. Qoheleth has no concept of cheating death—it is another given, and it is given in God’s own time. In chapter 7, ‘tasty nectar’, Crenshaw examines the passages on enjoyment, including the Solomonic autobiography. He shows how God alone opens the door to pleasure. He suggests that it might be limited to royalty in Qoheleth’s thought (which I am not sure I agree with, given that the royal pleasure-seeking is only a small part of the coverage of this theme). He points out that a virtuous life does not necessarily lead to enjoyment and that even those who hate life might occasionally experience pleasure. God withholds enjoyment too when he wishes. He explores the idea of an individual life as a ‘portion’. He makes the interesting comment that Qoheleth is different from other sages in that he is not interested primarily in improving his lot ‘through education and right conduct’ (p. 86). Whilst there is ‘enjoyment’ in Qoheleth’s thought, Crenshaw decides that the vocabulary for rejoicing is ‘lean’—it is a tempered enjoyment. Crenshaw draws out passages thematically here and brings out their inherent contradictions in masterly fashion. In chapter 8, ‘flawed genius’, Crenshaw shows how the epilogue fundamentally misunderstands Qoheleth and suggests there is a flaw in the genius of the author. He posed a threat to the mainstream sapiential world-view and to the moneyed society of his time. Finally, in the conclusion Crenshaw draws out the ambiguity of Qoheleth afresh in a discussion of 11:1–8. He notes
Qoheleth’s legacy down the centuries. He brings out again his ‘dialogic pedagogy’ and relativity. Qoheleth ‘praises joy in contexts that suggest irony’ (p. 116) and ‘Because everything is hebel, according to Qoheleth, all his ideas partake of this quality... As such, they go up in smoke, every concept deconstructing its opposite’ (p. 116). The Epilogue is a ‘we know better’ misreading. Qoheleth himself winks in our direction as if to say—you have grasped the irony, hence ‘the ironic wink’. ‘Or does he?’ (p. 171).

This book is truly masterly and has moments of brilliance. Crenshaw even includes his own poem (pp. 114–15) and a little story based on a Roman parallel (the work of Lucretius) in the Appendix (pp. 117–18). One of the unusual features of this book is its wider reference to other canonical texts—he shows how thematically integrated Qoheleth is with other biblical books (almost in contraction to his usual insistence on the separate integrity of ‘wisdom’ books). At least thematically, the book draws across the prophets, the Psalms, Deuteronomy, Genesis - or even if it does not do so consciously, the connections are there for the reader to make. Crenshaw also shows how the themes of this book link up with the ancient Near Eastern world, with Greek culture and Greek philosophy and with many other literary and philosophical ideas. He displays his rich knowledge of wider culture and grounds Qoheleth in its rightful place in the ‘pense´es’ of the educated reader.