Erin Runions


Erin Runions’ remarkable book explores various ways in which the biblical figure of Babylon, or Babel, circulates in contemporary U.S. politics and culture. In her “Introduction,” Runions notes that the U.S. is characterized by tensions between a globalized economy, which requires open markets, surplus labor, and individual economic agency; and nationalism, which aspires to unity, sovereignty, and military strength. In this contradictory context, the figure of Babylon, which simultaneously allures and repels, and the story of Babel, which plays on tensions between unity and diversity, are deployed in multiple ways. Drawing on several theoretical frames including Michel Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, Runions argues that interpretations of Babylon are repeatedly linked to valorization of the nuclear family, U.S. militaristic ambitions, and the management of subjects for global capitalism.

In Chapter One, “From Babel to Biopolitics: Josephus, Theodemocracy, and the Regulation of Pleasure,” Runions explores the relationship between Josephus’s retelling of the Babel story and contemporary political uses of the figure of Babel. Josephus’s interpretation adds several elements to the story that become influential, such as a role for Nimrod as a tyrant who encourages rebellion against God. Josephus’s retelling reflects his own commitments, including “a suspicion of democracy as an impious and tyrannical locus of moral dissolution and a threat to established hierarchies of governance” (p. 49), such as kinship-based priestly hierarchies. Mediated by Christian traditions, Josephus’s interpretation influences a set of modern political assumptions that Runions calls “theodemocracy.” Theodemocracy emphasizes hierarchy, individual economic liberty, reproductive family, and Judeo-Christian faith while denouncing excessive democracy, economic equality, pleasure, and collective tyranny. Runions identifies examples of neoconservative political and religious rhetoric that promote theodemocratic assumptions with appeals to the Babel
story, and links these examples to a wider network of neoconservative rhetoric. The racialized figure of Nimrod provides one vehicle for conservatives to use such rhetoric to critique President Barack Obama and his policies. Yet as Runions shows, Obama also appeals to the figure of Babel to encourage faith, family, and common purpose.

Chapter Two, “Bellicose Dreams: Babylon and Exception to Law,” explores several texts by political neoconservative and religious “theonomist” writers who appeal to Babel rhetorically as a “dangerous unity” (which is sometimes the state, sometimes secular humanism, sometimes a nefarious organization with global aspirations such as the United Nations) to be combatted. These writers emphasize the importance of law while providing justifications for going beyond the law in service to some transcendent point of reference. While ostensibly supporting democracy, they are suspicious of the “babble” produced by too much democracy, and of the sexual immorality and political weakness believed to accompany it. The writings Runions analyzes are characterized by contradictory attitudes towards unity and multiplicity, and towards liberalism. Nevertheless, they mobilize the figure of Babel and construe the relationship between text and truth to further such conservative principles as “God’s law or pax Americana” (p. 94). “Scripturalizing” appeals to the Bible and the U.S. Constitution facilitate this process, which is accompanied by a valorization of patriarchal heterosexuality. Runions’s arguments here include engagement with influential texts by Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben on the “state of exception.”

In Chapter Three, “Tolerating Babel: Biopolitics, Film, and Family,” the “malleability” (p. 124) of the symbol of Babylon is explored through an analysis of two films: D.W. Griffith’s Intolerance (1916) and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s Babel (2006). Both films associate Babylon with tolerance, but also reflect ambivalence toward the multiplicity and pleasure that characterize it. Although the filmmakers understand film as a language with potentially universal appeal, each film ultimately privileges the white heterosexual nuclear family in the face of difference. Such privileging replicates the shift of focus in Genesis from the multiple peoples who leave Babel to the reproductive family line of Abraham.

Chapter Four, “Revenge on Babylon: Literalist Allegory, Scripture, Torture,” takes its point of departure from the use of Boney M’s disco/reggae song, “Rivers of Babylon,” to harass prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison. Boney M’s song draws on Psalms 137 and 19; and Runions uses the notorious call for revenge in Psalm 137, and the biblical tradition of seeking revenge on Babylon, to explore interpretations of the Bible that read events in the Middle East in the context of eschatological “literalist allegories.” Juxtaposing strategies of eschatological