



Bob Becking
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE
NETHERLANDS

Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil

By James L. Crenshaw

New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; x + 275 pp.; hb. \$ 50.00, pb.
\$ 37.50; ISBN: 978-0-19-514002-6.

The existence of evil, especially construed as undeserved punishment, is one of the perennial problems of a religious way of making sense of the world. The problem can be approached in different ways: By an emotional outburst from the bottom of the pit; by analyzing the presuppositions and implications of a given theological 'solution' to the problem; or – more simply – by describing a variety of positions. In *Defending God*, James Crenshaw – a well known Old Testament scholar, especially versed in the analysis of Wisdom texts – offers the reader the harvest of a lifelong challenge and an ongoing thinking and rethinking of the problem of theodicy. Basically, Crenshaw offers a reader oriented reading of passages from the Hebrew Bible that deal with the conflict between divine mercy and the liminal experiences of humankind.

The chapters in this book have been published separately as articles in journals and volumes, but nevertheless read as a coherent monograph. Its coherence is not to be found in a coherent argument or in a well structured position. The disparate material is tied together in the question: How did a given author cope with the reality (s)he met?

Crenshaw analyses a set of Psalms (e.g., 10; 14; 80; 82), as well as main sections of the book of Job, which seems an obvious choice. He pays special attention to major themes such as the relation of mercy and justice, the meaning and role of Satan, and the connection between suffering and atonement. He offers an interesting and empathic reading of Isaiah 53. An important theme in the texts of the Hebrew Bible is the question of the relation between sin and punishment. Crenshaw makes clear that this relation is more subtle than a variety of classical and modern theologies presuppose. His readings of the texts make once more clear that a 'one-to-one' relation between transgression and punishment is absent in the Hebrew Bible as is the image of God as a caring father whose concern is confined to mercy and forgiveness. YHWH is to be seen as an inscrutable deity. In this connection, his remarks on the assumed almightiness of God are of great importance. The process whereby *El Shaddai* becomes Almighty naturally goes far beyond the Hebrew Bible. Crenshaw correctly notes that no clear clues for this concepts can be found in the Hebrew Bible.

Crenshaw of course pays attention to the dissident and sometimes dissonant

voice in the Book of Ecclesiastes. To my great surprise he reads biblical historiography also from the point of view of theodicy. The Deuteronomistic and Chronistic histories as well as the Book of Maccabees can be seen as ways of world making, coping with the disaster of the day. It is a pity that his remarks on this subject remain rather fragmentary.

The final two chapters are dedicated to a more thematic approach. Here, Crenshaw is in search of the origin of the hope for the resurrection. In his view, this hope is rooted in the legends of Enoch and Elijah who both were raised by God to a different dimension. The hope came to full blossom during the harshness of the Maccabean days. Next to that he poses moral questions about God-talk. He openly admits that the image of God in the Hebrew Bible has cruel, evil, and negative sides. As he states on page 180: 'In short, the Bible describes God as cruel; of that there can be no doubt'. My question would then be: How to connect this dark side in God with his mercy and with human transgressions?

Crenshaw makes clear that he prefers a synchronic reading of the texts over a more diachronic approach. His main argument for this position is fear for some sort of evolutionary thinking: Crenshaw wants to avoid the idea that Ancient Israel found a better way of coping over the years and that the later ways of coping are to be preferred above the older—and then obsolete ones. Strangely enough, his reading of the texts is more historical than one would expect on the basis of such a methodological presupposition. In fact, Crenshaw's proposals are forms of contextualized theodicies. This makes them applicable for the modern reader who wants to defend God – or some sort of belief at least – but only after a process of re-contextualisation.

Both Biblical scholars and systematic theologians will do themselves injustice when they ignore this book. I would suggest them to read it and discuss it in conversation.