Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future

This book explores the Jewish community’s response to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 ce. The focus of attention is 4 Ezra, a text that reboots the past by imaginatively recasting textual and interpretive traditions. Instead of rebuilding the Temple, as Ezra does in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Ezra portrayed in 4 Ezra argues with an angel about the mystery of God’s plan and regives Israel the Torah. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, the imaginative project of 4 Ezra is analyzed in terms of a constellation composed of elements from pre-destruction traditions. Ezra’s struggle and his eventual recommitment to Torah are also understood as providing a model for emulation by ancient Jewish readers. 4 Ezra is thus what Stanley Cavell calls a perfectionist work. Its specific mission is to guide the formation of Jewish subjects capable of resuming covenantal life in the wake of a destruction that infects but never erases revelation.

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Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future

An Analysis of 4 Ezra

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Yale University
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Preface

This preface begins with three moments:

1. When I was a graduate student, working on writing as a metaphor, my advisor James Kugel gave me a copy of Michael Stone’s commentary on 4 Ezra. Kugel understood my fascination with writing and interpretation, but he also knew that 4 Ezra was that perfect bridge between biblical and rabbinic Judaism, between writing and orality, between darkness and light. He said that he knew that I would work on 4 Ezra. Although I did not yet understand how central 4 Ezra would be in my own thinking and intellectual development, he did. I thank Jim for his vision as my teacher, my mentor, and now, almost twenty years later, my most treasured colleague.

2. In 2008, I gave a lecture in Munich on the concept of exile and revelation. In a spare hour on a Friday afternoon, I decided to run over to the Brandhorst Museum. I wandered to the first floor where I was enveloped by Cy Twombly’s Roses. I froze in place for about twenty minutes just staring at the paintings. I was literally turned around in an exhibit that was mounted on multiple walls, as was Ezra in the fourth episode of 4 Ezra. Twombly’s Roses exhibited the very compassion, trauma, and beauty that Ezra was
taught to comprehend by Zion, the mourning woman, and the angel Uriel. I wrote to Twombly before that summer and he soon after granted me permission to exhibit his Roses on the cover and the pages of my own work. It is of tremendous sadness to me that he died before I completed the book, but I dedicate this book to his memory, to the depth of his experience, and to his inspired works. His Roses series, with Rilke’s poetry inscribed across the canvases, somehow captured the eternal promise and beauty of the Torah in 4 Ezra. May Cy Twombly’s memory continue to shine brightly.

3. I heard Jonathan Lear discuss his book, Radical Hope, in March 2009 at the University of Toronto. That lecture, and my subsequent reading of that book, transformed this project immeasurably. Suddenly I understood the fourth and seventh visions. Lear explained Radical Hope in terms of the Crow Indians, but also in terms of a biblical exemplar, Psalm 137. Although he did not develop the deep connections to the trauma of the first destruction in 586 BCE and the second destruction in 70 CE, he did not have to. Lear’s characterization of destruction and trauma, his characterization of the need to be silent and then again to imagine, to hope, and to build – even amid a persistent destruction – resonated with the ancient Jewish past about which I was writing and thinking. I acknowledge that profound connection and influence.

Parts of this book have made use of some of my recently published articles:


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I thank the publishers of the volumes and journal issues in which these essays appeared for their permission to use parts of these essays in my book.

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