

“There is no doubt that the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in the sixth century BCE were of pivotal importance for the history, literature, and theology of biblical Israel. In *Jerusalem Burning*, Robert Canfield brings the events, stories, and personages of the time to life for interested readers. In an informed and highly readable overview, he provides a view of and beyond the disaster that is as timely as it is engaging.”

—**Jill Middlemas**

Associate professor of biblical theology and Abrahamic religions, University of Copenhagen

“In this daring and erudite study of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, Robert Canfield brings clarity to the process of meaning-making and moral imagination in biblical texts grappling with individual and community suffering.”

—**Louis Stulman**

Professor of religious studies, University of Findlay

“Robert Canfield develops a rich and absorbing cultural-historical narrative of the fall of Jerusalem that is meant to help us explore how such a trauma inspired—required?—a distinctively new religious understanding. While the proximate causes were clear enough—one king betrayed another—Canfield has a deeper interest: making sense of God’s love in light of tragedy. This is still important today. So, alas, is the great cost of ignoring warnings of impending disaster.”

—**Paul K. Wason**

Senior director, Culture and Global Perspectives, John Templeton Foundation

“By carefully navigating through historical criticism of biblical texts, uncertainty of dates, and divergent interpretations of archeological evidence, this book skillfully analyses a watershed moment in the biblical history: the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC carried out by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. *Jerusalem Burning* is an indispensable book for students and scholars of biblical studies, archeology of religion, and religious studies broadly construed.”

—**Ashok Kumar Mocherla**

Yang Visiting Scholar, Harvard Divinity School

“*Jerusalem Burning* tells the story of how the Israelites made sense of their plight following the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem and how they came to understand their demise as an act of God’s love. With a detailed presentation of events, this brilliant book will leave the readers to ponder its relevance to the world that we live in today.”

—**Lihong Shi**

Associate professor of anthropology, Case Western Reserve University

“*Jerusalem Burning* is an elegantly written and expertly constructed analysis of the meaning and significance of a most terrifying event, the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 587 BCE by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. This book should interest general readers and those interested in the history of religions, and it is a valuable resource for adoption to the courses on comparative religion and the anthropology of religion in colleges and universities.”

—**M. Nazif Shahrani**

Professor emeritus of anthropology, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian studies,
Indiana University

“Infused with knowledge and wisdom gained from a lifetime spent in the study of the biblical text, combined with years of anthropological research and university instruction, *Jerusalem Burning* is an invitation to look deeply into the impact of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC and the exile of its people to Babylon. I highly recommend this refreshing look at how a people came to make sense of their circumstances and find hope in the midst of great loss.”

—**Katherine M. Johnson**

Author of *Lectio Divina Catholic Prayer Journal Series*

“Robert Canfield’s gift for storytelling and meticulous research brings this history to life, and his use of textual, linguistic, and cultural sources illuminates this history. His explanations of these source materials are crucial, especially for the non-specialist reader. It places a society’s experiences and ideologies in their historical reality: what they shared with their neighbors, what made them distinctive, how they interpreted society-altering events, and the lessons they took from the violence and upheaval they experienced.”

—**Laura Cochran**

Professor of anthropology, Central Michigan University

JERUSALEM BURNING

The Terror and Promise of the “Wrath of Love”

ROBERT L. CANFIELD

Foreword by Darrell Whiteman



CASCADE *Books* • Eugene, Oregon

What is remarkable about human beings, in distinction from other animals, is what we have done with our illusions—with our free imaginations.

MARSHALL HODGSON, *THE VENTURE OF ISLAM*, I, 159

The world is not given to us “on a plate,” it is given to us as a creative task. It is impossible to banish morality from this picture. We work, using or failing to use our honesty, our courage, our truthful imagination, at the interpretation of what is present to us, as we of necessity shape it and “make something of it.” We help it be. We work at the meeting point where we deal with a world which is other than ourselves.

IRIS MURDOCH, *THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOOD*, 215

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Preface

THIS WORK WAS INSPIRED by the recent interest among anthropologists in the meanings of events and their consequences. Following the work of Marshall Sahlins and William Sewell, I take every event to have “a distinctive cultural signature”¹ and some events to be climactic, with radical consequences for societal relations and communal understanding.² This is a study of an event whose consequences induced a community to construct a distinctly novel religious understanding of themselves and their affairs.

I had intended this to be an article on how events influence human moral understandings and vice versa. I thought the article could be completed within a reasonable time span. Little did I know what I was in for. It turned out that the empirical material on which my argument was to be based required a deep dive into a body of writings and a morass of discussion and dispute that was far beyond my competence. The questions and controversies about specifics were older and more convoluted than I had dreamed. There was so much more to learn, so much more to examine, so much more to sort out. This work thus reflects a long, hemmed-in period when I was trapped in an ever-rising pile of books, articles, and essays about details that were necessary for me to understand if they were ever to be used in my argument. The release of this book is a desperate act of emancipation from the bog of detail that has entrapped me, held me captive for many years.

Even so, for me the issues have seemed worth the project. For all of us in the twenty-first century there are multiple lessons to be learned from this story. Beyond its interest as an example of the moral imagination in social practice, it should be instructive on how costly it can be for a community

1. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, xiii.

2. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors*; Sahlins, *Apologies*; Sewell, *Logics of History*.

P R E F A C E

to ignore impending disaster until there is no escape. In fact, the closer we get to some foreseeable events in our own time the more relevant this story becomes.

1

Event and Challenge

The Attack

IN 587 BCE A Babylonian army led by its king, Nebuchadnezzar, after a siege of at least eighteen months, broke into the city of Jerusalem, pillaged it, slaughtered many of its leaders, set its great mansions on fire, broke down its defensive walls, and forced many of those who survived to set out on a journey of several weeks to Babylon, where they would become servants of the Chaldean Empire.¹ Along with the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE and the Holocaust of World War II, the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem was among the most crushing moments in Jewish history.² For those who survived the attack it challenged their capacities to understand what happened, for despite numerous warnings, many of them were unprepared for what actually took place. For more than a year they had suffered starvation and thirst, and in the period of a few weeks witnessed the slaughter of their leaders, the wrecking and burning of their homes and their city, and

1. This was a Neo-Babylonian force. The Neo-Babylonian period extended from 612 to 539 BCE.

2. Dates of events in the Hebrew Bible can be referenced in two ways: according to the Hebrew calendar, which began in autumn, or the Babylonian calendar, which began in spring. Thus, the collapse of Jerusalem can be dated in either 587 or 586 BCE. I here follow dates as they are used by most experts (cf. Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 78–81). However, recent geomagnetic studies seem to indicate that the attack took place in 586 (Vaknin et al., “Reconstructing”). The significance of this remains to be absorbed into the current literature.

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their displacement into an alien land to serve a gentile nation. Traumatized, it was not easy at first for the survivors to make sense of what they had been through. The certainties they had lived by no longer applied. Many of them wondered how they had come to such a state.

Eventually many of these Israelites came to believe that the disaster they had suffered had been an act of their god Yahweh because they had been worshipping other gods and had persistently ignored Yahweh's commandments.³ And moreover, they decided that Yahweh's violent disruption of their lives in this attack was an act of love. I suppose that they came to such a belief only after some discussion and debate. It is evident that there were among these folks some who had been respectful of Yahweh's claims all along, and no one could have missed the urgent appeals and remonstrations of certain prophets who had insisted on warning them and challenging their leaders, even down to the last minute before everything collapsed. And yet the preponderance of the survivors had commonly practiced forms of worship declaimed by the prophets of Yahweh. The prophet Jeremiah had been challenging their ways of life in Jerusalem for years, and in Babylon the prophet Ezekiel was declaring to his fellow refugees that Jerusalem would be destroyed; nothing worth coming back to would remain, he said. And these two prophets were but the most current of a long train of prophets who had been warning of a terrible moment of Yahweh's wrath for Judah's citizens if they continued their offensive practices.

The problem for me as I approach my question about the moral understanding of the Judahites is that the survivors of the attack actually had what would seem to be a clear-eyed understanding of why the Babylonians had attacked the city. Their king, Zedekiah, had sworn a promise of fealty to Nebuchadnezzar, the new hegemon of the Near East, but then Zedekiah secretly sought Pharaoh's help to escape the Babylonian conqueror's demands on his treasury. That brought down on himself and his country the full force of Nebuchadnezzar's fury. This was clearly the reason their society had come to such a complete and humiliating demise. But the Judahites also believed in malign spirits and other deities that might have brought about this disaster. So they had reason to wonder what spiritual forces could have also been operative in this affair. The belief that Yahweh had brought about the demise of their society was not the only possible way they might have attributed the cause to spiritual forces. The Israelites had for generations

3. I use the term "Israelite" to refer to the people in both the kingdoms, Israel and Judah.

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been worshipping various gods as well as using magical devices in their attempts to cope with the challenges of living in the world. The gods they had worshipped included the deities they had learned about from their neighbors: Canaanite, Egyptian, and Assyrian gods. From among all the deities they had solicited the Israelites decided that it had been the ancient god of their ancestors, Yahweh, who had willed it. Why did the surviving community of Judahites come to believe that Yahweh—this god and no other—had been the source of the disaster?

They had two explanations for how their great city had come to ruin. Without sensing a contradiction, they knew that it had been brought down by Nebuchadnezzar's wrath for being betrayed, an earthly-materialistic explanation; and they also embraced a spiritual explanation: that Yahweh had wanted this to happen because they had persistently rejected his claims on their lives. Here is the way the writer of the book of Chronicles explained it.

Zedekiah . . . did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet. . . . He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar. . . . He became stiff-necked and hardened his heart and would not turn to the LORD. . . . Furthermore, all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the LORD, which he had consecrated in Jerusalem. The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors.⁴

4. 2 Chr 36:11–20. In quotations from the Bible, I retain the form the LORD (small caps) for the divine name (YHWH), now usually believed to have been pronounced “Yahweh” (though usually written as Yahweh).

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From one viewpoint the destruction of Jerusalem was an act of God: “The LORD . . . sent word . . . ; God gave them all into the hands. . . .” From another viewpoint it was human beings acting in the world: “the Babylonians . . . killed . . . did not spare . . . carried [objects] to Babylon . . . destroyed . . . set fire . . . ; carried [people] into exile. . . .” It was simultaneously an act of God and an act of a worldly military force.⁵

In this work I examine the way the surviving community of Israelites came to the certainty that Yahweh had been the moral-spiritual cause of the demise of their society. The god who was mentioned in the stories and legends they had retained from the past had willed this cruel, terrifying, and ruinous attack on their community because he was angry that they had persisted, despite many warnings, in worshipping other gods and flouting his commandments.

The Sources

The best sources from which to construct an account of how the Israelites came to believe this are in the Bible. However one regards Jerusalem, it is the primary source for any serious examination of the affairs of the Israelite peoples in the ancient past. Here is how Robert Bellah puts it in his masterful work, *Religion in Human Evolution*: “What we have to work with is essentially the Hebrew Bible . . . with some archaeological evidence and some appearance of Israel in the archives of neighboring societies, but, in the end, it is the Bible that is the primary source. The problem is that after 200 years of intensive scholarship there is still only weak and contested consensus on such elementary facts as the dating of various biblical texts. . . .”⁶

The texts we have to examine are, for most of us, religious documents, but for the people who composed them, revised them, and edited them they were not religious documents any more than they were political or

5. The difference between explanations of material process and explanations of enduring significance are sometimes confused in debates about religious explanations. Collins (*The Language of God*) believes that God authored morality in humans; Cunningham (*Decoding the Language of God*) believes that behavioral genetics provides a sufficiently naturalistic explanation for human morality, obviating, he says, any need for the concept of God. For him, if something can be explained in naturalistic terms, then God had nothing to do with it. For Collins, in contrast, God works *in* nature and history; for him, what science discovers is merely the mechanisms of God’s creation work, as God stands outside of and apart from his creation. This, I understand, was presumed by Newton.

6. Bellah, *Religion*, 283.

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economic writings. They wrote about the world as they knew it. The unseen forces in their lives were a “real” part of their experience. Their experiences were of one piece, giving form to their understanding of who they were and what happened to them. As Goodman puts it, “the concept of ‘religion’ as a separate sphere has been a product of Western Christian culture since the Enlightenment and had no precise equivalent in the ancient world, since the relation of humans to the divine was fully integrated into the rest of life.”⁷

As I proceed with my story of how this particular interpretive turn occurred among the exiles living in Babylon, I will discuss the respective issues entailed in using each text as it comes up in my story. We are fortunate that a vast body of translation, commentary, and interpretation has been done by biblical scholars over many generations, and I draw as I best can from that rich body of knowledge. But much remains contested. Martin Goodman notes that “uncertainty about the dating and process of composition of key biblical texts and about the significance of archaeological evidence from the biblical period has sustained remarkably divergent interpretations of the historicity of these narratives.”⁸ I am obliged, in producing this story, to negotiate through the cloud of competing views and methods that have been deployed in the critical examination of the Bible. This story is my own best attempts to make sense of the texts and the critical writings that have been produced about them.⁹ If I miss or gloss over certain insights important to the experts, I can only claim that, while I have sought to respect their work, my questions may be different from theirs, and my methods of inquiry and demonstration likewise different from theirs.

It is fair to say at the beginning that one approach to the Bible is by its nature inimical to my task, as it takes an essentially skeptical view of what the Bible declares. Historical criticism seeks to explain phenomena ascribed to Yahweh in biblical texts in naturalistic terms. It disallows at the outset the influence of a divine force in human affairs.¹⁰ Walter Bruegge-

7. Goodman, *History of Judaism*, xxviii.

8. Goodman, *History of Judaism*, xxix.

9. The warning of one notable member of the biblical studies community reveals how much is open to speculation in the interpretation of the biblical texts: “Because of the paucity of external evidence and the high number and complexity of internal exegetical and historical data the discussions seem to be influenced by unconscious prejudices and ideological limits, which are difficult to clarify” (quoted in Albertz, “Open Mindedness,” 2).

10. John J. Collins describes the principles of the historical critical approach to the

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mann describes this viewpoint as “deeply wrongheaded.” It seeks to find in the ancient texts “what they did not intend to deliver.”¹¹ Jon Levenson accuses historical criticism of arrogating to itself greater insight into the lives of people in the ancient world than those folks had themselves. Historical critics, he says, claim to have

a definitive insight, not empirically derived, into the meaning of things, even things that they have never directly experienced. . . . They assume that the observer’s observation [i.e., their own] is truer than the practitioners’ [ancient Israelite] practice. . . . [Their view] shifts the locus of truth from the practicing community to the non-practicing and unaffiliated individual. . . . [T]he real meaning of religious phenomena is available only to the outside observer.¹²

Historical criticism, that is, screens out of consideration the practical “reality” that the folks living in ancient times lived in. Brueggemann says, “The claim that ‘God acts in history’ is not compatible with our Enlightenment notions of control, reason, objectivity, and technique. Indeed, if one begins with the assumptions of modernity, history can only be thought of as a mere story of power, in which the god of the Bible can never make a significant appearance.”¹³ We cannot leave these folks without the humanity that must be recovered in the texts that they produced about themselves and their world.¹⁴ When a psalmist sings to God, “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal

Bible to be: “(1) The principle of . . . methodological doubt . . . (2) The principle of analogy: historical knowledge is possible because all events are similar in principle . . . (the laws of nature in biblical times were the same as now). (3) The principle of correlations: the phenomena of history are inter-related and inter dependent and no event can be isolated from the sequence of historical cause and effect” (taken from Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, 119). The second and third principles in this list are indistinguishable from the central principles of modern geology.

11. Brueggemann, *Introduction*, 8.

12. Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 115. Levenson and Baruch Halpern (*The First Historians*, 4) both regard historical criticism as a kind of fundamentalism. Halpern (16) calls it a “delusion” for biblical scholars to believe that they could know history “just as one could know chemistry.”

13. Brueggemann, “Like Fire,” 74.

14. Sociologist Irving Zeitlin (*Ancient Judaism*, 120, 146) objects to the “tradition-historical” or “form-critical” (essentially positivist-empiricist) analyses of biblical texts, which he accuses of being “highly subjective and they tend to obliterate the factual materials contained in the narratives.”

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pleasures at your right hand,” he is reacting to a compelling Presence in his experience, a presence that historical criticism essentially denies.¹⁵ Transcendent values of the sort that historical critics would discount are the reality of life for this psalmist, and for the people I want to understand.¹⁶ In the end, suggests Brueggemann, the writings of the ancient Israelites must be read as testimony whose validity has to be received, like the voices that come from the holocaust; it “requires a wholesale break with all positivistic epistemology.” It begins “at a different place, and so ends up with a different sort of certitude.”¹⁷

If we are to understand the people who composed these texts we must grant them the transcendent “realities” that they experienced. As Clifford Geertz points out, all of us look at “the lives of others through lenses of our own grinding” so that we are biased by perceptions that seem “natural” to us, leaving us liable to viewing the opinions of others as biased.¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann notes that the “skepticism about the text in some scholarly circles is also an act of interpretive imagination.”¹⁹

In a brilliant essay on the importance of understanding the moral worlds of others Professor Wendy James recommends that the task is to understand their “moral knowledge,” a term that blends the emotional and the conceptual aspects of experience. If we are to know people as they are, we must see ourselves in them. We want, as philosopher Iris Murdoch puts it, to “inhabit” their lives. In fact, Murdoch avers, we human beings all live in a common moral world. If we can see courage, generosity, humility, and pride in others—even if they practice customs radically unlike our own—we are acknowledging that they and we live in comparable moral worlds.²⁰

15. Ps 16:11.

16. It seems crucial to me to grant the salience, even the reality, of what we are used to calling transcendent “values” in shaping the affairs of human beings. Even an avowed atheist, Ronald Dworkin, argues that for human beings “inherent, objective value permeates everything.” “The universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring.” And human life “has purpose and the universe order” so that people can have a “commitment to the independent reality of value” and respect a “force” in the universe that is “greater than we are.” That reality, he believes, imbues human affairs with moral significance. None of us is free from a tendency to ascribe meanings to our lives that assume values too sublime to be examined critically. All of us approach situations with premises taken for granted as “natural,” fundamental, unassailable. We are creatures of our own imaginative creativity.

17. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 119.

18. Geertz, “Anti Anti-Relativism.”

19. Brueggemann, *Introduction*, 8.

20. Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*.

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Mary Midgley puts the point succinctly: “Morally as well as physically, there is only one world. . . .”²¹

My task in this critical enterprise is to examine the moral knowledge of the Israelites in captivity so as to see people like myself and others in my world.²² I want to appreciate the way transcendent values influenced their lives lest I flatten their essential humanity. Isaiah Berlin urges that this “inhabiting” of others’ worlds is in any case crucial to historical understanding. “History . . . seeks to provide as complete an account as it can of what men do and suffer; to call them men [*sic*] is to ascribe to them values that we must be able to recognize as such. Otherwise, they are not men for us.”²³

If we understand religion as “an existential encounter with holy reality and as a responsive action of the human being existentially determined by the holy,” then we seek to treat with respect the accounts of those who believed they had encountered “holy reality.”²⁴ We want to listen to their ancient texts for what they say about their lives and affairs as they lived them. This is why it is fair, as sociologist Irving Zeitlin proposes, to practice the methodological rule that, “where biblical criticism is concerned . . . one ought not reject any statement in the scriptures which is not inherently impossible, nor contradicted by a more reliable source.”²⁵ Baruch Halpern similarly argues for appreciating biblical texts in their own terms.²⁶ When people write down their experiences and opinions, he says, they are trying to communicate something about what is real to them. “History is referential,” he says. “[H]istorians try to communicate information about phenomena extrinsic to the text.” Accordingly, we as readers should search the materials before us for the “data its author meant the reader to extract.”²⁷ We want to know “what they mean to say,” he says.²⁸ He believes that the writers of these texts intended their work to be taken seriously by their readers. They knew, he says, that their task entailed a certain discipline in

21. Midgley, *Heart and Mind*, 74.

22. James, *Listening Ebony*, 152, 155.

23. Quoted in James, *Listening Ebony*, 148.

24. Quotation is by Gustav Mensching, cited in Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion*, 246n48.

25. Zeitlin, *A History*, 43.

26. Halpern, *First Historians*, xvii.

27. Halpern, *First Historians*, 11.

28. Halpern, *First Historians*, xvii, emphasis original.

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what they were doing. They were writing “true” reports of their affairs as they knew them.²⁹

What makes these texts worth the consideration of later generations is what they purport to reveal, something about the deity and the world of values that informed their experience. The theologian Otto Eissfeldt was “[w]eary of historicism and psychologism and relativism of the history-of-religions method, [because] people are longing for revelation and calling for a scientific treatment of the Bible which does justice to its claim to be the revelation of absolute values.”³⁰ Rainer Albertz says, “Historians must be content with the statement that they are dealing with an entity which claims to be the revelation of the Word of God.”³¹

So as to enter the worlds of the ancient Judahites I quote liberally from the texts they produced, to retain their vivid and earthy way of expressing their ideas in writing.

I take this whole affair as an example of the way human beings make sense of their lives, sometimes even to impute a historical moment with iconic significance.

29. Halpern, *First Historians*, 3.

30. Quoted in Albertz, *A History*, 8.

31. Albertz, *A History*, 12–17.