

Critical Biblical Studies Is Here to Stay

Erin Runions Responds to Essays on *The Babylon Complex*

Erin Runions, Pomona College

The six essays in *The Bible & Critical Theory* 11.2 (2015) brilliantly demonstrate the scholarship that characterizes an emerging area in Religious Studies—let’s call it critical biblical studies, or more broadly, critical scriptural studies. This work analyzes the way biblical texts reflect and sustain contemporary and ancient power dynamics, political regimes, cultural norms, violences, performative practices, as well as resistances. In its attempt to critique dominant structures, critical biblical studies differs from other important areas of biblical study, those more bounded in their aims (such as solely historical, literary, or theoretical approaches); further, it resists the transcendent closure of using the Bible for theological construction. The subfield has been developing for some time. *The Bible & Critical Theory* has been an important platform for it, along with *Postscripts: A Journal for Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds*, the Institute for Signifying Scripture, and a growing number of sections at the Society of Biblical Literature, including the many perspectival, contextual, philosophical, and ideological critical sections. *The Babylon Complex* (Runions 2014), was written with the benefit of these conversations, and I am grateful to be able to respond to these productive engagements with it.

As Julie Kelso suggests in her editorial introduction, the kind of scholarship in which *The Babylon Complex* partakes expands the place for biblical studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. In fact, critical biblical studies is somewhat unique in the Humanities as a mode of analysis. That is to say, because religious texts (often ancient) are cited and recited with such authority over long expanses of time, they become a distinctive index of the development and emphases of power. Since biblical citations in culture are rarely invoked in a neutral manner and usually bear the traces of other philosophical and political discourses, they signal the larger stakes of the discourse, ideology, identity, or exclusion that they support. Scholars can look at the theopolitical relations encoded in the texts themselves (including oral, pre-textual, post-textual, and cognate traditions), as well as the way these are magnified, modified, inflated, or atrophied in subsequent political and cultural iterations. Nuances within historical constellations of power and discourse become more visible through the study of religious text, interpretation, philosophy, cultural artifacts, and the political. It is arduous work though, as scholars contend with what James Harding has called “the sheer fecundity of the biblical texts, due not only to their polyvalence at the point where text and readers meet, but to the array of contexts through which they have been transmitted, and in which they have been read” (2015b, 39). As in other fields, finding the archive, rendering it visible, and parsing it are all part of the scholar’s task.

Like reception criticism of which it is a subset, critical biblical studies has much to offer a new generation of scholars in the field who wish to develop and apply linguistic and historical expertise, but also to engage with the intellectual trajectories and the cultural formations around them, without necessarily being attached to theology. Such approaches have been somewhat marginalized, especially by those who do straight historical critical work, but those championing reception criticism have roundly challenged such gate keeping (e.g., Crossley 2012a; Harding 2015b; England and Lyons 2015; see also *Journal of Biblical Reception*; *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*). What is particular to critical biblical studies is its theorized analysis of the way that scriptures are formed, given authority, and made to respond to or uphold power.

Taken together these six essays indicate how biblical texts—amplified by imagined teleologies—mediate conflicts and identities tied up with the appropriation of land and resources (dispossession and acquisition), in ways that simultaneously encourage the subjugated and justify domination. Along the way, they substantially contribute to an understanding of the social dynamics that shape the texts and reception histories that make up the Babylon Complex. Beyond simply responding to the book, each essay takes up its own set of questions and site of analysis that expand on and nuance the dynamics I seek to expose. We gain further understanding of the frequently appropriative tendency of scripturalization, and we are given a glimpse of each author’s own versatility and expertise. The issue as a whole skillfully draws together many of the ever expanding sets of tools that can be used in critical biblical studies: a myriad of biblical criticisms as well as the many theoretical discourses circulating in the Humanities. The exemplarity of these contributions to critical biblical studies comes as no surprise, since the authors have been at the forefront of this trend (e.g. Crossley 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Graybill 2015b, 2016; Harding 2013, 2015b, 2015c; Havrelock 2007, 2011, 2013; Kotrosits 2015b, 2016; Kotrosits and Taussig 2013; Raz 2004, 2013, 2016). In the rest of my remarks, I would like to draw out how each of the essays in this issue models the investigation of *scripturalized* validation of appropriative power relations.¹

Scripture is a result of interpretation. A basic premise of critical biblical studies—learned from the field’s many considerations of hermeneutics—is that interpretation always bears the trace (or the stain) of identity, conflict, ambition, the status quo, or resistance, perhaps in some combination. Along these lines, in a theoretically astute, ground-changing reading of Jephthah’s daughter in Jdg. 11:30-40, Rhiannon Graybill argues that empire and power have inflected even critical feminist readings of this text. Graybill rejects readings that mirror (neo)liberal feminism’s imperializing attempt to save women from their cultures, in this case Jephthah’s daughter from her orientalized “barbaric” father (2015a, 41, n.3). Such readings, she argues, are premised on the idea of Jephthah’s daughter’s innocence and victimization. Rather, Graybill reads her as a queer figure, theoretically drawing on Lee Edelman’s figure of the *sinthomosexual*, Karmen MacKendrick’s turn to “counterpleasures” as ascetic practices that are not productive nor morally gratifying, and my discussion of “raw sex” (Graybill 2015a, 44-7). The daughter’s “desire is resistant to teleology” (47). Wishing to interrupt the interconnected

¹ For a larger discussion of appropriation, see Lazzarato (2015) and Anidjar (2014).

norms of hetero and imperial teleologies (2015a, 45), Graybill refuses to redeem the narrative and Jephthah's daughter. In other words, Graybill sees the daughter as a figure whose asceticism is a form of raw sex that does not accede to the compulsory futurity of family/nation/empire and takes pleasure in that contestation.

Such an incisive and bold interpretation—more of which we are sure to see in Graybill's forthcoming *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (2016)—pushes back against the desire for (reproductive) futurity that has so marked U.S. empire. It radically exposes and resists the way that heterosexual sex is built into habitual imaginations of (national) redemption. It therefore also pushes back against readings of scripture that, consciously or not, create ideological support for the heterosexist national teleology of sex and the imperial projects to which it is tied. Graybill writes, “the idea that Jephthah's daughter might embrace her death, that she might find a pleasure in it that is not contingent on imagining a greater good for the nation, or for faith ... is truly threatening” (2015a, 47). Threatening, perhaps, because it is critical, not comforting, *jouissant*, not pastoral, ateleological and nonidentitarian, not bellicosely defending the future of the self. This is not to say that critical reading practices do not have their own set of commitments, as skeptics might point out; but knowledgeable awareness, as well as constant re-evaluation of large scale ideological investments are crucial. Graybill's innovative and provocative reading attends precisely to these matters.

Interpretation solidifies into scripturalization. As texts are passed within and between particular communities, sacred meaning forms over time. Humans give texts the status of scripture, as William Cantwell Smith (1993) and Vincent Wimbush (2008, 2012) have prominently argued. Tracking scripturalization requires scholars to move seamlessly between the ambiguities of ancient text, historical context, and the histories of reception. James Harding does this work here with erudite, detailed attention to developments of biblical and academic traditions, in multiple eras and languages, supplemented through marvelously rich footnotes. These are also distinguishing features of his book *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* (2013), from which he both pans out and focuses in here. He argues that the sexualized and appropriative scripturalizations that fuel the Babylon Complex have their roots in a tradition of ethnic boundary policing, beginning with the Tanakh and amplified in the Protestant Reformation. Harding reviews the many biblical texts that draw ethnic boundaries through sexualization, considering how these dynamics are transmitted in interpretation. After the Reformation, he suggests, scripturalization is fueled by the contradiction between the Protestant assumption that “the language of Scripture is (that is, *must be*) clear and simple” (2015a, 87) and the actual ambiguity of ancient texts.

As a case in point of the boundary-staking-sexual-stereotyping made possible through the “clarity” of (unclear) scripture, Harding looks at Dan. 11:37. This is the syntactically ambiguous verse that is interpreted to produce the gay antichrist. He contends that originally the text's anti-Seleucid political message would have been clear enough to make the syntax a nonissue, “yet because the hermeneutical key to understanding it was relatively quickly lost, it became, under the impact of scripturalization, artificially open to whatever unanticipated decodings its new contexts made possible” (2015a, 92). One of these new contexts

is Germany, where the figure of the gay antichrist is elaborated by Luther long before it appears in the U.S. context to depict national enemies. The antichrist, says Luther, practices “Italian marriage” (a pejorative term for same-sex relations) after the fashion of the Pope and the Turks. As Harding glosses, “We have in Luther, then, the abjection of deviant sexuality connected not only with racial boundaries, but with interreligious polemic” (2015a, 90). Scripture mimics power once again. The essay is a beautiful example of careful reception historical investigation. It highlights the way scripturalization consolidates and transmits certain tendencies already existing in the biblical text, preserving and amplifying them in application to ongoing conflicts.

If Graybill and Harding elucidate the effects of interpretation, Maia Kotrosits moves behind the text to underscore the historical dynamics that are *felt* through the text. The essay surfaces a genealogy of biblical trauma, ruin, and reconstruction. Kotrosits considers how historical conflicts and traumas carry forward through texts. With characteristic sophistication and lyricism, she proposes Babylon as a figure of ruination that encodes “the inherent doubleness of diaspora,” whereby colonial violence destroys but also “ironically strengthens and enables” collective identity (2015a, 4). Experiences of colonization and diaspora become “dreams of sovereignty ... threaded into discourses of ruin and ruined places” (3). She takes us into the cognate Greek literature (Pausanias and pseudo-Longinus) to see how ruins are represented in ways that transform loss into sublimity or ambition, so compensating for subjection in imperial conquest and the reminder of loss in cultural remains (6). Likewise, biblical texts from Daniel to the Christian canon pick up on this tradition, “mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and negotiating diasporic belonging in its wake” (6). Elaborating questions explored more fully in her book, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (2015b), Kotrosits helps us to see that biblical dynamics of destruction and rebuilding are perhaps not so much *religious* as *affective* attempts to come to terms with loss and displacement.

Kotrosits’s work indicates that scripturalization can be a survival strategy; yet when transferred to less embattled situations, such strategies can end up in bids for sovereignty, triumphalism, and self-righteousness. Responses to ruination change with distance from trauma, so that later reckonings begin to imagine reconstruction as indestructible sovereignty. In contrast to the “barely attenuated” ruination of Jesus’ body in Mark (2015a, 13), the book of Revelation, for instance, imagines indestructibility. It depicts the ruin of the slaughtered lamb, to be sure, but also latches onto hope for the imperishable sovereignty of the new Jerusalem (11). But Revelation is not alone in the Christian canon in dealing with trauma and diaspora this way, the Gospel of John and the letter to the Hebrews likewise work toward new imaginations of sovereignty. They rebuild the temple metaphorically, making Jesus’ wounded body a new heavenly temple (12-14). The persistent use of religious imaginaries to reclaim and shore up sovereignty, as discussed in *The Babylon Complex*, is made familiar and plausible by the early Christian writers’ attempts to deal with trauma. With remarkable insight, Kotrosits shows how lived material realities of dispossession and migration have deeply impacted the traditions we call scripture, pushing us to situate critique within compassion.

Once scripturalized, dynamics of loss and restoration play into the future, used again and again, to give voice to ruin and exile, bolster hope for redemption, or justify violence in the name of rebuilding. Identifications with biblical figures of loss can migrate along with changes in circumstance in ways that occlude the power dynamics of the new situation. Yosefa Raz—who is a multi-talented scholar (2013, 2015), poet (2004), translator (2016), and activist—gives such an example in her important and nuanced analysis of the Israeli “Rachel Complex.” Using a genealogical approach that works back from contemporary dynamics in Israel, Raz shows how the scripturalized patterns of trauma and restoration that Kotroisits assesses repeat in contemporary Zionist terms. Scripture enables dreams of sovereignty that are connected to violent struggles over borders.

Masterfully crafted, this essay helps us to see the portability and mutability of scripture. Zionist identification with the figure of Rachel has changed over the last decade, Raz argues, so that Rachel is symbolically deployed in response to “anxieties about the promised Zionist fulfillment” (2015, 22). The essay begins by recalling the use of the phrase “and sons shall return to their borders,” in response to the 2014 kidnapping of three Jewish teenagers in the West Bank. This phrase, which borrows Rachel’s lament over her lost sons and exile in Jer. 31:15-17, serves as an indicator of a changing sense of security. In order to understand its hold in Israel, Raz turns to past Jewish engagements with Rachel’s mourning—in biblical, rabbinic, and Kabbalistic texts—which transform Rachel into an intercessory agent who “embodies the symbolic or mystical key to [exile’s] ending” (27). More recently, Zionist iterations in Israeli music intensify this mythic shift. There, Rachel’s mourning is masculinized and resolved into triumphal nationalist redemption that celebrates the end of diaspora (29-30). With the more recent unravelling of that closure in the conflicts over Jewish settlements in the West Bank, Rachel’s words are used to claim contested borders, and reassert the promise of Zionism. Taken as an immutable pillar (even as its uses change), the biblical text mediates confusion over political change and loss of certainty. It authorizes violent attempts to turn ruin into restoration and loss into redemption, even as it obscures the actual balance of power.

Biblically-stamped politics are not predetermined to these particular themes only, however. James Crossley looks at how scripturalization plays out differently in Britain, a nation less historically characterized by diaspora and exile and more central to the development of global capitalist power. Indeed, Crossley’s expert and trenchant assessment of British politics—further detailed in his book *Harnessing Chaos: The Bible in English Political Discourse since 1968* (2014)—shows that the apocalypticism surrounding Babylon that I discuss is not so much part of mainstream political discourse in Britain. Rather apocalypticism has been taken up, in utopian form, by dissidents in what Crossley calls the Radical Bible. In it, Babylon is the counterpoint for a *new Jerusalem*, in which disease, hunger, and ignorance are ended. Politicians, like Tony Blair, may try to appropriate these themes, but eviscerate any leftist, pacifist, or anticapitalist critique. Instead they are put to work in the Neoliberal Bible—another of Crossley’s compelling appellations. Proponents of the Neoliberal Bible are likely to tone down apocalyptic themes, as in Blair’s support for the Iraq war, which conjured a “benign liberal imperialism where Rogue States will become New Jerusalems of thriving capitalist democracies” (2015, 66, see also 68).

Rather than appealing to an imagined end, the Neoliberal Bible, beginning with Margaret Thatcher, urges a more dispassionate, if self-congratulatory, identification with the Good Samaritan. It thus obscures its appropriation of public funds and imperial projects. Crossley sharply critiques the way this parable and associated moral sentiments such as, “love your neighbor” and “do good deeds,” have been used, especially by David Cameron, in the neoliberal vein of valuing privatized individual compassion over collective action and use of state resources. Yet even the Good Samaritan Complex takes on an interventionist apocalyptic hue, I would note, in response to ISIS, which Cameron calls “the embodiment of evil,” in the face of which Britain must be the Good Samaritan. “*We cannot just walk on by,*” declares Cameron, “if we are to keep this country safe” (Crossley’s emphasis, 2015, 71). No less than in the U.S., the Bible in Britain is used to identify *which* brutal violence is justifiable. Since then, Jeremy Corbyn, new leader of the Labour Party has tried to reclaim the parable for the Radical Bible, motivating nationalized care for the neediest. If scripturalization is typically bound up with the ideals of those who use it, Crossley shows that these ideals are not always about taking or reclaiming, they can occasionally be grounded in solidarity.

Yet lest we should think that even the most critical biblical studies can emerge unscathed from the ills of appropriation, Rachel Havrelock’s gripping essay superbly demonstrates that it is not simply political *uses* of scripture that are caught up with power struggles, but that the discipline of biblical studies itself is profoundly implicated with empire, colonization, borders, conflict, and globalized capital. Havrelock traces a devastating history in the acquisition of antiquities so foundational to the historical criticism that first unseated theological readings. She uncovers the material stakes at play in the production of knowledge, namely that many quests for antiquities were either combined with, or a front for, the search for natural resources, chief among them oil. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “members of excavations and exploration teams acquired maps and geologic studies of potential oil wells” (Havrelock 2015, 55). The search for biblical history went hand in hand with the colonial apportionment of borders and plans for extraction of subterranean resources. As she puts it, “Antiquities, like oil, rarely figured as the patrimony of the people who lived above or alongside them, and bases of excavation, which doubled as proto-military bases, marked some of the first colonial outposts” (54).

As ever, orientalist knowledge production, in this case the search for antiquities by which to verify scripture, is tied up with colonialism and extraction of resources. Just as the Middle East was being divided into nation states along lines drawn by colonial powers, so also the “pseudo-national oil companies” of Germany, Britain, France, and the U.S. carved up the natural resources beneath the soil (Havrelock 2015, 56). So for instance, Havrelock exposes the crucial detail that when Koldewey excavated Babylon and sent the Ishtar Gate to Berlin, it was not only a coup for German nationalism, it was “part and parcel of concessions awarded by the Ottoman Empire for the Baghdad-Berlin [oil] Railway” (55). This alliance failed with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire (although the Ishtar Gate remains in Berlin). Koldewey was barred from Babylon by the British Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force, who had their own designs on what could be extracted from the region. This fine work—related to her next book project, *Pipeline: How Oil Created the Modern Middle East and How Water Can Transform It*—

requires us to examine what it means to be critical not only of the text and its reception, but also of the field and the authority that it affords us.

Each of these essays, shows how the production, transmission, and study of scripture is so often bound up with the materialities that shape power relations—namely, the appropriation (or loss and reclamation) of land, resources and identity. Resisting such impulses, these essays work against interpretations or citations of scripture that might authorize subjugation in the name of (home)land and resources. Along the way, they considerably extend the range of questions and methodologies for thinking about the Bible in nationalist cultures and global power relations. They exhibit the dexterity, breadth, and depth that critical biblical studies requires, combining linguistic, historical, cultural, archival, and theoretical competencies. Taken together, they give us a template for the ongoing contribution of biblical studies to the Humanities. Critical biblical studies is here to stay.

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