

The Biblical, Reinvented

Goliath, *Babel*, and Biblical Scholarship in a Sci-fi Future

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The biblical still persists, if not proliferates, as its own kind of argument: the transparent and untroubled use of the biblical as timeless, eternal, primordial, and thus contemporarily relevant is still quite effective in a range of contexts, religious or “otherwise.” –Joseph A. Marchal (2011, 383)

Science fiction writers, in general, are not interested in retelling biblical narratives; rather they focus on contemplating the possibilities and limitations of human nature. Thus, when authors use a biblical story, they freely recast it. –Nicole Tilford (2021, 88–89)

The assignment for this “Books and Culture” piece was seasonally designed for an end-of-summer deadline: pick a few of your favorite summer fiction reads and write about their connections to biblical studies in ways that might get others interested in them. (The unspoken assumption of this task is that many of us are giant book nerds!) My book list this summer was stellar, so choosing “favorites” was tough. I narrowed myself down to radical, queer-ish science fiction—my go-to genre of late. The selections became obvious. In 2022, two books in this genre have been published with explicitly biblical titles. Thus, I give you: *Goliath* by Tochi Onyebuchi and *Babel* by R.F. Kuang.

Writing about the representation of Noachic women in early-twentieth-century science fiction, Nicole Tilford observes that science fiction writers “freely recast” biblical narratives in order to explore their themes and resonances in reimagined worlds (Tilford 2021, 89). By reinventing the Bible and scientific possibility, science fiction allows readers to understand the present more clearly and dream toward changing the future. Different from scholarly expectations of a “biblical retelling,” science fiction draws from biblical texts in ways that engage the Bible’s *affective* uses—an affect that Joseph A. Marchal (drawing from Carolyn Dinshaw’s work on “the medieval”) names *the biblical* (Marchal 2011, Dinshaw 1999). A general example offers a concise way of explaining “biblical” as an affect (a force, sensation, and feeling): people frequently say a rule, idea, proverbial wisdom, or condemnation (especially of sexuality) comes from the Bible (i.e., “the Bible says...”), even though many of these statements are decidedly *not* biblical. Yet, given the Bible’s weighty impact across history, these statements *feel* biblical because they radiate “timeless, eternal, primordial” sensations (Marchal 2011, 383).

Thinking alongside this work, what follows are analytic reviews of both novels that contain as few spoilers as possible. I hope this offers tantalizing, provocative glimpses into the novels that will get biblical scholars engaged with and excited by how these books get readers feeling “biblical” in the midst of an absorbing read. By titling their novels after biblical narratives, Onyebuchi and Kuang explicitly frame their stories through biblical affects. To the degree they engage biblical texts at the narrative level, their writing represents a wholesale reinvention of biblical stories. The resulting novels recast readers’ sensations of the biblical and open possibilities to change the Bible’s affective futures.

Tochi Onyebuchi, *Goliath*. New York: Tordotcom, 2022.

But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity. –Ps. 37:11 (NRSV)

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. –Matt. 5:5 (NRSV)

The byline changes, but the title is always the same: The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth. –Tochi Onyebuchi, *Goliath* (191)

What does it mean that the meek will inherit Earth? And who are these “meek?” Though biblical texts frame this inheritance as delightful and a blessing, Tochi Onyebuchi’s *Goliath* imagines an inheritance that is much more dystopic.

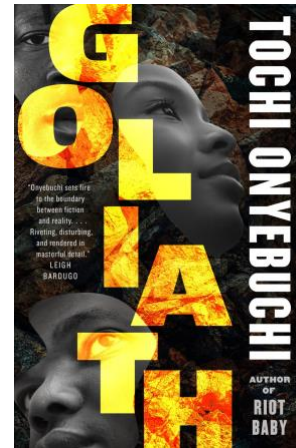
Onyebuchi’s citation of this biblical saying, quoted above, presents a discomfiting plausibility to readers living in an increasingly apocalyptic climate. Those most marginalized will inherit a land no longer worth inhabiting.

The novel takes place in the United States—primarily around New Haven, Connecticut—in the near-future 2050s. In the mid-2020s, the effects of climate change made the U.S. (and, presumably, the globe) less and less inhabitable: temperatures rise; the air becomes less breathable; toxic waste increases the prevalence and severity of cancers. As a result, the wealthy create the Colonies, an infrastructure in space designed to be more habitable. Of course, the resources needed to build and maintain this infrastructure come from Earth, exacerbating the devastation for those left behind.

Those who settle and reside in the Colonies are overwhelmingly (if not exclusively) white. The premise was inspired by Onyebuchi’s adolescent experiences watching and reading predominantly white space fiction. *Goliath* answers the question he repeatedly asked: Why aren’t there any Black or brown people in space? “Oh, wait, they got left behind on Earth” (Summers 2022).

Goliath presents fragments of life on this left-behind Earth. The novel takes place loosely across a year, in four parts titled by season. However, the story is narrated in shards: multiple speakers giving their own perspectives, many of which involve extended flashbacks. These shards disorient the reader: no title accompanies the “chapter” breaks; readers must use context and narration style to determine whose voice they now hear. I was relieved to learn, after reading several reviews (Brown 2022, CW 2021, Markovits 2022), that my disorienting reading experience was not exceptional. Onyebuchi’s shard structure fits the novel: the novel’s events do not transpire linearly: “Almost two hundred years later, history don’t repeat itself, but it sure as hell rhymes” (200). We can learn from history, but as much as the past and present may rhyme, the rhythms are unpredictable.

By the novel’s start, the Colonies are well-established. A generation has come of age who has never known Earth apart from its description by their families and educators. Instead of building a dystopic world where the Colonies cruelly siphon themselves off from Earth and then frame themselves as exclusively better and more deserving than those left behind, the people on the Colonies teach about privilege and the racism and classism that enable their existence, even as they continue to build and benefit from the system. With direct references to Minneapolis in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, Onyebuchi makes clear this reflects the



contemporary politics around “The Racial Reckoning that Wasn’t,” as NPR’s *Code Switch* podcast titled an episode (Demby, Meraji, et. al. 2021).

Goliath opens with a significant portion of the narrative perspective coming from Jonathan and his partner David (wink wink), two young white men raised in the Colonies. Jonathan sets out to join others who have returned to Earth and build a new home there. Jonathan frames himself as a returning “pioneer.” Having learned about his privilege, he wants to see the world he and his family have helped deplete; he wants to return and live in solidarity with those left behind, and perhaps even make things better for everyone. As with similar tales in recent history, it very quickly becomes clear this is just gentrification.

Onyebuchi surely intended to reference 1 and 2 Samuel through the biblical naming of these two gay gentrifiers, especially given that the novel’s title comes from the Philistine character of 1 Samuel 17:19–58. Contemporary popular culture riffs on the possibilities of a romantic and homoerotic element to the friendship of soon-to-be-king David and son-of-the-king Jonathan almost as often as it has been debated among biblical scholars. *Goliath*’s allusions to this biblical text dig into layers of the text and offer a complicated recasting of biblical power dynamics. Although gayifying David and Jonathan has become cliché, Onyebuchi’s Jonathan and David never adhere to the stereotypes. At least in my experience of pop culture, it is more common to meet a “manly” warrior David, the alpha top, with whom a clingy and often-effeminate Jonathan falls madly in love. But in *Goliath*, it is Jonathan who does the conquering, in the form of returning to an apocalyptic Earth in order to prepare it for his partner’s safe arrival. David stays behind, ostensibly to be present for his mother’s imminent death—yet, once Jonathan arrives on Earth, he describes David as if he is one of the brides who waited to be called “home” to the frontier by their pioneer husbands.

Readers encounter a deeper layer of *Goliath*’s allusion when they ask: who is David and who is Goliath? The strength of the novel as a form of biblical interpretation lies in Onyebuchi’s refusal to make this a one-to-one metaphor. From the title and premise, a reader might reasonably assume that the Colonies are the Goliath whom the David—the folks originally left behind on Earth—must confront. However, the casting of a David and Jonathan among the returnees demands that we consider flipping who’s who. By casting David and Jonathan as gay men who were struggling in their lives on the Colonies, *Goliath* reminds us that the ancient Israelites were also struggling, marginalized people trying to survive an imperial landscape. This does not justify David and Jonathan’s privileged actions throughout the novel, but it does cause us to consider the unnamed powers that benefit the most from these actions and who lie beneath the novel’s (and the Bible’s) many layers.

A shard that features a news article titled “The Preacher” explicitly cites the biblical story of Goliath and David. The citation begins with the expected, surface-level comparison: it describes images found on Earth that depict those left behind—captioned as David—confronting the oppressive force of those from the Colonies—as Goliath. But the article ends by quoting 1 Sam. 17:51 directly (“And when the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled” [274, Onyebuchi quotes the KJV]). This quotation follows the description of a funeral caravan to the grave of the article’s titular preacher. “They can’t stay here anymore, so they will scatter,” the reporter writes (274). In this citation, it appears the funeral caravan, comprised of Black and brown folks on Earth, are the Philistines, scattered by the powerfully

dominant narrative that casts them as Goliaths in order to scatter them and inherit their earth.

Across the span of a few paragraphs, Onyebuchi moves his readers from the obvious metaphor we are prone to draw to one that is more ambiguous. He calls attention to how biblical texts and interpreters tend to racialize the Philistines in order to make them Other. Onyebuchi never gives us a clear “Goliath” or “David,” for the novel is not a retelling of the narrative: it instead draws out affects of the biblical tale. What do we sense when we feel Goliath’s story hovering across these shards? *Goliath* reminds that one-to-one biblical metaphors are doomed to fall flat: we won’t get out of the dystopia by following the text. But perhaps it is possible to do something different by exploring these biblical feelings.

Onyebuchi’s biblical feelings extend far beyond citing the stories of 1 and 2 Samuel. Every instance is as layered and complex as the allusions to the text from which the novel’s title comes. The allusion I found most provocative is one to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1–29). The setting is during the novel’s longest shard, which tells two stories side by side: a Black Yale graduate’s firsthand account of a failed prison revolt (based on the Attica Prison Rebellion of 1971) alongside a white man’s narrative of the search for the body of a Black child he murdered. As the rebelling prisoners are about to discover they have been left to die, the narrator recounts an interaction with Doc, the voice of wisdom and de facto leader among the incarcerated. “You know what he tells me?...‘It’s been so long since I’d seen stars.’ He gets quiet, then he says, ‘Story says that there weren’t even ten good men in Sodom and Gomorrah. I think there were. And I think before the fire came down, they got a good look at those stars. They felt loved. I believe that’” (255). Like the portrayal of the Philistine Goliath, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction—including its sexualized abuses that violently abrogate a culture of hospitality—racializes the other and justifies their destruction/otherness as a result of their immense immorality. They are threats. The racialized history of this text intersects with its histories of justifying oppression and violence against LGBTIA2Q+ folks. Onyebuchi appears to allude to this history. Doc’s interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah echoes Dennis Shepard’s courtroom speech, made famous in *The Laramie Project*, in which he testified against the death penalty for Aaron McKinney, one of his son Mathew Shepard’s homophobic murderers. “You...left him out there by himself, but he wasn’t alone. There were his lifelong friends with him, friends that he had grown up with. You’re probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky and the same stars and moon that we used to see through a telescope” (Kaufman 2001).

Through his references to Gen. 19, Onyebuchi emphasizes the countless Others whose lives have been destroyed in the name of “Sodom.” But Onyebuchi makes clear that, when this story is interpreted violently, the destruction occurs not by God but at the hands of the dominant powers who marginalize and oppress in order to preserve their own sense of comfort. *Goliath*’s invocation of Sodom and Gomorrah inquires: How many “good men” have been made evil and threatening to preserve a particular worldview? How many people have been said to have deserved their violent punishment because they were not “good?”

The book flap describes *Goliath* as “a primal biblical epic flung into the future.” It’s easy for the biblical scholar to bristle at this description. Even with its clear citations and allusions to biblical passages, the novel does not map easily onto any

text or genre. It does not reflect an attempt to take a historical or literary critical understanding of the Bible and revise it neatly into a future world.

The “biblical” nature of *Goliath* is affective—a sensation or feeling of biblicalness in and around the text. “To understand the function of the biblical,” writes Joseph A. Marchal, “one must recognize how it draws upon and partakes of its historical home in our antiquity, slides comfortably in modern periods pre and post, and persists in a range of contemporary effects and affects, religious and otherwise, where the biblical frequently works to compare, prioritize, reinforce, or, in short, *normalize* specific concepts and practices of gender, sexuality, and embodiment” (Marchal 2011, 376). Situations feel biblical because they are based on normative assumptions about what the Bible “says”—even though most of these so-called sayings are, today and throughout history, what folks *feel* like the Bible *should* say, based on normative expectations and interpretations.

Goliath epically engages biblical affectiveness in the form of dystopian sci-fi. Onyebuchi draws from the normative interpretive assumptions—what *feels* biblical—and challenges these feelings. *Goliath*’s biblical feelings and allusions make it possible for readers to feel differently about the Bible. Though the story offers no easy, concrete solutions to its (and our) problems, by reading *Goliath*, we start to imagine what it could mean to sense change.

R.F. Kuang, *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators Revolution*. New York: HarperVoyager, 2022.

Therefore, it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

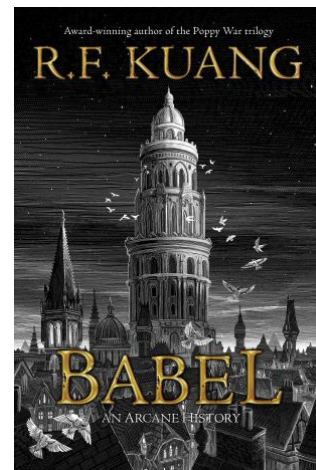
—Genesis 11:9 (NRSV)

Language was just difference. A thousand different ways of seeing, of moving through the world. No; a thousand worlds within one. —R.F. Kuang, *Babel* (535)

Set in 1830s Oxford, *Babel* is a tale about the violence of empire and colonial exploitation and how it might be dismantled by those whom imperialism oppresses even as it purports to include, support, and “help” them. As in her *Poppy War* trilogy (also a fascinating read for religious studies scholars), Kuang does not flinch from the violent reality of empire. Readers should come in knowing that the book contains depictions and discussions of racism and child abuse, in addition to some gore and graphic violence.

In Oxford, Kuang builds a fantasy world for the Bible geeks who nerd out over ancient languages and how we might translate them. How many of us have felt magical when, as we pour over ancient texts, lexica, and grammars, we discover the perfect translation—one that hits the term’s meaning more deeply than the dictionary’s gloss? Don’t we love what we do because it makes us feel like witches? Kuang transforms that magical feeling into a brilliant magical system. As I read how the magic of translation worked, I exploded with giddy desire. I have never wanted to summon a magic more than this one.

“Babel” refers to the Royal Institute of Translation at Oxford University. Housed in a gleaming tower, Babel is the academic center for the study of translation that



leads to the making of magic. The most skilled of translators make magic by inscribing words on silver bricks: two words, in two different languages that form a “match pair”—i.e., one word and its possible translation in another language. The translator, who must be fluent in both languages, speaks both terms and...magic! But how does such basic translation make magic? Translation never perfectly captures a term’s nuances when it moves across languages, especially since terms often pick up multiple meanings and idiomatic uses over time. The magic happens *because* of this distortion: the magical effect derives from *how* the match-pair differs, even though they mean “the same thing” in translation’s terms.

It’s clear why Kuang chose to title her novel using the tale of the tower and God’s scattering of languages and peoples in Genesis 11:1–9. The scattering of languages creates the need for translation and interpretation—at least if different peoples interact with one another. Furthermore, housed within an ascendant British empire, the Royal Institute for Translation attempts to unscatter the globe, making all language accessible, comprehensible, and ultimately profitable to those in power. Just as the tower of Genesis lets its builders “make a name for ourselves” (11:4) and, with one unifying language, be “only the beginning of what they will do; nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (11:6), the work of Oxford’s Babel helps make Britain’s name great and is the source of all kinds of possibilities, most of them involving British glory through exploitation, violence, and domination. For Kuang, *Babel* and Babel are stories about empire.

Kuang is not alone in setting Genesis 11 in the midst of empire. Biblical scholars note the resonances between “Babel” and “Babylon” and consider the meanings of the story’s imperial rhymes and rhythms (e.g., Runions 2014). Kuang’s plot expounds upon what it means to interpret the aims of Babel as imperial: one common language, one common rule, paving over all others. *Babel* is the story of Robin Swift, a Cantonese orphan who is “saved” from a cholera outbreak and a life of poverty in Canton by an Oxford don (also Robin’s father, though he will never acknowledge this to Robin) who brings him to England, becomes his guardian, and prepares him for enrollment as a Babel scholar, on a full scholarship with a generous stipend. Once enrolling in Oxford, Robin seems headed to the good life: a life of the mind, hard work that he is passionate for, and a cohort of close friends: Ramy (from India), Victoire (from Haiti via France), and Letty (from England).

As the cohort’s time at Babel and in Oxford progresses, Ramy, Victoire, and Robin discover the holes in Babel’s promises and the violent underpinnings of the translation magic that they’d dreamed of grasping. “Language is a resource, just like gold and silver,” says Anthony, a Haitian Babel graduate and silver worker (164). Britain mines its colonized linguists. Babel takes them from a young age and makes coercive promises of a stable future in the academic study that fulfils them. This stable future, however, secures the ongoing, violent dominance of British colonial rule. New match-pairs create new magic that increase efficiency and profits, cure illness, bolster military prowess, and amplify torture. But Britain’s monopoly on language study also increases its ability to possess the silver bars needed for the magical process; its growing stronghold of silver guarantees its linguistic conquest.

As with the project of the biblical Babel, Oxford’s Babel works toward a world united by one language: English. Silver magic works off the translation distortions between any *two* languages, and scholars like Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Anthony are all fluent in many languages besides English. It is purposeful that, at Babel, English is always on one side of a silver bar.

But also, like in Genesis, Babel's project is always doomed to fail. Earlier in the same conversation, Anthony explains why, despite their racist ideas about non-Western languages, peoples, and cultures, Babel turned to exploiting the languages of its Asian, African, and Caribbean colonies, grudgingly admitting students from these colonies. "Most of the silver bars that power London are translations from Latin, French, and German. But those bars are losing their efficacy. As linguistic flow spreads across continents—as words like *saute* and *gratin* become a standard part of the English lexicon—the semantic warp loses its potency" (163). This leads to the inevitable realization: like gold and silver, language, though always being invented and reinvented, is not an infinite resource under the coercions of colonial translation. Cathy, whose primary language is Gaelic, notes how British/European invasions are "edging out regional languages and dialects like cuckoo chicks" (384). Babel's colonization of languages consumes others' words and leaves them decimated in worlds without magic—only English. But, leaving them with this devastating "gift" will eventually undermine Babel's magic. Once there is only English, there is no magic. English power annihilates other lands and cultures first, but, ultimately, it must self-destruct. This is "the great contradiction of colonialism....It's built to destroy that which it prizes most" (384). Or, framed by Genesis 11, the tower can never be completed. Inevitably, it collapses.

My one disappointment at the end of an otherwise stellar read was the lack of explicit queerness. From the moment Robin and Ramy meet, there is a chemistry and a sexual tension that I wanted to see play out on the page. Ramy, to me, read as queer, and there were several moments where it felt like we were headed toward a profession, a kiss, or at least a reckoning between the two men. However, there was never any explicit acknowledgment that these queer affects I sensed were really there. I cannot lob my disappointment as critique so much take my feelings as an opportunity for deeper affective scrutiny. Given how the novel displays the violence of empire, this unrequited, unacknowledged longing captures the silent violence of British imperialism and its Victorian effects on sexuality, especially for the folks conquered and racialized into the system. Ramy may be queer, Robin may reciprocate these feelings, there may have been intense sexual tension and chemistry between them. But, as colonized subjects living under Babel's gaze, neither can afford the risks of queerness in Oxford. Perhaps my own unrequited longing to see this queerness in a historical fantasy embodies queer theorizations of loss and failure (e.g., Love 2007, Halberstam 2011).

Like *Goliath*, *Babel* is no simple retelling. Kuang takes the original story and reimagines it through this epic fantasy. Summoning the biblical feelings of the Babel tale and its afterlives, Kuang's novel brings biblical scholarship to life through her fictional reimagining of the text's potential meanings, especially when read through the lens of empire and postcolonial criticism. In moments like when Victoire says of Babel, "I want it to burn," the novel raises the plausibility that, around the biblical story, everyone was not equally invested in the project of building the tower, that not everyone was content with one language, one culture. *Babel* asks: who cheered when the biblical Babel fell?

In Kuang's reimagining, the builders of Genesis's tower desire and construct a world void of difference. When God destroys the tower, scattering the people and their languages, God makes a world of wonderful difference. *Babel* shows readers that the ongoing colonization of languages results from reading the scattering of Genesis 11 as tragic. Imperialism keeps trying to rebuild that tower. Through her

meditation on whether dismantling the imperial tower requires violent scattering, Kuang's fantastic biblical interpretation inquires: Is Genesis 11 a tragedy or a victory for humanity?

Babel and *Goliath* join a rich tradition of science fiction—which also includes Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) as well as Ursula K. LeGuin's "She Unnames Then" (1985)—that grapples with biblical affects by freely recasting the "original" texts. Though they end with the KJV version of the two gospel parables, Butler's books do not resemble the texts themselves. Like *Goliath* with 1 Samuel, Butler draws on the affective resonances of parables (as well as apocalyptic traditions) to reveal truths about her contemporary present: these texts tried to warn us (Due and Coleman). Like Kuang's *Babel*, LeGuin's short story emphasizes the inherent power dynamics involved in the language of naming in Genesis 2:18–23. As both stories end, the narratives recognize the radical challenges of using language non-hegemonically: it requires us to do more than "chatter away" as we used to do (Le Guin 1985, 27).

Participating in this rich heritage, *Babel* and *Goliath* challenge readers to "feel biblical" in even more ambivalent ways. Both novels show how, in 2022 and beyond, science fiction might help readers understand the biblical affects that structure cultural norms and increasingly seem to lead us into these dystopian futures. In so doing, these authors provoke us to sense unpredictable responses to the questions that their stories pose—alongside and beyond the biblical.

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