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Thomas' "Voices from captivity: incarceration from Siberia to Guantanamo Bay" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Thomas, J. (2018). *Voices from captivity: incarceration from Siberia to Guantanamo Bay*. London: Jessica Kingsley. 432 pp. \$25.95. ISBN 9781785924989

What is it like to be a prisoner or in some other form of captivity? While one could attempt to answer this question through the use of statistical and research data, another option would be to examine memoirs that provide firsthand accounts from prisoners and other captives. J. E. Thomas, professor emeritus at the University of Nottingham and author of *The Exploding Prison* and other books, examined written accounts from various parts of the world and from different historical periods.

The book is organized according to the different stages of imprisonment or captivity, including being incarcerated, settling into prison life, dealing with staff members, dealing with prisoners in authority, communicating with other prisoners, experiencing organized cruelty, living in political captivity, being released from prison, and entering again into society. In each of the chapters, Thomas discussed the oppressive elements in imprisonment. For instance, in discussing the early period of captivity, he notes the methods used in prison to strip people of their sense of individual identity and train them to become members of a community of obedient prisoners. Through practices such as removing all belongings and clothes, assigning prison numbers, limiting opportunities for communication, establishing strict rules guiding institutional behavior, and giving significant punishment for breaking the rules, prisoners come to conform to a existence of emptiness, isolation, and obedience.

Each chapter includes personal statements from captives as well as narrative and statistical information that tie the different comments together into a coherent whole. In this way, Thomas, who has over fifty years of experience in working with prisoners, gathers the information from different memoirs and allows the captives' experiences be heard in a powerful manner. One interesting discovery is that the experiences of hundreds of captives from different countries and different time periods are fairly consistent with each other. They discuss the shock of entry into confinement and the difficult psychological adjustments to life in incarceration – including the need to block out all thoughts about the outside world. They also mention similar things about the period after confinement is over, including the challenges of adjusting back to a world very unlike the one they have experienced

in the past many years. There were shared fears and concerns as well, especially about being accepted back into society, finding employment, and overcoming the desire to return to prison.

While this book is written in a way that is accessible for all audiences, it also is academic in nature and includes statistical data, footnotes, a bibliography, a subject index, and a name index. While Thomas it does not give significant attention to religion, his concern for prisoners and their experiences is relevant to the Christian faith and to faith-based universities. His book would be helpful and useful both in public and academic libraries.

Reviewer

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