

No Child Left Behind

Reading Jephthah's Daughter with *The Babylon Complex*

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Erin Runions' *The Babylon Complex* is positioned at the nexus of Bible, religion, politics, and critical theory. In approaching Runions' work, I will not be so bold as to claim to address its entirety. Instead, I will pull on certain threads to construct an argument in close conversation with its analysis. In particular, I propose to read the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11) through and with *The Babylon Complex*, with attention to ideology, perversity, and refusal. Jephthah's daughter may seem a strange place to start. The central concern of *The Babylon Complex*, already stated in the title, is Babel/Babylon, which does not appear in Judges; neither do Jephthah or his daughter turn up in Runions' study. Nor is the narrative of Jephthah's daughter a favorite among advocates of neoliberalism, whose readings of Bible and Babel Runions engages at length. But it is less Babel itself than Runions' political and methodological commitments that I will take up here. Her critiques of theodemocracy, heteroteleology, and neoliberalism have much to contribute to a reading of the biblical text more broadly; her queer readings of Babel likewise open new possibilities in approaching a difficult text such as Judges 11.

Judges 11:30-40 tells the story of how Jephthah, one of Israel's judges, makes a foolish vow that leads him to offer up his daughter as a sacrifice. Jephthah's daughter is frequently portrayed as an innocent victim of her father, of Yahweh, or simply of the unstoppable workings of patriarchy. This reading persists in spite of several problems. First, the repetition of a small handful of arguments about Jephthah's daughter seems trapped in a predetermined hermeneutic space without offering new insights into the text or opening a space for novel forms of critical reading. Second, and more seriously, these readings bear an uneasy resemblance to more explicitly troubling contemporary discourses that marry feminism and liberal values to "save" global women of color. More recent scholarship has challenged liberal feminist projects, such as efforts to "liberate" women in Afghanistan or Iraq, as neoliberal colonial exploits. The scholarly interest in "saving" Jephthah's daughter betrays an uneasy overlap with these projects; it likewise assumes the universality of liberal values without allowing for the possibility that Jephthah's daughter's values may differ from those of liberal feminists. Runions' critique of empire in *The Babylon Complex* helps draw out this point more sharply.

Against these familiar readings, the second half of this essay pursues other ways of understanding Jephthah's daughter and her desire in the text. I am less interested in exposing the truth of the narrative than in opening alternate ways of reading, imagining, and being otherwise. In *The Babylon Complex*, Runions argues for "an approach to scripture that values opacity, liminality, and undecidability [and] looks for connections and disruptions, eschewing higher meanings" (Runions 2014, 244). Runions' methodological prescriptions guide my reading of Judges 11 here. Pressing

into service the work of Lee Edelman, I will explore reading the figure of Jephthah's daughter as positioned against reproductive futurism. (Importantly, the daughter is a *figure*, not a flesh and blood person.) And it is not only through the category of victim that she can be understood. Instead, the daughter, like Edelman's *sinthomosexual*, refuses the future, as well as what Runions terms "heteroteleology." I then link this reading to Runions' own theorization of "raw sex." Though Jephthah's daughter remains a virgin—one of the few details the text provides about her—I will argue that her very refusal of sex and reproduction can be read as its own form of raw sex, suggesting new ways of thematizing resistance, pleasure, and a refusal of teleology. Following Runions, I will insist that interpretation is never neutral, and that, in particular, biblical interpretation has a significant but largely unspoken relationship to neoliberal formulations of power, gender, and political engagement. This reading names these unspoken relations and, in doing so, opens the possibility of other forms of understanding.

If my theoretical references and borrowings are promiscuous, they are promiscuous in imitation of Runions' own style in *The Babylon Complex*. I aim to participate in Runions' call for "reconceptualizing scripture, rethinking the relation of scripture and law, and uncoupling the U.S. form of liberal democracy from the hierarchical authority and imperializing mission it seems, to many, to demand." To this call, Runions adds, "New forms of reading must be imagined" (Runions 2014, 250). This essay is one attempt at such an imagining.

The Trouble with Jephthah's Daughter

The story of Jephthah's daughter begins, famously, with her father's vow. The son of a prostitute, Jephthah the Gileadite is described by the book of Judges as a "mighty warrior" (Judg. 11:1). Though he is initially rejected on the basis of his parentage, he is summoned to lead the Israelites into battle against the Ammonites. Indeed, it is the ongoing struggle against the Ammonites that leads Jephthah to make his infamous vow:

And Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh, saying, "If you give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in victory from the Ammonites, will belong to Yahweh, and I will offer that one up as a burnt offering." (Judg. 11:30-31)

The vow is successful, but comes with a steep cost. Jephthah is greeted upon his return by his daughter and only child:

When he saw her, he ripped his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to Yahweh, and I cannot take back my vow." (11:35)

His daughter does not protest against the sacrifice, but requests that he first grant her two months, "so that I may go up into the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I" (11:37). Jephthah agrees:

At the end of two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her that which he had vowed. She had never slept with a man. Thereafter arose a custom in Israel that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (11:39-40)

This etiological note bring to an end the narrative of Jephthah's daughter, even as her death brings to an end his familial line.

This brief narrative has attracted its share of attention. As an account of child sacrifice, it has long provided interpreters with a counter-text to Gen. 22, the (near) sacrifice of Isaac, while also suggesting parallels to sacrificed daughters in the Greek tradition, such as Iphigenia and Polyxena. I am especially interested in the feminist and queer politics that intertwine around this text, in differing and sometimes conflicting ways. For this reason, before going on I want to sketch out some of the most significant trends in feminist readings of Judges 11. In particular, I will touch on the feminist questions of voice, ideology, and resistance.

Feminist interpreters have long been drawn to the figure of Jephthah's daughter, both as heroine and as victim. The book of Judges has been a source of recurrent difficulty for feminist interpretation, and the story of a father sacrificing his only daughter has hardly proved an exception. Interestingly, for early interpreters, the question of whether the daughter actually *was* sacrificed was a recurring concern, with a significant portion of readers suggesting she survived (Gunn 2005, 140-142, 147-153).¹ This question was largely abandoned in the modern period, however, with interpreters—feminist and otherwise—instead centering their work on explaining and understanding the sacrifice. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's discussion of the story in *The Woman's Bible* anticipates many of the themes that recur throughout subsequent feminist critique:

This Jewish maiden is known in history only as Jephthah's daughter—she belongs to the no-name series. The father owns her absolutely, having her life even at his disposal. We often hear people laud the beautiful submission and the self-sacrifice of this nameless maiden. To me it is pitiful and painful. I would that this page of history were gilded with a dignified whole-soul rebellion. I would have had the daughter receive the father's confession with a stern rebuke, saying, "I will not consent to such a sacrifice. Your vow must be disallowed. You may sacrifice your own life as you please, but you have no right over mine..."(Stanton 2003 [1898], 25)

The daughter's imagined speech continues for another nine sentences; it includes the chastisement to her father that "better that you die than I"(Stanton 2003, 25).

The namelessness of the daughter, the unfairness of her sacrifice, and the desire to see her rebel—or at least speak back—against her father are all themes that recur in feminist readings. Judges 11 comes into focus as a narrative of female silencing by means of femicide. In a reading in *Texts of Terror* that remains influential today, Phyllis Trible describes the daughter as an "innocent victim" and laments her fate. She adds, with theological flourish, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken her?"(Trible 1984, 104, 106). Subsequent feminist readings of the text continue to describe the daughter as a victim of gender violence, while criticizing the text for what J. Cheryl Exum terms its "phallogocentric ideology" (Exum 1993, 41) and Esther Fuchs its "patriarchal ideology, the ideology of male supremacy" (Fuchs 1989, 45).

¹ Compare the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Greek tradition, which is sometimes represented as miraculously averted at the last moment (for example, Hyginus' *Fabulae*; Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*).

In addition to condemning the text on ideological grounds, feminist criticism of Judges 11 has often pursued two strategies: locating latent instabilities in the text and reimagining the role of the daughter. These strategies, moreover, often proceed hand-in-hand as part of a larger practice of what Exum terms “feminist mythmaking” (Exum 1995, 78). The first approach involves destabilizing the narrative through immanent critique. Exum, for example, suggests that the narrative, while undeniably androcentric, is not fully under the narrator’s control. She argues that the daughter’s willingness to speak back to her father, along with her solidarity with the daughters of Israel, creates a “resultant image...too powerful to be fully controlled by the narrator’s androcentric interests”(Exum 1993, 41) The text thus exceeds its own best attempts at patriarchy. Mieke Bal likewise argues that Judges’ seemingly coherent ideology of gender and violence is opposed by a “countercoherence” (Bal 1988, 17). For both Exum and Bal, resisting the narrative and pursuing its internal instabilities also involves reimagining the role of Jephthah’s daughter. Often, this practice of resistant reading begins by giving her a name (see Stiebert 2013, 81-83). Bal calls the daughter “Bath,” after the Hebrew word for daughter (Bal 1988, 43); Exum, “Bat-jiftah”(Exum 1995, 75). Beth Gerstein uses “Bat” and “Batya” (Gerstein 1989, 179, 190). Still others prefer to use the name given in Pseudo-Philo, Seila (*Bib. Ant.* 40). In naming the daughter, the practices of resistance and mourning meet. To give the daughter a name is to render her a character, and to identify her life as a grievable life. This is similarly the aim of feminist readings that give the daughter a *voice*, most frequently in order to imagine her speaking back against her father.

Naming, remembering, grieving, resisting, voicing—all of these are important feminist practices. And they continue to dominate the ways in which Jephthah’s daughter is read. Indeed, the arguments advanced by Tribble, and subsequently Bal, Fuchs, and Exum, remain touchstones for feminist readings of Jephthah’s daughter (e.g. Claassens 2013; Cooper, 2004; Exum 2012, 119-120; Erbele-Küster 2013, 99). However, I want to suggest that they do not exhaust the range of possible feminist responses to such a text. And such readings, however laudable their intentions, are not without risks of their own. Feminist discourses of concern for “innocent” figures such as Jephthah’s daughter conceal political agendas of their own. In particular, I am interested in the resonances between scholarship on Jephthah’s daughter and liberal feminist practices directed toward global women’s rights (especially those directed at Muslims, Arabs, and women of color). While these two realms—international liberal feminist advocacy and feminist biblical scholarship—are distinct, I will suggest that critiques leveled against the former are useful, as well, in understanding and reconfiguring the latter. Let us turn, now, to feminism as it engages neoliberalism.

The Vulnerable Virgin as Neoliberal Object of Interest

Critiquing neoliberalism is one of the overarching concerns of *The Babylon Complex*. A major imperative of Runions’ work is ferreting out the liberal and neoliberal assumptions that lurk in and around readings of Babel and Babylon. But while Babel/Babylon is an especially pronounced nexus of political anxiety, fantasy, identification, and counter-identification, it is far from the only such site. The narrative of Jephthah’s daughter brings together similar tensions with respect to gender. In particular, this narrative and its history of interpretation demonstrate the

tensions that ensue when liberal feminist ideas of gender run up against empire and transnational critiques. As a number of theorists have noted, the liberation of foreign women and girls has become a point of agreement between proponents of U.S. exceptionalism and mainstream liberal feminist organizations. The cooperation between the Bush administration and the Feminist Majority and the National Organization for Women to “liberate” Afghan women is perhaps the best known, but far from the only, example of this trend (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Puar 2007). And yet, as other feminist and postcolonial theorists have repeatedly and forcefully argued, such liberal feminist projects rely on unspoken normative assumptions of liberal values. In particular, freedom, agency, and the self are understood in culturally specific terms that conceal false universals and do not accurately speak to the experience of all women (Lorde 1997; Mohanty 1988). Thus the seemingly blameless and unimpeachably feminist desire to help foreign women conceals all sorts of other unspoken politics.

The feminist scholarship on Jephthah’s daughter I have surveyed above likewise begins with what Saba Mahmood, critiquing liberal feminism more generally, terms “normative liberal assumptions about freedom and agency” (Mahmood 2001, 203). Like so much else about Jephthah’s daughter, this is already made clear in *The Woman’s Bible’s* reading of the story, which concludes with a discourse on the rights of women by another contributor, Louisa Southworth:

The Iphigenias have been many and are still too numerous to awaken compassion. We must destroy the root of this false and pernicious teaching, and plant in its place a just and righteous doctrine. What women have to win for the race is a theory of conduct which shall be more equitable. The unalterable subserviency of woman in her natural condition can never be overcome and social development progress so long as there is lack of distributive justice to every living soul without discrimination of sex. (Stanton (ed.) 2003, 27)

For Southworth as for Stanton, the story of Jephthah’s daughter is intimately bound up with the issue of women’s rights.² Her feminism is likewise invested in a discourse of rights, and it is through these categories that she articulates her critique. For subsequent feminist interpreters, the same underlying assumptions about freedom, agency, and rights remain. The problem with such a reading is that it collapses all space of historical and cultural difference, seamlessly assimilating the past to the present, and our values to the women in question. Mahmood has argued against such an easy assumption of universals in her study of Egyptian women’s personal piety. Taking up female Islamic devotional practices that are often criticized by secular western feminisms, she calls for caution:

In order for us to be able to judge, in a morally and politically informed way, even those practices we consider objectionable, it is important to take into consideration the desires, motivations, commitments, and aspirations of the people to whom these practices are important... This is not simply an analytical point, but reflects, I would contend, a political imperative born out of the realization that we can no longer presume that secular reason and morality exhaust the forms of human flourishings. In other words, a particular openness to exploring nonliberal traditions is intrinsic to a

² For an assessment of Stanton’s larger project, see Groot (2012).

politically responsible scholarly practice, a practice that departs not from a position of certainty but one of risk, critical engagement, and a willingness to reevaluate one's own views in light of the Other's. (Mahmood 2001, 225)

Though Mahmood is primarily interested in contemporary Egyptian women's practices of self-formation, her words hold, as well, for the biblical text. The Bible and its world stand at a distance from the secular liberal feminism of the West. We might note a similar neoliberal inclination underlying feminist scholarship on Jephthah's daughter, especially when that scholarship aims to name the daughter or otherwise expand upon or re-narrate the event. This scholarship, however well-intentioned, replicates the falsely universalizing claims of liberal feminism.

There is another reason to attend to the difficulties of exporting liberal feminism to Judges 11, and that concerns empire. As the example of the Feminist Majority and Afghanistan suggests, the histories of colonialism and racial difference are not neutral. The desire is not simply to save women; it is, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, a desire to save brown women from brown men (Spivak 1988, 296). Gender is intertwined with race and empire. And insofar as the interpretation of biblical texts is intertwined with the history of empire—another point that *The Babylon Complex* makes clearly—this is relevant to Jephthah and his daughter as well. It is not neutral that Alicia Ostriker begins a recent reading of Judges 11 with “honour killings,” which she glosses as “an ancient custom, and in many parts of the world a contemporary one” (Ostriker 2009, 151). Though Jephthah is an Israelite, he leaves no heirs, and as such, represents a dead end on the family tree. He thus becomes a sort of other, even within the ethnic same. In addition, his actions sacrificing his daughter have occasionally been explained, if not justified, as representing a sort of “Oriental” brutality.³

Though this trope rarely figures explicitly in feminist readings of the text, a trace remains—often sustained, I would suggest, by the emphasis on the victimhood of the daughter. If Jephthah's daughter is a victim, there must be a perpetrator; if Jephthah is willing to kill his daughter, he must be “other” (contrast Abraham, the *ur*-ancestor, who does *not* kill his own child (Trible 1984, 104)). The innocent, virginal daughter is the necessary counterpart to the othered male from whom she must be rescued. Even if Jephthah's daughter cannot be saved, she can be commemorated, and this rhetorical practice replicates certain discourses familiar from the political use of the bodies of women, especially non-white and non-western women. Just as these western feminist practices have come under scrutiny, so too should we cast a critical eye on the analogous case of Jephthah's daughter.

Alternate Ways of Reading Jephthah's Daughter

If we do not choose to read the narrative of Jephthah's daughter with a desire to “save” or “grant a voice” to its central figure, how, instead, should we understand it? *The Babylon Complex*, like much of Runions' prior work, offers new models of how to approach difficult texts. In a study of Ezekiel 16, another violent and disturbing text, Runions reflects:

³ The repudiation of similarity between Jephthah and Abraham goes back to rabbinic literature (Feldman 2010, 190). While early Christian interpreters often valorized Jephthah for his actions, he also offered later interpreters with an easy example of the “barbaric” Oriental Jew who sacrifices his own child.

I have been asked a number of times, “Why not just reject this text?” The answer is political and theological. I am concerned by the way in which the metaphorical language can be taken as prescriptive for real-life interactions. I wish to re-read this metaphor, and metaphors like it, so that they can no longer be used as normative for violent gender relations by those who read the Bible as instructive. (Runions 2001, 157)

In that article, Runions’ reading primarily takes the form of an engagement with René Girard, producing an unconventional but illuminating reading of one of the Bible’s most infamous narratives of gender violence. In *The Babylon Complex*, this approach to interpretation has evolved into what Runions terms “a Babelian approach to scripture” and “a queerly sublime ethics of reading.” This form of reading begins as a desire to return to the texts of Babel while repudiating the projects of theodemocracy, imperialism, and neoliberalism that the majority of chapters of *The Babylon Complex* trace. Runions calls, instead, for “becoming attuned to a queer opacity—that is, the sublime, liminal, undecidability of alterity—in the production of what is taken as transcendent” (Runions 2014, 214; italics original).

This way of approaching the text is not limited to Babylon. Instead, it suggests a way of reading other difficult texts as well—including, as I will explore, Judges 11. Following Runions, I will seek in the text “places where difference queerly inhabits what is known as truth,” privileging interruptions and contingencies over transcendentalizing or universalizing claims. Such “reading otherwise” (Runions 2014, 250) provides, as well, new ways of understanding Jephthah’s daughter.

Jephthah’s Daughter against Reproductive Futurism

My first “reading otherwise” positions the figure of Jephthah’s daughter against reproductive futurism. In setting up this opposition, I am not attempting to smuggle agency into the text or to reconfigure the daughter as an autonomous subject. Instead, I direct attention to the *figure* of the daughter as opposed to the ideology of futurity. The reading I will offer aligns with Runions’ call for a mode of reading that “looks for connections and disruptions, eschewing higher meanings” while valuing opacity (Runions 2014, 244).

In pursuing such connections and disruptions, my reading draws, as well, on Lee Edelman. Among the many theorists to appear in the pages of *The Babylon Complex*, Edelman makes a brief but critical appearance. In the context of her discussion of “the gay antichrist as political enemy” (Runions 2014, 179), Runions introduces Edelman’s concept of “reproductive futurism,” an influential, if controversial, articulation of the so-called “antisocial thesis” in queer theory. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman sets forth a scathing critique of the figure of the Child and the politics it engenders. He argues that our shared political investment in the Child—an investment that unites liberals and conservatives alike—conceals a specific political orientation toward the future that forecloses all else. The Child “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention,” even as this ideology of the Child—reproductive futurism—“impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to the organizing principle of communal

relations” (Edelman 2004, 3, 2). Edelman is especially concerned with the consequences of this ideology for queerness: “The sacralization of the Child thus necessitates the sacrifice of the queer” (Edelman 2004, 28).

In the context of *The Babylon Complex*, “reproductive futurism” plays two roles. First, Runions tracks the connections between apocalyptic theology (much of it obsessed with Babylon) and reproductive futurism. Though Edelman cites organizations such as the American Family Association, he does not thematize their use of apocalyptic futurity; it is left to Runions to uncover traces of Babel/Babylon in this discourse. Second, and more significantly, Runions argues that Edelman’s work “opens a space” for rethinking and reevaluating the “queer element[s]” of biblical texts, in order to “resist and disrupt the homophobic and sexist discourses that insist that sexual desires and gender roles be properly oriented toward the successful future of the (Christian) nation and humanity” (Runions 2014, 194-195). Indeed, Edelman’s work helps provide the basis upon which Runions constructs her queer, destabilizing, counter-dominant reading of Revelation. *The Babylon Complex* thus provides a vanguard effort in an anti-futurity, anti-social practice of biblical reading.

Building on Runions’ brief but productive engagement with Edelman, I will consider how a critique of reproductive futurism might relate to the figure of Jephthah’s daughter. In particular, I want to take seriously the possibility of reading Judges 11 as a narrative intentionally opposed to family and future alike. Constructing this reading, however, requires going a bit deeper into Edelman’s text. On the opening pages of *No Future*, Edelman sets forth what he terms

a simple provocation: that *queerness* names the side of those *not* “fighting for the children,” the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism...As I argue here, queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure. (Edelman 2004, 3, *emphases original*)

This assertion that “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children’” has rather queer consequences for Jephthah. To sacrifice one’s only child is a difficult act to understand; it is not, however, difficult to recognize that this action is not on the side of those “fighting for the children.” There is, however, a complication to address—Jephthah does not set out intending to sacrifice his daughter. Instead, this action is the outcome of a vow, which is made in order to ensure the broader survival of a people. From this perspective, Jephthah is less a radical queer critic of futurity than he is a man caught in a very unhappy situation.⁴ But if Jephthah himself does not occupy the space of the queer appropriately, there is another figure who does: his daughter.

I propose that the figure of Jephthah’s daughter rejects reproductive futurism. The daughter’s very refusal to argue for her life—a refusal that marks her as admirably, even tragically, obedient to some readers, and as a symptom of patriarchal misogyny to others—can be read differently: as a queer refusal of futurity. However we understand Jephthah, his daughter’s actions are clear. By

⁴ This aligns with the reading that Søren Kierkegaard offers of Jephthah and Agamemnon as “tragic” figures caught between irreconcilable demands (Kierkegaard 1983, 78, 87)

embracing her own death, she refuses the future. (Here we might note as well that Edelman associates the refusal of reproductive futurism with the death drive, though this drive is not, ordinarily, a literal one. However, it is the daughter's position of refusal, not her actual death, which is at stake here.) And by refusing to incorporate her death into the larger structures of the Symbolic, she refuses its consolations (to die for a reason, to embrace death for a future good, is not queer). It is she who performs what Edelman describes as the queer ethical obligation: "to insist that the future stop here" (Edelman 2004, 31).

Edelman has a name for this queer figure of opposition: the *sinthomosexual*. Many *sinthomosexuals* populate the pages of *No Future*, including Ebenezer Scrooge and *North by Northwest's* villain, Leonard. Closer to the home terrain of biblical studies, Kent Brintnall has suggested that Lot's wife represents *sinthomosexuality* (Brintnall 2014). The *sinthomosexual* is queer, not precisely in sexuality, but rather in orientation toward futurity and desire. The *sinthomosexual* repudiates the future, pursuing instead *jouissance* at the expense of all else. And this is essential:

In breaking our hold on the future, the *sinthomosexual*, himself neither martyr nor proponent of martyrdom for the sake of a cause, forsakes *all* causes, *all* social action, all responsibility for a better tomorrow or for the perfection of social forms. Against the promise of such an activism, he performs, instead, an act: the act of repudiating the social, of stepping, or trying to step, with Leonard, beyond compulsory compassion, beyond the future and the snare of images keeping us always in its thrall. (Edelman 2004, 101)

Jephthah's daughter is not a martyr; she does not have a cause. Indeed, I would suggest that the etiological note that the text appends to the account of her death ("so there arose an Israelite custom...") grows out of an anxiety over the *meaninglessness* of her death.⁵ The "Israelite custom" represents an attempt to contain and narrativize her actions, to replace *sinthomosexuality* with the realm of the Symbolic. In his reading of *North by Northwest*, Edelman notes the way the film's ending repudiates *jouissance*, reinstating the Law of the Father and celebrating heterosexual matrimony. Judges 11:40 does similar work, though with a ritual of commemoration standing in for the ritual of heterosexual marriage.

It is essential for Edelman that queerness describes not a specific identity, but rather a structural position. The queer is that which is excluded from the Symbolic. And because the exclusion is structural, there is no possibility of moving beyond it. Edelman's is a theory of radical negativity; there will always be something or someone excluded. Thus while "political catachresis may change over time the *occupants* of that [excluded] category, the category itself, like Antigone's tomb, continues to mark the place of whatever refuses intelligibility" (Edelman 2004, 114). This, too, has significance for Jephthah's daughter as she figures in feminist biblical scholarship. It suggests that a critical practice of rescuing or redeeming female figures from the patriarchal grasp of the text ultimately does nothing to disrupt larger structures and forces. Thus feminist and other readings undertaken with the laudable

⁵ Edelman writes, "*Sinthomosexuality*, then only means by figuring a *threat* to meaning, which depends on the promise of coming, in a future continuously deferred, into the presence that reconciles meaning with being in a fantasy of completion—a fantasy on which every subject's cathexis of the signifying system depends" (Edelman 2004, 114).

aim of “saving” Jephthah’s daughter represent another form of changing the “occupants” of the category while allowing the category itself to remain.

Notably, Ken Stone has made a similar argument with respect to the category of “abomination” in the Hebrew Bible. Stone argues that attempts to differentiate between the “deviant” sexual practices of the Canaanites and the “good” (if perhaps sometimes homosexual) sexuality of the Israelites, however well-intentioned, have a deleterious effect on queerness more generally (Stone 1997). Saving Jephthah’s daughter—whether from her father’s knife or from her own complicity in, or desire for, her death—is a similar maneuver. Any interpretive practice that delivers certain subjects, whether the “innocent daughter” (Antigone, Jephthah’s daughter) or the “good homosexual” (Smith 1994) ultimately does nothing to disturb larger structures.

Given such categories, what then are we to do? Instead of evacuating Antigone’s cave, should we simply blow it to pieces? For Edelman, at least, the answer is no. Instead, he offers a provocative proposition. He writes, “To embrace the impossibility, the inhumanity of the *sinthomosexual*: that, I suggest, is the ethical task for which queers are singled out” (Edelman 2004, 109). In the case of Judges 11, the ethical task for which the figure of Jephthah’s daughter is singled out may well be to embrace the inhumanity of her position. (Here again, it is the daughter *as figure*, not the daughter *as person*, that I emphasize). There are real political stakes to the practice of refusing the future, and refusing teleology along with it. While Edelman presents these stakes in primarily secular and political terms, Runions makes clear that they are also bound up in theodocracy and theopolitics (a point she illuminates by drawing out the apocalyptic strands already present in Edelman’s reading.) The interpretive practice of refusing the future has significance, not simply for queer theory, but for the theory of empire as well. Thus, we might add that the ethical task of interpreters faced with this text is to “to embrace the impossibility, the inhumanity” of Judges, as a step, however tentative, toward a queer refusal of empire. The refusal of the future figured by Judges 11 is appalling, horrific—and perhaps necessary. The narrative, like the daughter, refuses to be redeemed. There is no easy deliverance here, only the position of refusal—a position that is itself radical.

Chastity, Raw Sex, and Family Values

The second “reading otherwise” of Jephthah’s daughter draws on Runions’ notion of “raw sex.” To be sure, Jephthah’s daughter dies a virgin. However, “raw sex” is less a description of a particular status than it is an opposition to a logic of heteronormativity, teleology, and family values. “Raw sex” likewise names a transgressive, excessive relationship to pleasure, desire, reproduction, and death.⁶ It is as opposed to “homonormativity” (Duggan 2002) as it is to heteronormativity. As such, it provides another way to understand the figure of the daughter.

“Raw sex” has, appropriately, a non-linear, non-filial genealogy. It begins in “bare life,” a concept that originates with Giorgio Agamben; it also draws on Guy Hocquenghem’s reading of polymorphously perverse sexuality (with its own origins in Freud and Deleuze and Guattari). Bringing these theoretical progenitors together

⁶ “Raw sex” also figures, somewhat prominently, in *Unlimited Intimacy* (Dean 2009).

with the trajectories of sex and desire that circulate in and around the Babel/Babylon texts, Runions writes:

Let me posit, for a moment, raw sex as at least one aspect of bare life. By raw sex, I mean sexual expression of nonnormative desire...Raw sex is sexual expression understood simply through the desire and physicality of the moment rather than through some future goal, whether relating to the solidification of a monogamous relationship or the construction of a family. It is the opposite of heteronormative sex and of normative apocalyptically oriented desire. Let's call it Babylonian desire. (Runions 2014, 206)

Raw sex thus pulls together a number of distinct forms and practices of sexuality, united only in their opposition to futurity and heteronormativity. Raw sex also breaks down the link between sexuality and teleology.

This refusal to position sex in the service of a *telos* is also a refusal of apocalypticism. As Frank Kermode makes clear in *The Sense of an Ending*, the End is an object of desire; in Kermode's words, "we hunger for ends and crises" (Kermode 2000, 55). Raw sex, for its part, is opposed to ends, to apocalypses, and to the desires—including a desire for completion—that they engender. As Runions writes, "Offensive to the apocalyptic worldview, it seems, is the desire for the unattached pleasure made manifest in raw sex (or anything that is perceived to be raw sex)" (Runions 2014, 207). In line with Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, raw sex opposes an orientation to the future. It expands this critique into an opposition to teleology more generally. Raw sex refuses the imperative to be *productive*, whether of children, orgasms, or commodities. Like Edelman's figure of the *sinthomosexual*, raw sex pursues its own *jouissance* (though with a less strictly Lacanian logic). Oriented to its own pleasure, it is "not properly oriented to the future of the nation and of humanity" (Runions 2014, 207). In this way, too, raw sex also suggests a parallel to Karmen MacKendrick's notion of "counterpleasures," which refuse productivity and resist "the politically correct morality of gratification" (MacKendrick 1999, 112).⁷

How might raw sex come into play in the narrative of Jephthah's daughter? Seeking the queer, or perhaps simply some comfort before the narrative ends in untimely death, readers have sometimes located a lesbian interlude during the daughter's time in the mountains. It is simple enough for female companionship and segregation from men and masculine space to slip, with a sympathetic reading, into something more. This is the reading offered, for example, by Theodore Jennings in *Jacob's Wound* (Jennings 2005, 226). Without foreclosing the possibility of such a lesbian reading—hinted at as well by others, such as Rebecca Alpert (Alpert 1998, 52)—I would caution against collapsing same-sex desire and raw sex into each other. Indeed, maintaining these two categories as discrete is a key feature of the critique of homonormativity. Instead, from the perspective of raw sex, it matters less what Jephthah's daughter does with her friends than how this time is conceived of as an embrace of the present, over and against "some future goal." Whatever Jephthah's daughter is doing in the mountains, she is neither producing nor pursuing family values. And while her death is in compliance with her father's vow—a vow made to promote the nation's victory—I would suggest that her actions are "not properly oriented to the future of the nation and of humanity." Here, it is perhaps

⁷ MacKendrick also resists linking *jouissance* to orgasm (MacKendrick 1999, 111).

instructive to compare Jephthah's daughter to Tamar (Gen. 38). Confronted with an end to Judah's line, Tamar acts, in extremity, to preserve it. While there is a temporary queering of the ordinary trajectory of the family line (she sleeps with her father-in-law), it is ultimately directed toward the future. Tamar may clothe herself as a prostitute, but her desire is not perverse. Jephthah's daughter's is a very different narrative.

Indeed, I would suggest that in a text as preoccupied with genealogy and the production of children as the biblical text, chastity itself becomes a form of "raw sex." Here, it is worth considering MacKendrick's description of asceticism as a kind of counterpleasure:

It is this "violent seduction of sacrifice" that forms the heart of the ascetic paradox—sacrifice constituting the sacred, humility out of arrogance, life out of death, affirmation out of denial. It is profoundly perverse, self-denying and yet self-overcoming. The desire that drives it at once turns against the body and demands (and glorifies) the body as a space of suffering...It is unquestionably powerful, subversive precisely in its conformity to religious demands. (MacKendrick 1999, 86)

MacKendrick's "counterpleasure" is another way of naming Runions' "raw sex," especially in a case such as Judges 11, where raw sex means divinely endorsed death. And as MacKendrick's reading makes clear, both renunciation (sexual or otherwise) and violence against the self are linked to pleasure and desire. Such desire, moreover, is resistant to teleology. It produces nothing except subversion. While Jephthah's daughter is not, precisely, an ascetic, she too espouses a "violent seduction of sacrifice." Her fate is not neutral to desire. And it is this—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, that is truly threatening.

No Child Left Behind

The image of Jephthah's daughter as *sinthomosexual* and as a figure of raw sex is a long way from the innocent victim with whom we began. Bringing together the critique of western liberal feminism with reproductive futurity and raw sex suggests an unlikely assemblage: sex and death allied against empire. But perhaps, if we have read Runions closely, this assemblage is not wholly unexpected. The rejection of liberal discourses of rights and the refusal of fecundity and the family line share an opposition to (re)productive teleology. Instead of ends, we have an assemblage of pleasures, sensations, divergences. In this way, the daughter as a figure *against*—against reproduction, against ends, against productive uses of pleasure, against heteroteologies, against universals—becomes a figure very much in line with Runions' own reimagined Son of Man and Whore of Babylon. Runions describes the antichrist as "a sublime figure of undecidability"; this undecidability is fundamental to redeploying this figure against the Babylon Complex itself. And with the figure of Jephthah's daughter, I would suggest, a similar redeployment is possible.

Taking up the clichéd invocation "Leave no child behind," Edelman locates within it "a haunting, destructive excess bound up with its pious sentimentality, an overdetermination that betrays the place of the kernel of irony that futurism tries to allegorize as narrative, as history" (Edelman 2004, 31). This is precisely what we

find with the figure of Jephthah's daughter. The *overdetermination* of the story interrupts the very possibility of the future. Narrative fails; irony triumphs. The "pious sentimentality" of father and daughter conceals "a haunting, destructive excess." There is also the destructive, *jouissance*-filled embrace of raw sex, the refusal of teleology and ends and apocalypses in favor of excess, of Babylonian desire. Leave no child behind, except the one you sacrifice. Embrace your position of exclusion and refuse to refuse your death. Embrace your *jouissance*, enter Antigone's cave, take up the knife. Though they remain unspoken, Jephthah's daughter's most important words are this: "The future stops here."

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