The Bible and Critical Theory: Special Issue

Engaging with Erin Runions' *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Soverignty* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014)

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I am rather proud that my final issue as co-managing editor of *The Bible and Critical Theory* is this one. (With this issue, Roland and I retire as managing editors, handing this academic tour of duty over to the agile minds of our colleagues and mates, the Drs Caroline Blyth and Robert Myles.) This journal has published some excellent scholarship over the years, scholarship that has made me think carefully not only about biblical texts and their meanings/meaningfulness, but also about what and how the contemporary biblical scholar can contribute to the broader spheres of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Erin Runions' recent book *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty* is certainly of this ilk, a work that, to quote Jennifer Glancy (from the back cover), "sets an agenda for a next generation of biblical scholars while demonstrating what cultural studies gains from engagement with biblical studies." Specifically, the book explores the multi-valency of "Babylon" in US politics and culture. Importantly, contradictions abound when this biblical figure is evoked, and those contradictions are telling:

> The United States has a Babylon complex: Babylon becomes a site of identification and an object of intense counteridentification. Great city, successful empire, queenly Whore, ambitious building project, united charismatic power, and failed achievement, Bablylon is both vilified and glamourized. It is condemned (as immoral, undemocratic, inhuman) and imitated (as sensational, titillating, tolerant, diverse, and unifying)…Although Babylon's appearances are highly labile and seem to indicate contradictory affective responses (fascination, admiration, self-righteousness, revenge), there are consistencies: Babylon and the Bible are used to authorize military action and policy in war, shape the population via sexual regulation, and negotiate the meaning of social collectivity and democracy in ways that are consistent with globally expanding free markets. (Runions 2014, 3)

Runions' work is cross-disciplinary, situated at "the intersection of biblical studies, religious studies, and cultural studies" (Runions 2014, 7). As her title suggests, she is interested in how the many biblical depictions of Babylon are utilized in theopolitical (the relationship between religion, secular politics, and power), biopolitical (the controlling of human beings for the purpose of capital and market relations), and nationalistic discourses in the US. As she points out, while the theopolitical has recently garnered increasing attention from within these sub-disciplines, the complicity of biblical interpretation with respect to biopolitics remains under-examined. As such, her book is "unique in demonstrating how biblical interpretation is implicated in biopolitical securitizing and regularizing

discourses (on war and sex), as they are yoked with national self-understandings and aspirations (of collectivity, democracy, economic hegemony" (Runions 2014, 8).

In this issue, six peer-reviewed essays engage with Runions' book in light of the authors' own research concerns. (Runions will provide a response to these essays early next year, and we shall upload as soon as we receive it.) In her essay "Babylon's Fall: Figuring Diaspora in and through Ruins," Maia Kotrosits develops Runions' association between the complex image of Babylon, empire building and belonging to argue that "Babylon's fall, or rather Babylon as always already fallen" can be of great use in considering the nature of diasporic belonging. Importantly, Runions' analyses of biopolitics and sovereignty with respect to "Babylon" enable Kotrosits to "get some additional angles on Babylon by attending to the politics of life and death and dreams of sovereignty as they are threaded into discourses of ruin and ruined places. Because Babylon is often a metaphor for empire at large…imperial ruins…are the remains through which certain diasporic aspirations and colonial experiences are articulated and considered."

Yosefa Raz engages Runions' model for analyzing complex biblical figures in supposedly secular political and cultural discourses. In her essay "'And Sons Shall Return to Their Borders': The Neo-Zionist (Re)turns of Rachel's Sons", Raz explores the figure of Rachel in contemporary Israeli culture, claiming that in the twentieth century we can recognize an Israeli "Rachel Complex," particularly around the issues of motherhood, land, and war. She demonstrates that the varied uses made of the biblical figure of Rachel "are especially connected to themes of interruption and lack of fulfilment, as well as an anxiety about geographical boundaries and borders."

Rhiannon Graybill ("No Child Left Behind: Reading Jephthah's Daughter with *The Babylon Complex*") picks up Runions' methodological and political commitments in *Babylon Complex*, notably her critical engagements with theodemocracy, heteroteleology, and neoliberalism, as a way of interpreting the figure of Jephthah's daughter anew. Contrary to the victim-status usually given to the unnamed daughter, Graybill argues that we may profitably read the figure of the daughter in this problematic story as one "positioned against reproductive futurism…her very refusal of sex and reproduction can be read as its own form of raw sex, suggesting new ways of thematising resistance, pleasure, and a refusal of teleology."

In "The Ancient Past that Oil Built" Rachel Havrelock re-deploys Runions' analysis of the close links between biblical interpretations of Babylon and the US wars in Iraq. Havrelock's own work concerns the relationship between twentieth century (imperialist) notions of western nationalism, notions secured through wars, the control of archeological sites and discoveries, along with oil. Such an analysis demonstrates just how complicit the western nations have been "to the ongoing 'crisis of national sovereignty' in the Middle East."

Like Runions, James Crossley is interested in the connections between biblical interpretation and neoliberal political discourse and rhetoric. In "We Don't Do Babylon: Erin Runions in English Political Discourse" Crossley shows that, while there are some similarities, there are also significant differences when it comes to the use of Babylon in US and English political discourses. He points out that if

there is a biblical complex at work in English political discourse it would be "The Good Samaritan Complex": "While Babylon may well be more associated with leftist uses of the Bible in the English tradition, the seemingly gentler Good Samaritan makes this possible in a context perceived to involve more widespread scepticism and indifference towards matters deemed religious and biblical."

Finally, James Harding ("Scripturalization, the Production of the Biblical Israel, and the Gay Antichrist: A Response to *The Babylon Complex*") focuses on Runions' analysis of the role of the Bible in the policing of sexuality in religio-political US discourse. However, he insists that this relationship between nationality and sexuality is already present in the Bible "inasmuch as the production of the biblical Israel is inseparable from the notions that certain kinds of sex and desire pose a mortal threat to the body of the ethnos." His essay explores two themes: the relationship between ethnic boundaries and the abjectifying of the homoerotic; and, the afterlife of Dan 11:37, notably the idea of the gay Antichrist. Like all of the authors in this issue, the question of the role of the contemporary biblical scholar is also addressed: a testimony to the importance of Runions' book for the discipline of biblical studies itself, in the rapidly changing university landscape, and beyond.