



MICHELLE CAMERON

BABYLON

A Novel of Jewish Captivity

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

for *BABYLON*, including
research notes, fun food ideas,
and more!

About the Novel

586 BCE. Everything changes for Sarah the day Nebuchadnezzar's army storms Jerusalem. In an instant, her peaceful life on the farm is ripped away: her city sacked, her temple desecrated, her people enslaved. Marched across cruel desert sands to Babylon, Sarah and the remaining Judean people must find a way to keep their faith alive in a new and unforgiving home.

Displaced within an empire of strange gods and unimaginable wealth, Sarah and her descendants bear witness to palace intrigue, betrayal, brutal sacrifice, regicide, and a new war brewing in the east. Through every trial, the Hebrew people attempt to preserve their religion. Uri, Sarah's son, transcribes incredible stories of prophets and visions, Creation and Exodus stories that establish the central tenets of the Hebrew faith.

A family saga spanning three generations of exile, captivity, and return, *Babylon* weaves a powerful narrative of hope and perseverance during one of the darkest and least-explored eras of Jewish history.

About the Author



Michelle Cameron's *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*, published by She Writes Press (2020), was awarded a Silver Medal in Historical Fiction by the Independent Book Publishers, won First Place/Best of Category for the Chanticleer Goethe Awards, and was a Foreword Indies finalist.

The Fruit of Her Hands, published by Simon & Schuster's Pocket Books (2009), is based on the author's thirteenth-century ancestor, Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg.

Michelle's novel-in-verse, *In the Shadow of the Globe*, was published by Lit Pot Press (2003). Named Shakespeare Theatre of NJ's 2003–2004 Winter Book Selection, it was performed at the Stella Adler Studio's Shakespeare Benefit, among other line readings and performances.

Michelle's forthcoming novel, *Napoleon's Mirage*, a sequel to *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*, will be published by She Writes Press in August 2024.

A director of The Writers Circle, Michelle teaches creative writing to children, teens, and adults in NJ and virtually. Living in Chatham, NJ, with her husband, Michelle has two grown sons of whom she is inordinately proud.

What to Serve at Your Book Club Meeting

Do you like matching your book club fare to the food described in the book? Here are some excerpts and suggestions that will help you serve up a suitable repast.



Humus and Pita with Baklava for dessert

When Sarah is enslaved in the palace, she sees a lavish spread set out for the queen and princess:

Sarah had eaten well since she'd arrived at the palace, but her mouth still watered when she saw the luscious repast set before the women. There were flat baked breads to be dipped into a crushed chickpea mash or drizzled with olive oil, pickled cucumbers and small peeled white onions, roasted goat, fresh-grilled pike, pheasant's eggs baked in their shells, and date cakes sprinkled with sesame and honey.

~From Chapter 11, "Sarah and the Princess"



Barley Beer

According to the History Channel:

The first barley beer was most likely born in the Middle East, where hard evidence of beer production dates back about 5,000 years to the Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia. Not only have archeologists unearthed ceramic vessels from 3,400 BCE still sticky with beer residue, but the "Hymn to Ninkasi"—an 1,800 BCE ode to the Sumerian goddess of beer—describes a recipe for a beloved ancient brew made by female priestesses.

These nutrient-rich suds were a cornerstone of the Sumerian diet and were likely a safer alternative to drinking water from nearby rivers and canals, which were often contaminated by animal waste.



Beer consumption also flourished under the Babylonian Empire, where its ancient set of laws, the Code of Hammurabi decreed a daily beer ration to citizens. The drink was distributed according to social standing: Laborers received two liters a day, while priests and administrators got five. At the time, the drink was always unfiltered, and cloudy, bitter sediment would gather at the bottom of the drinking vessels. Special drinking straws were invented to avoid the muck.

As farmers of barley, Sarah's family would have brewed their own beer:

Reuven finished his meal, drank some of the family's homemade barley beer, and rose.
"Come on, then," he said, "We'll walk to the far fence and make sure it's still holding after last week's winds."

~From Chapter 23. "Uri and the Idols"

As almost all beers are brewed with barley, finding a brand your guests will enjoy should be easy.

Figs



There are many passages that speak of the dried and fresh fruit that grows so profusely in the Middle East:

The old man rose and brushed out his lap. He was taller and stood straighter than Amittai expected. "I don't keep sheep. I grow barley and olives. Figs and pomegranates.

~ From Chapter 22 "Amittai and the Farm"

Uri poured himself another drink and unwrapped the figs Zakiti's servants had packed for his dessert.

~From Chapter 33, "The Story of Samson"

Chava returned, having wrapped branches from the fig tree in her skirts to avoid touching the milky bark that would make her skin itch. She let them drop, rubbing her eyes. "It's too windy out there, and the wasps are bad today," she said. "I thought they were going to sting me."

~ From Chapter 37, "The Queen of Heaven Cakes"

Learn More About...

Historical novelists love research. Here are some facts that your book club enjoy learning.

The Division of Israel and Judea and the Assyrian Exile of the Israelites



One of the confusing aspects of the history for many readers is realizing that the Hebrew people had been divided into two separate kingdoms during the 9th Century BCE: that of Israel and Judah (or Judea).

According to the Jewish Virtual Library:

King Solomon created the wealthiest and most powerful central government the Hebrews would ever see, but he did so at an impossibly high cost. Land was given away to pay for his extravagances and people were sent into forced labor into Tyre in the north. When Solomon died, between 926 and 922 BCE, the ten northern tribes refused to submit to his son, Rehoboam, and revolted.

From this point on, there would be two kingdoms of Hebrews: in the north - Israel, and in the south - Judah. The Israelites formed their capital in the city of Samaria, and the Judaeans kept their capital in Jerusalem. These kingdoms remained separate states for over two hundred years.

The Jewish Virtual Library then describes how the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel became effectively “lost.”

When the Assyrians conquered Israel in 772 BCE, they forced the ten tribes to scatter throughout their empire...they are called "the ten lost tribes of Israel." The Assyrians scattered them in small populations all over the Middle East. Unlike the concentrated Babylonian exile, the Israelites deported by the Assyrians, soon drop[ped] their Yahweh religion and their Hebrew names and identities.

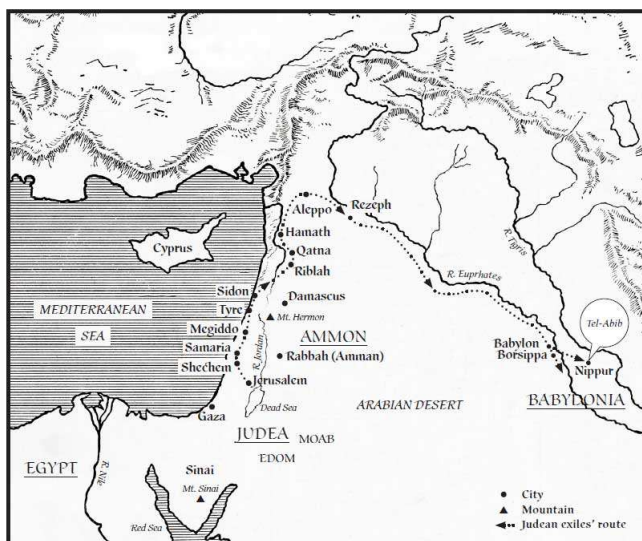
Sarah would consider her “cousins” as she is dragged in chains through the territory they once owned:

This morning, they had finally crossed the border into Aram, which had once been the Kingdom of Israel. Their journey took them north rather than eastward across the dangerous reaches of the desert. Sarah knew they were looping through the conquered cities of the vanquished Assyrian host. A hundred and fifty years ago, these cities would have been bustling with their cousins, the Israelites. Sarah had heard the stories, how the Kingdoms of Israel and Judea had once been united under King David and then King Solomon. But when ten of the twelve tribes rejected King Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, the kingdom split into two. Sarah’s family, living on their ancestral farm near Jerusalem, belonged to one of the two tribes loyal to the Davidic line. When the Israelites were exiled from their homes by the Assyrian armies more than a century and a half earlier, many Judeans claimed that this was a judgment on the ten tribes for abandoning their God-appointed king.

~ From Chapter 3, “Sarah and the Captain of the Guard”

The Reasons For the Babylonian Exile

Forced March of the Judean Captives from Jerusalem to Babylon



Map by Elizabeth Schlossbergh

From the Jewish Encyclopedia:

The inhabitants of Judea were subjected to two deportations. The first took place in the year 597 when Nebuchadnezzar II first conquered Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar wished to punish Jehoiakim, who, relying upon the assistance of Egypt, had renounced his allegiance to Babylonia. In 587, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the most distinguished citizens and the most valuable treasures of the Temple and the palace, to be sent to Babylonia (II Kings xxiv. 1-16).

A second deportation took place after the new Judean king, Zedekiah, planned an insurrection against Nebuchadnezzar, allying himself with Egypt.

On Aug. 7, 585 BCE, Nebuzaradan, captain of Nebuchadnezzar's body-guard, ordered that the Temple, the royal palace, and all dwellings in the city of Jerusalem be set on fire, and that the surviving inhabitants be taken captive to Babylon.

As a child, Seraf had apprenticed at King Zedekiah's palace, performing for the Judean royal family under his master's watchful eye. Then, eleven years ago, Judea made the fatal mistake of siding with Egypt against Babylon. Babylon had shown a measure of mercy when they captured Jerusalem the first time, only exiling the royal family and their court. The Chaldeans bestowed the territory back to the Hebrews, appointing a governor, requiring only loyalty and tribute from the bereft nation.

But still, as a boy walking through the echoing hallways of the abandoned palace in Jerusalem, Seraf felt shame for his lost king. Seraf sang David's old hymns of longing and loss and tried to find some vestige of romance in defeat, but the reality was merely painful. While the Judean governor, Gedaliah, was a fine ruler, he had neither leisure nor taste for music. Seraf spent the empty years practicing his craft and wishing something—anything—might restore Judea's pride.

And then it did—and Seraf learned to be wary of wishes fulfilled. He winced, recalling Gedaliah's slaughter by Judean rebels. Giddy with triumph, the dissenters dragged the governor's dead body through the palace hallways, smearing them with a slick red trail that left the copperscent of treachery behind. The young insurgents camped in the throne room, arguing day and night about how to defend themselves from the inevitable Chaldean onslaught.

As if on cue, the indignant Babylonians returned in force. This time, there was no restraint and no mercy. The rebels were put to the sword, the city leveled, the Temple destroyed, and every citizen of rank was exiled to Babylon—including merchants and landed farmers like Sarah's family.

~From Chapter 10, "Seraf and Daniel"

Cyrus the Great of Persia



From National Geographic:

Cyrus, ruler of the Achaemenid dynasty, was a brilliant military strategist. He first vanquished the king of the Medes, then integrated all the Iranian tribes, whose skill at fighting on horseback gave his army great mobility.

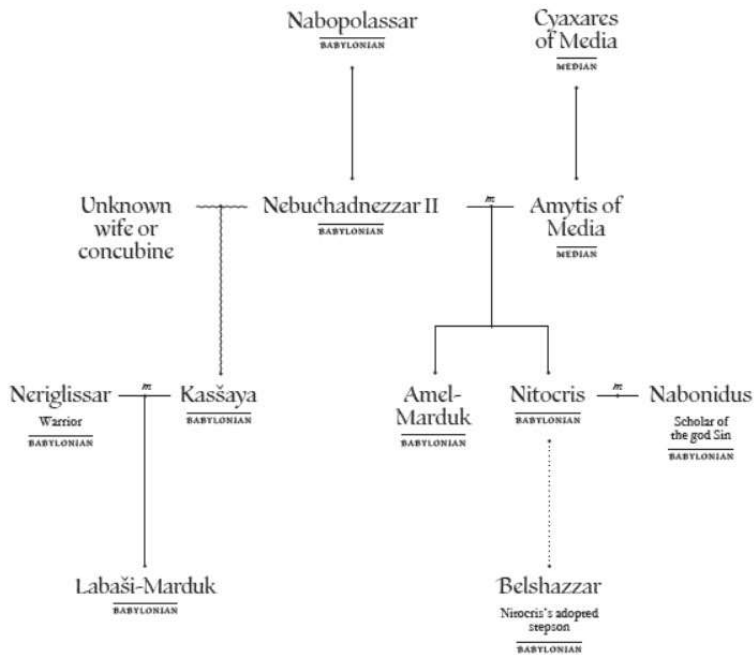
After conquering lands surrounding Mesopotamia, Cyrus closed in on Babylon. Disgruntled over imposed forced labor and the demotion of their city's patron deity, Marduk, Babylonians turned against their king and saw no reason to oppose Cyrus, who was known to spare those who yielded to him. In 539 BCE they opened their gates to the Persians, who entered the city "in peace, amidst joy and jubilation," according to an inscription touting Cyrus's triumph.

The benevolent nature of Cyrus's reign took many forms. He placated the formerly powerful Medes by involving them in government. He adopted habits of dress and ornamentation from the Elamites. Across his conquered lands, he returned images of gods that had been seized in battle and hoarded in Babylon. And in Babylon itself, he publicly worshipped the city's revered Marduk.

Cyrus's most renowned act of mercy was to free the captive Jews, whom Nebuchadnezzar II had forced into exile in Babylon, allowing them to return to their promised land, restore them to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple.

The Difficulty with Babylonian Names

Babylonian Royal Family



Family Trees designed by Elizabeth Schlossbergh

As I wrote Babylon, I realized that many ancient names, particularly Babylonian ones, may appear long and unfamiliar to Western readers. Babylonian men all seem to incorporate the prefixes of Neb- or Bel- or the suffixes -Marduk or -shezzar in their names. For instance, Daniel's Babylonian name, Belteshazzar, is easily confused with that of Belshazzar, Amel-Marduk's favorite courtier, whose name would crop up again when Nitocris's stepson appeared on the scene. The family trees provided in the front of the novel should help clarify the various players.

Judeans serving the Royal Court:

Daniel
called Belteshazzar
by the Babylonians,
seer

Azariah
called Abed-nego
by the Babylonians,
Daniel's friend

**Seraf's fellow
musicians:**

Tekoa
flute player

Rivai
harpist

Oreb
multi-talented
musician

Serving the Royal Court:

Belshazzar
courtier who betrays
Kassaya

Nebuzaradan
Captain of the
Guard, conqueror
of Judea

Melzar
master of eunuchs

Geb
Egyptian slave,
manager of Kassaya's
perfumery

Ibi-Sin
physician's
apprentice

Silili
Labaši-Marduk's
wet nurse

Cilci
mute nursery slave
from Cilicia

Interview with the Author

1. What prompted you to write about this little known part of history?

I love writing about periods of history that few people know about. It's been said that most Jews focus on their Biblical past, skip to the Roman conquest, and then ignore much of the rest of their history until the pogroms of the 19th Century, the Holocaust, and finally, the establishment of the state of Israel. Yet the Babylonian Exile is rarely discussed, even while it was a seminal event in the formation of the Jewish faith from a religion of sacrifice to one of prayer. The stories of the Bible were recorded during this period. And the Judeans managed to overcome the temptations of Babylon, with many returning to become a nation once again. I'm not certain why this rich period of our history has been so neglected, but it certainly called to me.

2. What was it like rewriting or alluding to some of the stories of the Bible?

Back when I wrote *In the Shadow of the Globe*, my editor noticed I was shying away from embodying Shakespeare. She said I needed to be bold enough as a writer to step out of my comfort zone. I was certainly aware that I was treading into the fraught region of faith as I rewrote some Biblical stories. The best examples hint that the mysterious disembodied hand that wrote on Belshazzar's wall might have actually belonged to a real person, or turning the story of Daniel in the lion's den into a dream. Trying to remain logical when recounting the Bible can be exceedingly difficult. So I kept my changes light and alluded to the possibilities rather than stating them outright.

3. What challenges do you face in writing historical novels for a 21st century readership?

You need to balance the history – which you want to remain as accurate as you can make it – with the expectations of a 21st century reader. If you read historical novels written in the 19th and even 20th centuries, they are slower to get started, have far denser descriptions, and often rely on an omniscient narrator to help cover the wide scope that a historical novel often needs. I love those books but recognize I would severely limit my readership were I to write in that way. So I read historical novels written by contemporary authors and learned from them how to move events along quickly, focusing on the perspective of different characters to encompass the full story.

4. This book deals with Jewish characters and issues. What do you think someone who is not Jewish would get from reading your novel?

In fact, the novel is based on our shared Jewish and Christian Biblical heritage. This is especially true because the novel deals with the latter-day prophets, whose visions and declarations are often interpreted by Christians to be prophecies about Jesus. While this was certainly not why I included these prophets, I hope their appearance will widen the appeal of this novel to Christian readers as much as Jewish ones.

5. Are there particular themes that unify your writing?

The temptation of assimilation versus the need to preserve our religious traditions is a common thread in my writing. In *The Fruit of Her Hands*, Shira contemplates how simpler life would be if she had been born a Catholic. In *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*, both Mirelle and Daniel see the advantages of assimilating into the wider culture, but recognize that, just perhaps, they are losing some part of their tradition and even soul by doing so. And now in *Babylon*, my characters are challenged to remain true to their God when they have been vanquished and are tempted by Babylon's wealth to assimilate.

6. How has the rise of antisemitism affected your work? Are you at all nervous about being singled out as being a Jewish writer?

There's never been a more important time to write about Jewish culture than right now, as we see the resurgence of antisemitism in the US and in Europe. Our history has shown that we gain nothing by hiding our religious identity. As for nervousness, with overt attacks on Jewish institutions, it's a frightening time to stand up and tour synagogues and Jewish community centers. But as a former officer in the IDF, no one's going to stop me.

7. You've been published by a small literary press, one of the big five, a hybrid press, and now a small mainstream press. What were the differences in your experience with all four?

It was never my intention to become what is now called a "hybrid author." I always wanted to be traditionally published and felt, when Pocket Books / Simon & Schuster accepted *The Fruit of Her Hands*, that I had accomplished that dream. But publishing is a strange beast, subject to market forces in a way that doesn't always support authors.

With Lit Pot Press, which published *In the Shadow of the Globe*, I knew what I was dealing with. My editor/publisher was clear that she had no distribution and no marketing beyond her own website. But I was a full participant in the creation of the verse novel, including working with an artist friend to create the interior and cover designs. It was a labor of love and, with lowered expectations of fame and fortune, I thoroughly enjoyed its trajectory.

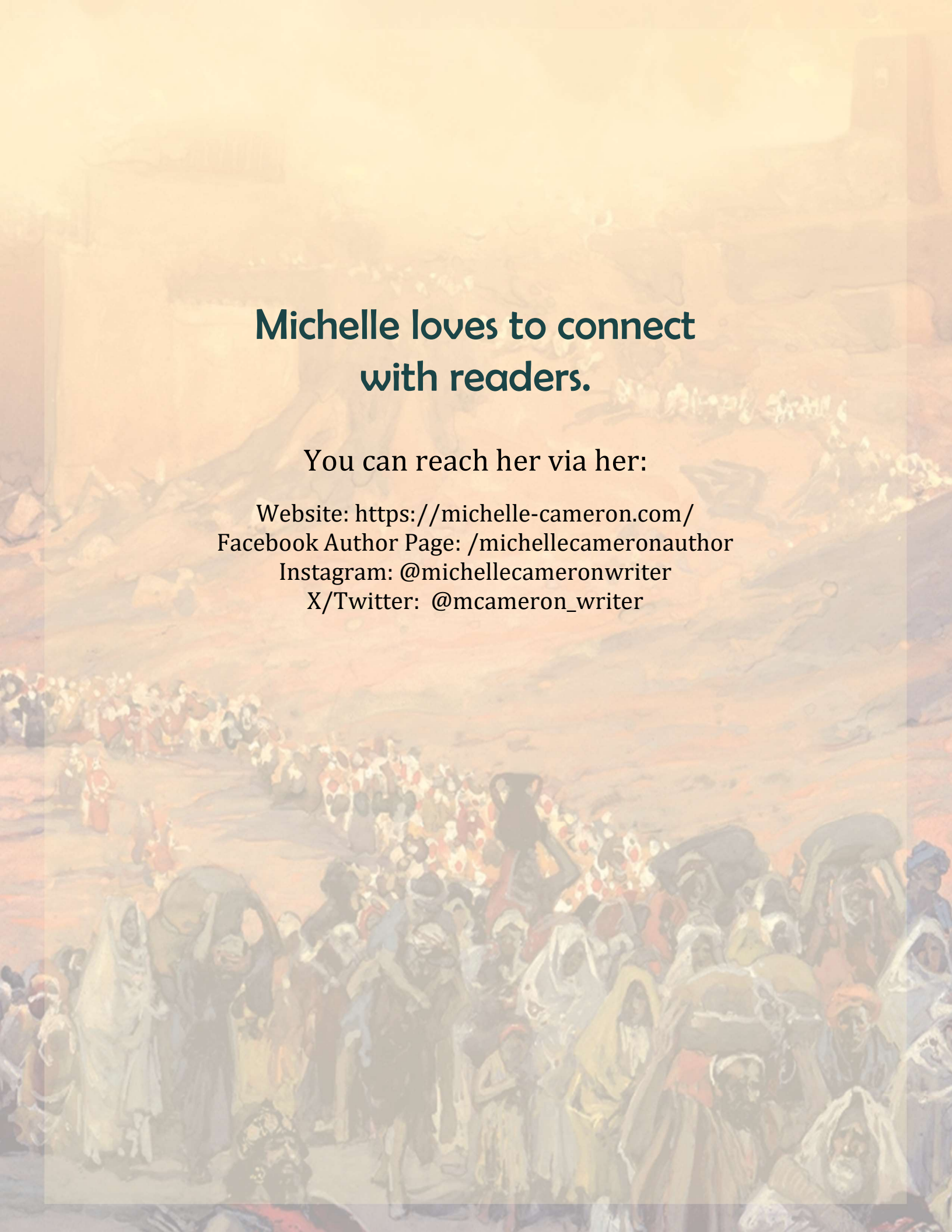
Naturally, I was beyond thrilled when Pocket Books accepted *The Fruit of Her Hands*. However, publishing during a recession year (2009) meant I was orphaned before the book hit the store shelves, leaving me without an advocate in the publishing house. The publisher didn't bring out a paperback, which would likely have made a difference to my sale numbers. But while I have regrets, I am also tremendously proud of that novel – and delighted to have the imprimatur of a major house on my work.

Publishing with She Writes Press, which operates like a traditional publisher with one major difference – that being my own financial investment in my novel – was in many ways the best of both worlds. There's greater transparency in the process than with a major publisher, and I've been much more involved in such aspects as cover design. However, they have the clout of their distribution and sales force. I'm looking forward to working with them again on the sequel.

As for *Wicked Son*, I'm delighted to have picked up once more by a more traditional press, albeit a smaller one. With distribution back with my old publisher, Simon & Schuster, and with direct access to the publisher, who tells me he "loves" the novel, I'm hoping for my most successful publishing experience ever.

Questions for Discussion

1. The pain of exile from your homeland – a severe type of homesickness – can be quite acute. Have you ever felt something akin to that pain? How did you handle it?
2. The exiles in Babylon were tempted to assimilate: to worship Babylonian gods, eat food that wasn't kosher, and forget their own faith. How do such temptations manifest themselves in your everyday life?
3. One way the Judeans kept their faith alive was by recording the stories that later were included into the Bible. Uri was particularly fascinated by the origin of the universe. Which of the stories that he transcribed spoke to you? Which did you wish had been included?
4. Amittai was given Sarah's family farm as Keren's dowry, yet he knew the farm was acquired by less than honorable means. Do you think he should have accepted it? Why or why not?
5. When Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, he allowed the Judeans to return home. Many, who had created comfortable lives for themselves in Babylon, opted to remain. If the choice were up to you, what would you choose – and why?
6. Jerusalem is a disappointment to the returning Judeans – certainly different from what they'd dreamt of during the exile. Have you ever traveled or moved to a place that didn't live up to your expectations? How did you handle it?
7. When Nebuchadnezzar exiled the Jews to Babylon, he didn't include the lower classes – *am ha'aretz*. They stepped in to take over abandoned farms, stores, etc., and owned and worked them for two generations. Do you think it was right for the Judeans who returned to reclaim these properties? Why or why not?
8. Chava is labeled a "loose woman" and is shunned by Jerusalem society after her misadventure with Uziel. Do you think she deserved such treatment?
9. Ancient societies allowed a man to take more than one wife. We've since outlawed this as bigamy. How did having more than one wife affect the family dynamic? What inequities arose as a result?
10. Ezra is given extensive powers by the Persian king and uses them to dictate sweeping changes in Jerusalem, even "changing the record" to reflect his own perception of history. How do you feel about how he handled himself in the novel?
11. Ezra's directive – to exile the non-Jewish wives and children – tore at the hearts of those who had accepted them into their families. If you were in Uri's shoes, what would you have done?
12. The Hebrews – both Israelites and Judeans – had intermarried for the entirety of their history. Think of Moses and Zipporah, or Boaz and Ruth. It is possible that Ezra's decision to exile the non-Jewish wives and children ended up meaning that the Jewish people, unlike many other ancient peoples, did not perish into oblivion. This being the case, does it change your mind about the cruelty of this act? Why or why not?

A painting of a large crowd of people, likely a biblical scene, with a warm, golden light. The scene is set in a desert-like environment with a large crowd of people, many carrying bundles on their heads. The background shows a large building or structure. The overall tone is warm and dramatic.

**Michelle loves to connect
with readers.**

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