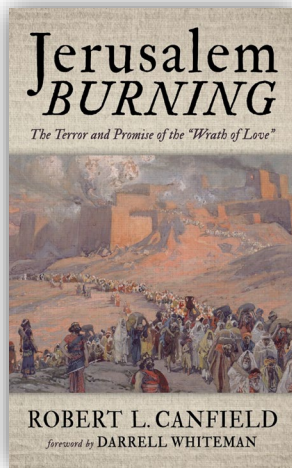


BOOK REVIEW

Jerusalem Burning

By Robert Canfield

Reviewed by Tyler Halstead



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How is it that the ancient Israelites during the time of the Babylonian exile came to the conclusion that what they had experienced came to them through the hand of Yahweh? Not only that, but how did they infer that the immense suffering they went through—the total destruction of their temple, razing of their capital city, and loss of their nation, along with being hauled away to a strange, faraway land from which most of them would never return—was not merely punishment from Him, but an act of desperate love meant to draw them back to their Creator? I, as a committed Christian with training in theology and cultural anthropology, found the premise of Robert Canfield's *Jerusalem Burning* fascinating. Furthermore, these are great questions to delve into. After all, it's not as though Yahweh held the sole devotion of the Israelites in the centuries leading up to the exile. Far from it, in fact. Canfield points out that archaeological discoveries from the pre-exilic period include more objects related to the worship of the "Queen of Heaven" deity than to Yahweh (166). This shouldn't be surprising to readers of the Old

Testament either, as the period dating back from the exile almost all the way to the conquest of Canaan is littered with descriptions of going after the gods of the surrounding nations and of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them (Judges 2:17, as one example among many). It's quite natural to wonder how they would have determined that their suffering was an act of judgment from Yahweh, and not any of the nearly innumerable other possible deities they had gotten mixed up with.

This is where Canfield's background as a cultural anthropologist, having done extensive work in Afghanistan, is worth noting. He's not a theologian. On one hand, this at times seems to betray a lack of depth in his handling of the theological issues at play, both for the Israelites at the time and for those of us today, Jew or Christian, who believe in the God of the Old Testament. On the other hand, I found his treatment of the familiar narrative to be fresh and empathic, humanizing the story and struggle of the Babylonian exile in a way I've seen no one else do, particularly in academic writing. As a good anthropologist does, he patiently and carefully takes the reader through the story, focusing on the human element and explaining how the views and choices of the various players would have made sense at the time. His chapters on Jeremiah (5-7) were particularly engaging. Jeremiah was one of many prophetic figures who had delivered warning after warning to the people of Israel that if they did not change their ways and return to Yahweh as the sole object of their worship judgment would come to their land. In Canfield's telling, it was the combination both of these warnings coming to pass in the form of the Babylonian conquest and the human need to find meaning in the midst of suffering (173) that led them to the conclusions that they drew.

Throughout this book, the author's wrestling with the significance of this story is evident. In the introduction, he notes, "this story is my own best attempt to make sense of the texts and the critical

writings that have been produced about them” (5). Making sense of it all is not easy for any of us, as at the same time we are dealing with Holy Scripture for the roughly 2.5 billion Jews and Christians in the world which makes serious claims of divine revelation and ultimate truth, and also researching historical events for which much is known, both from the texts and from archaeology. It’s clear that Canfield made a sincere effort to treat the Scriptural narrative with respect and take it seriously for the source of historical information that it is. Whereas so many others, writing from a nonbelieving perspective, commit the genetic fallacy of discrediting anything in the Bible as unreliable simply because they don’t like the source, Canfield avoids this mistake. In fact, through much of the book I was pleasantly surprised with the way he seemed to take the fullness of the Scriptural narrative of this period seriously, including the more overt acts of God involving Himself in the nation’s history (albeit in the latter portions of the book this pattern waned). Having said this, it should be noted that in many cases, he seemed to lean on the consensus of liberal biblical scholarship and didn’t give adequate attention to contrary perspectives. One notable example is in chapter 14, where he discusses the book of Isaiah. While acknowledging that many throughout history assumed that it was authored by one person, he hastily dismisses this notion without providing much evidence on either side of the authorship debate. Readers unfamiliar with the background would remain oblivious to the fact that every manuscript we have of the book of Isaiah shows no break between chapters 39 and 40, including the complete manuscript of Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls, along with the fact that Jesus Himself and every other New Testament author who quotes Isaiah consistently attributes the entire work to one author.

Ultimately, when it comes to writing about Scripture, and particularly, historical events described and interpreted in Scripture, there will always be the same fork in the road that we come to. Either there is a God who is active in history and interacts with His people, or there is not and all of our religious ideas are little more than coping with our existence. In the case of this story, we must determine whether it is believable that Yahweh actually did speak to the Israelites through the prophets, and that the biblical narrative is to be taken for what it is, or not. Whether we come to this as believers or unbelievers, following the evidence wherever it leads should be our mutual commitment.

Unfortunately, the concluding chapters of the book left me with very mixed feelings. Canfield did a masterful job answering the question of who God is to His people based on the Scriptural record. At the same time, his summarized conclusions seemed to me to be tainted with the same type of patronizing language with which social scientists often write about religion. While acknowledging that much of the reason the people of Israel came to recommit themselves to Yahweh was that His prophets’ warnings had come to pass, he still attributes their discerning of Yahweh’s hand animating their experiences as a product of the “creative and supple human imagination” (172). While interpretation of the evidence available may differ from person to person, it strikes me as rather unsatisfying to claim one of the two most formative and dynamic events in the Hebrew Bible (along with the Exodus) is little more than impressive imaginations striving to impose meaning on an otherwise miserable time.

In the end, I can recommend this book as an enjoyable and often insightful read for those interested in historical anthropology, while acknowledging that it has some shortcomings in its treatment of the Hebrew Bible.



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