

Babylon's Fall

Figuring Diaspora in and through Ruins

Maia Kotrosits, *Denison University*

Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, 'I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief,' therefore her plagues will come in a single day—pestilence and mourning and famine—and she will be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God that judges her.

(Revelation 18:6-8)¹

Great city, successful empire, queenly Whore, ambitious building project, united charismatic power, and failed achievement, Babylon is both vilified and glamorized. It is condemned (as immoral, undemocratic, inhuman) and imitated (as sensational, titillating, tolerant, diverse, and unifying). Babylon appears in shifting configuration in debates over the individual and the collective, law and exception to law, liberty and equality, moral control and economic expedience, tolerance and assimilation. In the war on Iraq, Babylon is the site of literal destruction. (Runions 2014, 2-3)

Babylon is the dream that shores up U.S. sovereignty and the nightmare that threatens it. It is a principal figure through which an imperial United States not only shapes but contemplates itself, Erin Runions proposes in *The Babylon Complex*, and the ambivalence and nearly opposing affective resonances of Babylon only attest to its flexible silhouette. The principal anxiety of the imperial U.S., then, seems to be actually getting what it wants: the dream of “having it all,” the voracious desire to consume, the wish to both isolate and contain its others (all of which are values regularly internalized by its citizens). It fears its own unchecked desires will cause it to collapse, and so desires of all kinds must be sublimated and regulated, if not outright policed. Hubris is, after all, one of the dominant moral lessons of Babel (Runions 2014, 51-54).²

Revelation thus offers a satisfyingly spectacular scene in which the Whore of Babylon is undone. It is a pinnacle moment in Revelation, not only because it is the moment in which the arch villain of the book is dramatically vanquished, but, strangely, because it is also the first time that that villain actually appears, at least named as such. In fact, Babylon's introduction at the end of chapter 16 begins not

¹ All New Testament quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, while all Old Testament quotes are from the New English Translation of the Septuagint.

² Runions discusses Josephus' influential reading of the Babel story, and his argument that *hybris*—meaning excessive wealth and the “unchecked effects of comfort and self-indulgence” rather than simply pride—was one of the principle transgressions leading to the fall of Babel (Runions 2014, 53).

with her clownish majesty but first with her judgment: “God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath,” (16:19), and a few verses later, “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters....’” (Rev. 17:1). Babylon is always already fallen.

To invoke Babylon is to invoke ruin and destruction. Babylon is of course the entity that destroyed Solomon’s temple, which is one of the more obvious reasons Revelation, written a decade or two after Rome destroys the second temple, evokes it here to speak about Rome. Babylon, by the first century, is also an empire that has seen its day. So calling up “Babylon” as a figure both immortalizes it as the epitome of empire, and represents the current imperial menace and its allure as on its way out. But Babylon as a figuration seems to have fragmentation and decay plaguing it on other, less straightforward levels. For instance, the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11, which as Runions points out negotiates (and leaves somewhat unresolved) the powers of both God and Babylonian technology/progress (Runions 2014, 13), embeds social dissolution into Babel/Babylon’s very project. The city and impressive tower are built in order to prevent scattering, to solidify unity amongst the people, but God punishes humanity, confusing their language and scattering them across the world. The building project is even thwarted by Yahweh before it can be completed—“they stopped building the city”—pointing to foiled potential, a fall before Babel got to enjoy its rise. The scattering that Yahweh performs, though, is fairly ambiguous. Although it would seem to be a story of Yahweh’s judgment on Babylon, a critique of Babylon as “mere babble” (Runions 2014, 13) the story seems to be a diasporic origin story at the same time, since Babylon represents Israel’s own diffusion and scattering.

This concurrence of identification/disidentification and moralizing on Babylon’s achievements and glory is, as Runions so strikingly demonstrates, part of the biblical discourse of Babylon:

Even within the revenge fantasy against Babylon in the book of Jeremiah, there is an implicit identification between Babylon and Judah, representing an ambiguity between them. In the middle of the oracles against Babylon, we find a short poem that seems to speak positively of Babylon as God’s weapon (51:20-23)...Conversely, a negative identification between Judah and Babylon occurs, as Hill notices, when the oracles against Babylon mimic the language of the earlier oracles against Judah... (Runions 2014, 15)

Likewise in the territory of mimicry, in second Isaiah, Babylon explicitly and blasphemously takes up the language of God, suggesting not only (as the story of Babel does) that Babylon’s power pales in comparison to God’s, but that Babylon is a cheap imitation of God.³ Second Isaiah’s figuration of Babylon as a queenly but humiliated woman is likely where Revelation draws its inspiration for Babylon as whore, though Revelation admittedly extends the analogy considerably. As

³ See Isaiah 47:1, 8: “Come down, sit on the ground, virgin daughter of Babylon! Enter the darkness, daughter of the Chaldeans, because you shall no longer be called tender and delicate...Now hear these things, delicate woman, who sits securely, who says in her heart, ‘I am, and there is no other.’”

Runions points out, one of the core conflicts of Revelation is a simultaneous revulsion for and identification with (or admiration of) “Babylon.”

This is part of what makes evocations of Babylon in contemporary political discourse so productive and wily, according to Runions, holding at once aspirations for sovereignty, anxieties about excess, dreams of unity, and worries about difference. “As in the tradition of Jeremiah,” Runions writes, “the United States can shift between being Babylon (the servant of Yahweh, the great site of culture) and standing firm against it (the place of evil, oppression, and excess). Babylon is tyrannical, colonizing, beguiling, technologically and culturally sophisticated, and spiritually threatening” (Runions 2014, 22). Starting from Runions’ diagnosis of the dichotomized but still ambiguous expressive value of Babylon for what it means and feels like to belong to an empire, I want to suggest here that Babylon’s fall, or rather Babylon as always already fallen, has particular traction as an expressive discourse on diasporic belonging. Runions’ book represents perhaps the most theoretically refined and politically urgent work in contemporary biblical scholarship, and its sensitive titration of history, theory, and cultural critique offers an integrative challenge that, frankly, I cannot meet in this paper, which will be relatively antiquarian in focus. But inspired by Runions’ honed attention to the questions of biopolitics and sovereignty circulating around the figure of Babylon, I hope 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, I suggest more generally that imperial ruins—by which I mean both the ruination incurred by empire and the specter of empire’s own ruination—are the remains through which certain diasporic aspirations and colonial experiences are articulated and considered.

By “diaspora” and “diasporic” I do not simply mean a group of exiles separated from homeland. Some theories of diaspora, specifically within the field of cultural studies (cf. Axel 2001, Braziel and Mannur 2003, Chow 1993, Hall 1990), have complicated that traditional definition, noticing not only that origins and place are always imaginative and discursive enterprises but that place isn’t necessarily the only or primary way of figuring diasporic belonging. Indeed imperial/colonial violence has been much more the focus of current diaspora studies. Violence is not understood to be simply *interruptive* of belonging, but productive of it, fusing people together into collectives across and despite their other differences. Thus origins and homeland are creative adaptations to social fracture, ways of figuring a new, shared, colonial positionality (cf. especially Hall, 1990).

This means, however, that diasporic belonging is generated through—relies upon—imperial and/or colonial maps and processes of subjectivication. As such, diasporic belonging, like colonial subjectivity at large, is always at least double. One belongs more distinctly to one’s diasporic collective *through* belonging to the imperial or colonizing entity.⁴ This might seem counterintuitive, since the experience of diaspora feels more often like alienation or tension from the imperial or colonizing entity, or because, for example, colonized people are regularly deemed nonpersons or “bad citizens” of the state: discipline has always been a

⁴ For a more extended summary of some theories of diaspora and their applicability to New Testament and affiliated literature, see Kotrosits (2015, especially 10-15, 135-138).

primary way of structuring belonging. I mean “belonging” then not as a feeling of at-home-ness (though it might include that), but rather a set of entanglements, of affective attachments, that contain both/either “positive” or “negative” feelings about any given collective.

The complexity of diasporic belonging helps us open up some new channels in the ambiguous relationship to and dichotomous feelings around Babylon—and particularly the tension and collusion between God and Babylon. Runions quotes John Hill, who observes that in Jeremiah Babylon is both a metaphor for exile and landlessness, and represents “the possibility of a future for Judah” (Runions 2014, 13). This is exactly because of the inherent doubleness of diasporic belonging: Babylon’s violence, while interrupting Judah’s sovereignty, ironically strengthens and enables it as a collectivity. The explanation for Babylon’s conquest is that God “uses” Babylon to punish his people, largely for cultural accommodation—a theme steadily repeated throughout Israel’s history. That instrumentalization not only manages to negotiate questions of God’s power in a time of helplessness, but suggests that God *uses Babylon* as a disciplinary mechanism to *show how thoroughly they belong to God*. In other words, “God’s people” are most definitively God’s people when given over to another power.

God’s judgment of “his” people, while uncomfortable for its victim blaming, thus imagines a disciplinary power outside of the current, overarching political one. It is a redescription of a destructive (imperial) act that coalesces a people, and the collusion between God and Babylon is at once an acknowledgement of and rhetorical and imaginative response to the hair-raising ambiguity of colonial life. But of course God’s judgment and anger is not only the imagined source-behind-the-source of the temple’s destruction, it is also the engine behind visions of Babylon’s ruin. God “restores” his people through God’s defeat of Babylon. These visions of Babylon’s destruction are, of course, revenge fantasies, as Runions points out, part of pitting Babylon as “the antagonist against which to claim transcendent sovereignty and authority” (2014, 36). In Revelation this dependence of Israel’s sovereignty on Babylon/empire’s defeat is especially conspicuous, since the swallowing up of Babylon/Rome is tied so closely to the new Jerusalem’s descent from the heavens, a vision which ends with the lamb and its followers taking up the divine throne.

But these visions of Babylon’s fall are other things, as well, and the ruin of Jerusalem and the ruin of “Babylon” are implicated in each other on deeper levels. In fact, if Babel tells us anything, as both diaspora origin story and story of Babylon’s untimely fall, a signal of God’s power and God’s defensive vulnerability, it tells us that ruin and ruination themselves represent strange materials and moments out of which constituencies are at once born and confused, and in which the presumed lines between life and death, power and vulnerability, are corroded.

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Ruins, both as metaphors and in and of themselves, are nothing if not socially useful. The recent critical work on ruins, while paying attention largely to ruins of the last two centuries (the Amazon, the Congo, and post-Holocaust Germany, Detroit or the post-industrial U.S. at large), illustrates how ruins are fetishized, romanticized, and refigured (cf. Hell and Schonle 2010, Gordillo 2014, Yablon

2009).⁵ Ruins are not just targeted effects of imperialism, colonialism, and/or capitalism, they have a kind of social expediency for the creation and maintenance of populations, not to mention a kind of material agency in their stubborn persistence and framing of landscapes (Stoler 2013, 1-35).

James Porter (2001), however, has done some initial work addressing ruins and the social discourse around them in the ancient world. Porter writes about Pausanias and pseudo-Longinus, two Greek writers of the Roman imperial period who, respectively, tour the architecture and literature of Greece's past. Porter describes the way ruins function as fragments through which longings for wholeness can be expressed and satisfied, or at least satisfied imaginatively. Pausanias and Longinus, like their contemporaries, prefer to skip over artifacts from the diffuse and complicated Hellenistic period, focusing on those from the vaunted classical Greece. The effect, Porter suggests is:

the imaginary wholeness of a Greece that was made to contrast sharply with the ruined condition of the monuments presented. Pausanias dwells upon monuments that are in fragments. Longinus serves up an antique past that is itself in fragments, and deliberately so, in the form of quotations torn from their original seats and contexts. The invitation to readers is that they restore the ruins in their minds. (Porter 2001, 67)

This "restoration" is one in which Pausanias participates in and creates an idealized notion of Greece and Greek belonging. Pausanias makes recourse to both the brief period of Greece's political sovereignty and a much more expansive idea of "Greekness"/the Greek people (Porter 2001, 68-69). According to Porter, Pausanias, fully part of the set of trends and sensibilities housed under the term "second sophistic," is among other writers who "embrace and exploit the uncertainties of their [Greek] identity" by fashioning their own identity in the midst of the generalized anxiety about belonging in the social flux of the Roman Mediterranean (2001, 90). Ruins in the ancient Mediterranean are plentiful, and not only do they foreground the destructiveness of imperial life, but that ubiquitous rubble becomes the very material through which one's distinctness is claimed and elaborated.

Porter draws attention to a particular passage in Pausanias on Megalopolis that offers a glimpse into what fallen cities evoked for those who considered them. In that passage, Pausanias laments how Megalopolis, "viewed with the highest hopes by the Greeks, now lies mostly in ruins, short of all its beauty and ancient prosperity" (8.33.1; Porter 2001, 67). Pausanias compares it to other great cities that likewise have fallen from their glory—Ninevah, Mecenae, and, notably, Babylon—describing them as now small, desolate, and modest. He waxes on the inevitability of change, God's will, the workings of Fortune, and how "transient and frail are the affairs of man" (8.33.4; Porter 2001, 67).

Pausanias' marveling at contingency, and his articulation of a relationship between the ruined and the magnificent, points to the way ruins impart a sense of the sublime, or that which is "wondrous and miraculous, the outsized and the venerable, and above all in what lies beyond reach in the present" (Porter 2001, 71-

⁵ One exception to the generally modern interests in these volumes on ruins is an essay by Julia Hell, "Imperial Ruin Gazers, or Why Did Scipio Weep?" (Hell and Schonle, 2010), in which she compares ancient and modern ruin gazers.

72). Ruins are tangible objects that produce a sense of a numinous absence, something outside of ordinary comprehension, but something *felt*; seeing and not being able to see are complementary partners in producing a sense of the sublime. So the fragmentary, metonymic nature of ruins is part of what lends them sublimity—they are the trace of something incomprehensible.⁶ For Pausanias, his travel and participation in the rituals of ancient Greece through the broken pieces that continue on into his present are what produces the elevated fantasy of a numinous entity, an entity to which he emphatically claims belonging.

The generality embedded in Megalopolis's very name (Greek for "great city"), and the philosophizing on the similar, inevitable fates of other cities—often metonyms for empires—casts a distanced "this too shall pass" glance on the places themselves. There is tension then between these cities' exceptional grandeur and their ordinary ephemerality. Notably, Pausanias is less impressed with the grandeur of the cities than the wonders of Fortune and her capriciousness (Porter 2001, 74).⁷ Nonetheless, ruins point both to the magnificence of the city and to its precariousness—indeed, the more magnificent the city, the more precarious its position for Pausanias, as if he is performing his own moralizing reading of the tower of Babel story. Pausanias finds himself enamored most with Greece in its relatively short moment of political sovereignty (Porter 2001, 68-69), but his use of ruins to elaborate that vision suggests that the project of sovereignty is always haunted by the inescapable life-cycles of political entities. Ruins relativize the exceptionalism on which political sovereignty is so often predicated; the divine sanction of political dominance ironized by the volatility of divine will.

The tension between exceptionalism and unexceptional ephemerality resides in Revelation's own implicit recourse to ruins, but the acknowledgement of the volatility of divine will is much more tacit. The new Jerusalem is a literal "restoration" of the old Jerusalem in much the same way as Pausanias's Greece is dreamt through its remains—it is a perfection of the old city, gathering in all those followers of the lamb and those who are faithful to God. Reading Revelation as a work of mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and negotiating diasporic belonging in its wake rather than as a text about any specifically Christian persecution, social conflicts, or negotiation of empire,⁸ it seems Revelation's new Jerusalem is like Pausanias' Greece in that it is a strategically inaccessible place, a

⁶ Cf. Runions, borrowing from the work of Charles Gaines, also discusses the sublime, and offers a queerly sublime ethics of reading Babylon and Christ (2014, 213-245). My hunch is that much could be developed out of the ruins of Babylon, the sublime ruins of Pausanias, and Runions' interests in the queerly sublime—too much for this particular essay, unfortunately.

⁷ As Porter writes, "at the heart of the account itself is the fundamental shock of contingency...that is itself elevated to sublime status" (Porter 2001, 75).

⁸ Although the vast majority of major historical studies on Revelation understand Revelation as "Christian" in its first century context and interpret it accordingly (cf. Baukham 1993, Collins 1984, Pippin, Beale 1999, Schussler Fiorenza 1991) I follow John Marshall (2001) who reads the book as not Christian at all but rather a response to and from within Israelite diaspora, though Marshall defines "diaspora" more traditionally as a separation from homeland. As Marshall also notes, Revelation never uses the term "Christian" and extant sources corroborate dating the emergence of the term "Christian" late in the reign of Trajan (117-119). (cf. Kotrosits 2015, chapter 2). Revelation's deep dependence on Israelite literature and motifs, and its very vision of a new, restored Jerusalem suggest not simply a reliance on Israel's literature and history, but an *investment* in belonging to the larger collective of Israel.

sublime place, which not only gets figured in and through ruins, but carries important diasporic social traction.

Contra Pausanius, who wonders at the strange workings of fate and divine will and restores Greece through memory (thus doing his diasporic work in the register of the past),⁹ Revelation imagines the physical restoration of Jerusalem as the restoration of God's will, doing its diasporic work in the register of the future. The new Jerusalem is not just one regime replacing the old, it is vindication. In fact, while Roman sovereignty, exceptionalism, and claims to divinely sanctioned rule (cf. Ando 2000) are ironized by its characterization as the always-already fallen Babylon, the new Jerusalem is imagined as free from threat and impurity, a utopian ideal of sovereignty—not just divinely *authorized* sovereignty, but the sovereignty of God himself.¹⁰

In other words, the new Jerusalem is a city immune from ruin,¹¹ and it is thus imagined in contrast to both the real Jerusalem and Babylon. The new Jerusalem is not just *imagined in contrast* to the real Jerusalem and Babylon, though, it is *figured out of the ruins* of both Jerusalem and Babylon—ruins which, it turns out, are pretty difficult to differentiate. Chapter 11, for instance, begins with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem:

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, “Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months.” (Revelation 11:1-2)

Revelation goes on to describe the “two witnesses” who will prophesy in sackcloth, promising fiery destruction to anyone that dares harm them (v. 4-5). After their prophesy, however, the beast will come up and “make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (v. 7-8). After the two prophets are raised, one tenth of the city is destroyed in an earthquake (v. 13).

Is this latter part of the passage talking about Jerusalem, Rome, or both?¹² In the first part of 11, Jerusalem is called “the holy city,” and this city in verse 8 is called

⁹ Cf. Susan Alcock's significant work on Pausanius (among others who imagine Greek pasts) and the relationship of architecture, memory/forgetting, and belonging/identity (2002).

¹⁰ Notably, the nations and the kings of the earth are still part of this final, restorative vision (cf. Rev. 21:24, 26). Such “inclusiveness” under the rubric of clearly defined, even absolute, sovereignty seems, as Runions points out, to manage diversity and its attendant anxieties. The nations are welcomed in here as loyal subjects who only function to aggrandize and justify God's righteous rule.

¹¹ Notice that the new Jerusalem has spectacular, highly decorated walls and gates (cf. chapter 21), but the gates “will never be shut by day” and “there will be no night there (21:25), because “nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood” (v. 27).

¹² Interpretations of this passage depend heavily on the presumably Christian character of Revelation at large. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1991, 78) noting that attempting to make allegorical sense of this section is difficult at best, sees the great city and the holy city as symbolic of Jerusalem and the Christian community, respectively. Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that the two cities are conflated into Jerusalem, and that God's wrath on the city is for the rejection of Jesus (1984, 84-86), leading her to conclude that Revelation is a Christian text which has a largely

“the great city,” terms that are not mutually exclusive, but also seem to be distinguishing. If it would then seem that the “great city” that is “called Sodom and Egypt” references Rome, that reference is interrupted by the reference to the place “where also their Lord was crucified.” That would be closer to Jerusalem (at least according to gospel tradition).

“Sodom and Egypt” is itself an incoherent referent. While Sodom and Egypt, like Babylon, are both used to figure cultural otherness and sexual/cultural impurity, both also represent diasporically complicated elements of Israel’s history. Egypt is the oppressive imperial presence through and against which an “original” Israel articulates itself, even as it is clear that “Egyptianness” is also constitutive of Israelite belonging from the get-go (most notably in the Egyptian lineage and name of Moses). Sodom also figures as a too-close-for-comfort contaminating force in Israel’s history. Not only is it the home of choice for Lot, morally dubious kin of Abraham (cf. Genesis 13:12), and the immoral city from which he is narrowly saved (cf. Genesis 19:1-29). But as if testifying to the ambiguity and contagion of Sodom and its destructiveness/destruction, Lot’s wife is turned into a pillar of salt for simply, and perhaps sympathetically, looking back as it burns (Genesis 25:26).¹³ Sodom is also thus like Babylon in its virtual synonymy with destruction, and its position as the foreign place which one might make one’s home, and out of which one must come to be saved iniquity and God’s judgment of it.

This confusion of cities certainly matches the open-ended referentiality of Revelation at large (cf. Boring 1989, 35-60), but it is particularly significant, even poignant, from a postcolonial or diaspora perspective. The question of which city, or whose city, is being ruined is evoked by Jerusalem itself, since from economic, political, and even cultural standpoints, it was somewhat typical for the ancient Mediterranean: Jerusalem becomes Rome in chapter 11 because Jerusalem was in effect a Roman city (Schwartz 2001). The associative drift from Jerusalem to Rome expresses not just ambivalence about Jerusalem as a (complicated) place but, implicitly, a question of which is one’s “home” city. I don’t mean “home” city in any literal sense of trying to place Revelation or its writer in a particular location, but rather, consonant with diaspora theory, I mean Rome and Jerusalem as “home” cities in terms of emblematic cities that are figures for constituencies

strained (albeit formative) relationship to Israel (or “Judaism,” for Collins). John Marshall (2001, 170-173) argues against both Collins and Schussler Fiorenza, and suggests that the phrase “where also their Lord was crucified” should not be over-emphasized or taken as a literal geographical referent, but simply a reference to the fact that Jesus was crucified by the Romans.

¹³ See Kent Brintnall’s striking elaboration of this image in the beginning of his essay “Who Weeps for the Sodomite?” (forthcoming) which gives a history of pro-LGBT readings of the passage and the stakes of such interpretations: “With the possible exception of Lot and his daughters, it seems virtually no one in the history of the West has obeyed the injunction not to look back on the fiery devastation rained upon the Cities of the Plain. While gendered injustice appears to play a role in the punishment meted out against Lot’s wife, when one begins to rack up the shame, terror, anger, and hate experienced by those who have tried to discern—or think that they understand—what happened in Sodom and Gomorrah, and to whom, and why, it may be that no one who has looked back has been left unscathed. ...The smoldering rubble cautions all who survived the initial blast to be wary lest sodomitic vice—whatever *that* might be—once again catch heaven’s attention.” Ruin is a kind of contagion that one can’t turn away from, and yet in which one fears being implicated.

and kinds of belonging. “Babylon” in fact specifically evokes the question of the ambiguities of home, since there is such a wide set of attitudes and affective associations with it in Hebrew literature, and there was at least the sense that plenty of those exiled to Babylon didn’t want to leave when they finally had the chance (cf. Runions 2014, 10-19).¹⁴

Runions draws on the discourse of Babylon and Babel to offer a crucial reminder that not only are body politics always about citizenship, and bodily landscapes about national landscapes, but that the reproduction of the national body demands relegating certain (sexualized and racialized) bodies to destruction and death. The whore of Babylon is part of a larger discourse in which cities were depicted as somatic, and so they express somatic or affective experiences. Thus ruined cities aren’t just emblematic or constructive of constituencies, they also seem to imply or reflect social-subjective kinds of experiences of those constituencies;¹⁵ in particular, it seems they register biopolitical hazard and entanglement. In other words, the ruined city is not just the ruination of architecture, not just the sign of the decimation of an entity or the crushing of its aspirations of self-determination, but as a figure, the city in ruins expressed in dramatic way the broader colonial or diasporic subjective experience of degradation and breakdown, the experience of biopolitical precarity in which the destruction of certain populations creates a future for others.¹⁶ In this vein, and elaborating on the ongoing productivity of ruin/ruination, Ann Laura Stoler describes two dimensions of Frantz Fanon’s work: his attention to the huge psychological toll attending French colonial rule in Algeria and his attention to the physical neglect and ruination of Algerian landscapes. Fanon describes it as the “tinge of decay,” and Stoler notes that the notion of a decaying personhood should not be seen as simply metaphor (Stoler 2014, 10-11). Ruination is, for Stoler, an

¹⁴ Of course, Babylonia continued to be home to a vibrant Jewish/Judean population long after the exile, eventually generating a strong rabbinic community and the Babylonian Talmud. (see Jacob Neusner’s 5 volume *History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 1965-70). Likewise, Babylonian Jews were hardly sequestered away from Jerusalem: one of Herod’s high priest appointees, Hananel, was a Babylonian, much to the dismay of those with Hasmonean loyalties, for instance. This was probably not exceptional: Herod’s larger program of incorporating people associated with Israel but living outside of Judea into the political life of Judea must have included Babylonians. It is interesting to ask what such evocations of Babylon, and Babylon’s fall, might have meant in the context of these more geographical and material considerations of first century diasporic dynamics.

¹⁵ Ancient laments for fallen cities often appear to be waxing about human mortality, in general (Hell 2010), but the personification of cities (overlapping with the personification of nations) in ancient literature and visual representation points to the ways individuals, collectives, and their associated political geographies implied each other. This was also obviously a gendered enterprise: the depiction of Rome’s conquered nations, or at least those nations that loomed large in Rome’s imagination, as ethnically stereotyped female figures, often in subjugated poses, is one striking example (see Lopez 2008; Taussig 2012). Although as Stephen Moore’s work on the depiction of the goddess/city Roma shows, female personification of a people/place did not always denote subjugation (Moore 2009). In any case, the gendered dimensions of these representations demonstrate just how deeply individuals, collectives, and geographies were entangled.

¹⁶ I evoke biopolitics here with regard to ancient imperial dynamics, despite the fact that biopolitics, at least according to Foucault, typically refers to a modern form of management and control. While obviously the biopolitical technologies of modernity are particular, I am suspicious of such a steep periodization of biopolitical control in general as the fostering/management of life, sustenance and reproduction through the production of populations marked for death, destruction, or neglect.

ongoing imperial process. It does not just mean the end, death, or erasure of certain people or things, but a continuing impingement that creates “differential futures” (Stoler 2014, 11), and a concrete experience of breakdown on both subjective and environmental levels—levels that involve and reflect one another.

In the book of Daniel, for example, another post-Babylonian era text evoking Babylon,¹⁷ the repeated survival of physical danger and destruction (the fiery furnace, the den of lions) parallels the indestructible, incorruptible kingdom that the God of the most high promises. More specifically, in Daniel one finds repeated recourse to themes of decline, destruction/indestructibility, and restoration/rising. Focusing simply on Nebuchadnezzar’s place in the story: not only does Daniel save himself from death by knowing and interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2—a dream about the decline and fall of various kingdoms—but in Daniel’s reading of the dream, the kingdoms that replace one another are symbolized by a statue composed of metals declining in value (gold, silver, bronze, and iron mixed with clay). Nebuchadnezzar himself is the gold head of the statue. The dream culminates, however, with a kingdom (i.e. Israel) that will not fall. Indeed, it is a kingdom that “will not be corrupted” and will “crush and abolish those kingdoms and it will stand forever” (Daniel 2:44). In the next chapter, when Nebuchadnezzar insists that everyone bow and worship the gold statue he has built (one not unlike that in his dream) or be thrown into the furnace, three Judean men refuse. Nebuchadnezzar, seeing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego emerge unscathed from the furnace, comments that “Lo, I see four men unbound and walking in the fire, and no ruin (*phthora*) has come to them...” (Dan 3:92).

In the following chapter, we find Daniel interpreting another dream Nebuchadnezzar has of his own downfall—this time symbolized by a tree cut down. As Nebuchadnezzar hears his fate delivered by Daniel, the text jumps to a year later, in which Nebuchadnezzar is strolling on the walls and through the towers, saying proudly to himself, “This is the great Babylon, which I have built by the might of my power, and it will be called my royal house” (4:27), when a voice from heaven tells him he will lose his power by sunrise. Immediately, he is exiled from civilization and is treated like an animal, being fed like oxen and growing his hair and nails long like a bird (4:33). Posing questions about power and what lasts, and noticing that sovereignty has its ironies, the text both implicitly and directly associates ruin and restoration along geopolitical, material/structural, and personal/subjective lines. Ruins seem to reveal not just the slipperiness of sovereignty, but a related uncertainty in configurations of the human. Another moment in which ruin/ruination haunts the boundaries of the human follows in Daniel 5:5-6, when a disembodied hand writes King Belshazzar’s fate on the wall. The writing hand might be read as an emblem of dismemberment, symbolic of physical destruction and the fracturing of a social body, the ghostly remnant that leaves messages on the hard plaster of the palace walls, and disturbs the presumption of the power that destroyed it.

¹⁷ The dating of Daniel is complicated by its mix of languages and genres or sources. Modern scholarship generally views Daniel as a whole as a Hellenistic text, and additionally, many scholars date chapters 7-12, which show pointed interest in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, to the Maccabean period. Chapters 1-6, though circulating earlier, or perhaps composed a century or more earlier, are still most likely centuries later than the neo-Babylonian period. See Collins 1993, 24-50.

Interestingly, the book of Daniel's trajectory in the text is one in which faith in God is continually rewarded with avoidance of destruction of varying sorts, and wisdom and savvy with positions of power under foreign kings.¹⁸ It is an improbable and idealized picture of diasporic social negotiation, in which one manages to ascend to the heart of colonial administrations while themselves staying steadfast and culturally intact, even while kings lose their minds.¹⁹ No threat is more harrowing than God, it turns out, who produces *real* ruination, often of cosmic proportions, compared to the inconsequential dangers imposed by foreign authorities. Indeed, Daniel's faith is never in question in the book of Daniel. The text prefers to focus its interest on the faithfulness/unfaithfulness of foreign rulers, most compellingly, I think, through Nebuchadnezzar's haunting dreams about the precarity of his sovereignty, and his idol worship and then frightened concession about the sovereignty of the "most high" god. Anxiety about destruction circulates somewhat ironically around Babylon and its rulers, perhaps out of sympathetic attachment and identification, but also thereby displacing worries about colonial ruination onto the colonial figures themselves.²⁰

As a text, Daniel thus charts a narrow path in which colonial ruin and the felt dangers of the ruinous God are imagined, against the odds, as avoidable. For Revelation on the other hand, even while it alludes so heavily to Daniel, the possibility of ruination is never fully displaced from its aspirations, and is thus more thoroughly haunting. The untouchable new Jerusalem, that utopian ideal of sovereignty which is seemingly immune from destruction, still carries the hints of ruin within it: by the end, the lamb standing as if slaughtered, that graphic reference to violence and dehumanizing victimhood, resides in the center of the divine throne. Revelation's own dramatic bid for (imagined) political viability in the new Jerusalem thus contains an implicit acknowledgement of the vulnerability at the heart of its project.²¹

The lamb, standing as if slaughtered, is not just a figure for violence and victimhood in a general way, but carries specific associations with the (destroyed) temple—less because of any associations with sacrifice than because Revelation

¹⁸ This trajectory is not particular to Daniel, and something like it—in which the protagonist is endangered, escapes death or imprisonment, and then is given recognition or power—occurs in the stories of Joseph and Esther, for example (Collins 1993, 192; Nickelsburg, 1972).

¹⁹ W. Lee Humphreys (1973) has suggested that the project of Daniel, not unlike the book of Esther, is to imagine how "the Jew can remain loyal to his heritage and God and yet live a creative, rewarding, and fulfilled life precisely within a foreign setting...." (223). Humphreys also suggests that the book of Daniel forces the reader to "stretch his [sic] credulity to the breaking point" to accept a figure who remains loyal to God and ascends through foreign administrations in the first part of the book, only to condemn those powers as oppressive and against God's plan in the second part (223). Aside from the source questions that attend the book of Daniel, this does point to a larger disjuncture and idealization in the book in which foreign power and loyalty to Israel are seen as reconcilable.

²⁰ In fact, it is through the change of heart of these foreign rulers, their sudden loyalty to Israel's god, that the nations are able to come to Yahweh, fulfilling earlier Hebrew scriptural visions (most distinctly in second Isaiah). See Daniel 4:34, 6:25-27, e.g. It is also worth noting that Daniel's interest in restoration at the end of the book in chapter 12 means not just restoration of a kingdom or a collective, but importantly a kind of personal/subjective restoration through "resurrection," described as becoming like stars.

²¹ Cf. Kotrosits 2014.

states that in the new Jerusalem, there is no temple, “for its temple is Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22).²² Revelation is not the only text to associate Jesus and the temple, however. The Letter to the Hebrews makes of Jesus both high priest and the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, even suggesting that his flesh is the temple curtain (Heb 10:20), ironically making Jesus’ vulnerability and fleshiness a constitutive, material part of the indestructible heavenly temple. Just as distinctly, the Gospel of John has Jesus claim that he will resurrect the destroyed temple in three days, but as if all hope for the physical temple seemed useless or silly, the text clarifies that he was “speaking of the temple of his body” (John 2:21).²³ The Gospel of Mark frames a similar sentiment a bit differently:

Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’ But even on this point their testimony did not agree.” (Mark 14:57-59)

The Gospel of Mark makes the association of Jesus’ body with/as the temple (or at least needs to account for it), but retracts it by calling it “false testimony.” Later in the story, Jesus is taunted with these words he apparently did not speak while on the cross: “Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’” (15:29-30).

While the text shies away from calling Jesus’ body “another temple,” or a rebuilt temple, it does not however see an association between Jesus’s body and the temple itself as problematic. Case in point, at the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion, Jesus’ humiliating torture and death is dramatized as or alongside the destruction of the temple in the war: he calls out that God has abandoned him, is again mocked for his helplessness, and just as he breathes his last breath and cries out, the temple curtain is torn in two. It would seem then that the Gospel of Mark’s initial retraction around the association of Jesus with the temple is simply about the association of Jesus’ *resurrection* with the temple. The text rather presses the point that the association of Jesus’ body with the temple is that *both are in ruins*.²⁴

For the Gospel of Mark, not incidentally, both Jesus and the temple were always already fallen, given that both are predicted (at least in the narrative)

²² As Loren Johns (2003) has shown, Revelation’s use of *arnion* does not match the Septuagint’s preferred term for a burnt offering (*amnos*), and lambs were not the most popular sacrificial animals. Thus, Revelation’s use of lamb evokes the more general sense of vulnerability that *amnos* accumulates in Septuagint uses of the term. While there is no temple in the new Jerusalem, there is a heavenly temple in Revelation (cf. 11:19, 14:15, 15:5-6). Presumably there is no temple in the new Jerusalem because the new Jerusalem is already thoroughly free from impurity, making a cultic system of purification extraneous, but according to that logic there would be no need for a temple in heaven, either.

²³ The history of interpretation is heavy with supersessionist readings of this association that assume that Jesus equal Christianity and the temple equals Judaism. But rather than any kind of supersessionism or replacement theology, though, or even any kind of grand theological statement at all, it seems the association of Jesus’ violent death with the ruined temple simply expresses the ongoing colonial effects of debilitation and decomposition. These effects, by the way, don’t get transcended as much as they *catalyze* dreams of sovereignty and projects of belonging—both figured as “restoration.”

²⁴ Pressing the question of ruins in Mark further, it seems that the empty tomb scene is strongly reminiscent of the “numinous absence” in Pausanias’ ruins, as well.

regularly and in advance of their occurrence. The intensity of Mark's historical moment, in the immediate aftermath of the war, means that ruination dominates and infuses the gospel. The "little apocalypse" in Mark 13 in fact offers something of a phenomenology of ruin, since its *ex eventu* character means to describe *what things feel like now*, in Mark's present. Even apart from the "little apocalypse" of chapter 13, the Gospel of Mark depicts an entire landscape of ruin in its attention to the destitute, hungry, injured, near-dead, stigmatized, and condemned. The story of the Gerasene demoniac, a possessed man consigned to live in the tombs, has been most explored for its colonial resonances,²⁵ and is as evocative as the crucifixion scene in its associations between colonial experiences of deadness/hauntedness and physical structures. The stories of the Gerasene demoniac and of Jesus's crucifixion are only where the larger understanding of colonization as ruination, as at once de-structuring and objectifying, makes itself most overt. If the framing of the larger story of Mark as "good news" seems to be a pointed ironizing of the imperial foundational claim of giving order and structure to the cosmos,²⁶ then we should probably foreground the topography of human wreckage into which Jesus' (not always successful) healing, miracles, and teachings intervene, not just those healings, miracles, and teachings themselves.²⁷ In fact, the imperfect and incomplete character of Jesus' healing, the only fleeting moments of luminosity and relief in the transfiguration and the feasts for thousands, and the anti-climax of the empty tomb all suggest imperial/colonial ruination is only barely attenuated.

Ruins are where the monumental meets the personal, and where what we might call "social architecture" is literal, concrete, and distinctly material. The notion that one *feels like crumbled stone*, though, makes more understandable Pausanias' writing and investment in ruins, especially his deadened tone (interpreted as neutral description) which is only occasionally cut by a philosophical wistfulness.²⁸ It also makes the associations between Jesus and the temple in Mark and John, Revelation and Hebrews, more legible. John, Revelation, and Hebrews are embarking on diasporic restoration projects, apparent recuperations of sovereignty

²⁵ Reading the story of the Gerasene demoniac politically is practically commonplace these days, and the cue was largely taken from Ched Myers' (1988) signal work, which uses that pericope as an interpretive key for the rest of the gospel. Stephen Moore (2006) perhaps most clearly reads the story of the Gerasene demoniac as a parable of colonial occupation.

²⁶ Many have noted that the "good news" from Mark's incipit has uncanny parallels to the Priene calendar inscription which proclaims the good news of Augustus as giving order to the cosmos (Evans 2000). Mark's attention to wounded and/or marginalized figures and its ending with its protagonist dying a humiliated death under the auspices of a Roman soldier who mocks the idea that he could be a son of God, seems to be a caustic satire of Roman imperial "good news."

²⁷ Jesus is not only often misunderstood by his disciples (cf. Mark 4:10-13), but he has to work a little extra hard to get a blind man to see (8:22-26), and (more famously) can't heal in his home territory (6:5).

²⁸ As Jas Elsner (2001) also points out, "Pausanias' choice of structure—apparently so simple and unreflective—has the virtue of naturalizing, through the relentless 'and next we come to this place' quality of the travel book, his texts' subtle reflection on Greece as other...and simultaneously as self in the Greek-speaking pilgrim's confrontation with all that is most essential and most sacred about the Greek tradition..." (5). Elsner connects this naturalization through structure to contemporary readings of Pausanias that simply reconstruct places in a literal or material way from his texts, rather than understanding his work as specifically literary and ideological.

(really re-articulations of it) through ruins, while for Mark the project of sovereignty—understood both as an imagination of personal self-determination and as collective political autonomy—itself is still in ruins, though, importantly, contingent affiliations and moments of vitality are still possible.²⁹ But in all cases, they testify to the stony, deadening effects and breakdown characteristic of colonial captivity.³⁰ Christ as seemingly mortally wounded animal and heavenly temple, as destroyed structure that is also surprisingly vital, chronicles ruination as a process that renders material remnants lively, even sublime, and figures people as “remains,” decaying part-objects.³¹

The ruined Jesus/Christ thus also might be seen as having diasporic resonances especially given how closely his crucified and/or resurrected body is tied to collectivity—from Paul’s oneness in Christ which aims to elide all differences, to Revelation’s lamb which leads the faithful to occupy the throne of the new Jerusalem, or even Luke/Acts figuration of a Jesus who restores Israel to wholeness.³² The ruined Jesus as a magnet for diasporic self-understanding and sociality, though, nonetheless suggests that forms of collectivity gather around figurations not just incidentally or out of their expediency, but because of their expressive power, their experiential resonance: Christ is a figure for colonial wreckage and the possibilities that attend it.

As Runions so amply demonstrates, Babylon is not only a socio-politically useful discourse, but an affectively saturated one, containing the hints of multiple and contradictory experiences of and affects accumulating around empire—hatred and desire, love and fear. But Babylon also always alludes to ruins and ruination. Thus if the bejeweled and voracious whore, the fallen tower and cacophonous collective are some of our deepest cultural preoccupations, it is in part because we are (that is, we feel like) glittering hyperbole and crumbled architecture; endlessly hungry and ever unsatisfied; too diffuse to make sense of and crowded out by our

²⁹ Though sovereignty is deeply questioned in the Gospel of Mark, healing and some kind of tentative salvation are still possible. In the tradition of Greco-Roman noble death, one is saved in the Gospel of Mark by emulating Jesus—staying faithful even to the point of death, and enduring to the end (cf. Mark 8:34-35, 13:13).

³⁰ Addressing especially Revelation, Mark, and Daniel as diasporic musings on and through imperial ruin, poses larger possibilities for considering “apocalyptic” literature as something other than as a distinct category, discrete theology, or comprehensive worldview. What we call “apocalyptic” scenes might have more interpretive purchase as part of a discourse on ruins/ruination, sovereignty, and diaspora.

³¹ I’m picking up here on the posthuman and new materialist turns in cultural studies and literary theory, particularly some of the strands which theorize the ways that the category of the “human” is always a racialized, gendered, and otherwise normativized category, and specifically what the instrumentalization of human beings, the compatible suffering and significations of human beings and animals, and the agencies and vitality of matter mean for the subject/object, human/non-human divides. I’m especially interested in the work of Mel Chen (2012) and Alexander G. Weheliye (2014), Eduardo Kohn (2013), and Jane Bennett (2010) along these lines.

³² Christ as simultaneously disciplined (non)citizen of Rome and conduit for diasporic belonging in fact parallels Brian Keith Axel’s work (2002) on Sikh martyrs and Sikh diasporic aspirations for sovereignty. See Kotrosits 2015, 117-145, where I discuss this parallel at more length. Again, in that book, I assume that there was nothing like a distinct Christian social phenomenon, theology, or self-understanding until at least well into the second century, and that all of what we consider “early Christian” literature should be understood as fully part of the larger colonial/diasporic conglomerate of ancient Israel.

own noise. We long for our own destruction and fear it, even while we wear the knowledge that the damage has already been wrought—the ruination is not only in the fall of Babylon, of course, but in its building. Still, the vigorous afterlives of the labile figure of Babel/Babylon, not to mention the vital remains of Jesus, do nothing if not testify to the dynamism of imperial ruins, and the ways in which all projects of sovereignty and the collectivities they imply constitute something like resurrections from rubble, which is to say new materializations of old politics of life and death.

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