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**Christopher Meredith**

# Zombie Bible

## Stant Litore's *Strangers in the Land* and the Conditions of Bibleness

Stant Litore's *Strangers in the Land* represents a very canny fusion of apocalyptic zombie literature and the biblical story of Deborah from Judg 4–5. This article examines the way Litore redeploys the zombie sub-genre to put otherwise obscured aspects of the Judges story on full display. Thinking through the Zombie in relation to the process of Kristevan abjection, the article also explores the ways in which the novel presents the so-called 'real' Bible as an already-zombified cultural phenomenon. Is the undead corpse a useful emblem through which we can explore the functioning of the social idea called 'The Bible' in all its gory detail?

The zombie bible is the collective name of a growing series of novels by Colorado-based author Stant Litore, each volume of which takes a biblical story or tradition and re-imagines it through the allegedly improbable lens of

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apocalyptic zombie fiction. Four volumes are currently available. *Death has Come up into Our Windows* tells the story of the prophet Jeremiah, trapped in his royal cistern in the zombie-infested Jerusalem; *What our Eyes have Witnessed* follows Bishop Polycarp as he tries to bring peace to a Roman community divided by the undead; *No Lasting Burial*, which represents an undead foray into the gospels; and *Strangers in the Land*, a 400-page reimagining of Deborah's foray into Galilee with Barak from Judg 4–5, which sees the prophet-judge face the escalating threat of the zombies of the north.[1] It is this last and most expansive of Litore's works that I want to devote some attention to here, looking particularly at the ways in which Litore re-imagines and reorganises the zombie sub-genre as a mode of resisting the biblical text, or rather, of resisting a particular deployment of the idea of the biblical text.[2]

[1] Stant Litore, *Death has Come up to Our Windows* (Seattle: 47North, 2012); *What our Eyes have Witnessed* (Seattle: 47North, 2012); *Strangers in the Land* (Seattle: 47North, 2012); *No Lasting Burial* (Seattle: 47North, 2014). At the outset, I would like to make plain my thanks to Stant Litore, who graciously read this essay and made some comments and suggestions (and the occasional gentle factual correction) when it was in the draft stage. His enthusiasm at my analysis of his work has been hugely appreciated—and I'm thrilled to have some of his comments buried in and amongst the footnotes here (Barthes truly did not know the power of the undead author). I trust Stant will forgive both any errors which remain (all mine) and my persistence with Kristeva over Levinas (whom he is obviously glossing in some sections of his novel). I can only say that Kristeva's centrality will make more sense once this project comes together with the other "abject" Bibles I am marshalling in my writing.

[2] It is worth my noting that this is not an isolated phenomenon. Zombie films themselves use biblical and religious tropes reasonably frequently. As Kim Paffenroth argues, Romero's film *Land of the Dead* (93 min; Universal, 2005), quite aside from adapting its tag-line from the gospel of Matthew ("the dead shall inherit the earth"), ends with an episode that "has visual overtones of the Israelites escaping from slavery by crossing the Red Sea": *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 131. In the same volume Paffenroth argues that Romero's earlier, genre-defining work, *Night of the Living Dead* essentially works to recast the problem of original sin. The much more recent (2013) film *World War Z* plays upon similar issues regarding religious, ethical, and social tensions, even invoking the idea of the "promised land," this time through a disquieting scene at the Israeli/Palestinian border in which ethnic and religious differences are put aside in the merciless hunt for the true monstrous Other (*World War Z*, dir. Marc Forster, 123 min, [Paramount, 2013], adapted from Max Brooks's, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* [New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006]). More direct appropriations of biblical texts and religious traditions exist too. Nina Kiriki Hoffman's *Zombies for Jesus* (1989), originally published in *Strained Relations*, ed. Alan Bard Newcomer (Eugene: Hypatia Press, 1989) works to spoof evangelical Christianity by, for example, telling the story of the backstage zombies that prop up a travelling Reverend's tall tales of bodily resurrection; the undead hostages bet fingers and limbs in their poker games. Stranger still is the "Stinque Zombie Bible" (http://zombie.stinque.com/bible/), an online open-source project to rewrite every

It should be stressed from the outset that Litore's volumes are not the result of rough intertextual hackery, an allegation made against other similar attempts at genre splicing (Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* being by far the most infamous).[3] On the contrary, Litore makes every effort to preserve the tenor of the originals amongst his undead additions. He transliterates familiar biblical proper names into Hebraic forms, works as far as possible with ancient Palestinian geography (with appended notes of apology where poetic license won out),[4] and writes according to the general narrative parameters of the stories as we know them, apparently seeking not to re-invent the texts but to use the zombie as a mode of corporealising certain drives that sit behind the narratives. In the re-telling of Jeremiah for instance, the zombie manifests the fear and uncertainty surrounding the prospect of a threat from within, the impossibility of knowing who is actually going to become dangerous, and of course the fear that emerges when our deeds (/dead) come back to haunt us. In *Strangers*, the zombie is more interested in making manifest the Bible's strange colonial politics, as we shall see. For despite its fantastic elaborations, and some prodigious gap filling, *Strangers* follows the general shape of Judg 4–5 reasonably carefully.

## The Reanimated Text

The plot runs something like this. The judge-cum-prophet Devora receives a petition to go with Barak and the Northern tribes to fight an unchecked zombie hoard that is wandering across Galilee. After some vacillation (in part prompted by Devora's own terrifying encounters with zombies as a child), Devora rides out under divine instruction with a small band to address the threat head-on. One by one her companions are killed and graphically eaten as they travel, until, having burnt and buried a number of corpses, and rescued but one small group of refugees, Devora returns alone to the southern tribes to demand more help. Interwoven with the main action is a sub-

verse of the King James Version as zombie fiction. Predictably, some parts of the biblical text lend themselves to the Stinque treatment better than others. Psalm 1:1 is a particularly lovely example: "Blessed is the man that shuffleth not in the gait of the zombies, nor standeth and stareth at nothing in the way of zombies, nor eateth the brains of the scornful."

[3] Jane Austin and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009). The first line probably gives enough of an indication of the tenor of the work: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains."

[4] Litore, *Strangers*, 417.

plot that deals with Devora's friendship with a Canaanite refugee, Hurriya, whom we first meet at the outset of the book when she approaches Devora's judgment seat looking for help for her zombified infant (whom Devora proceeds to impale, behead, and bury, contrary to the customs and wishes of her mother). Just as Devora warms to Hurriya, however, the young woman is herself bitten and Devora must exercise some judicious euthanasia to prevent her rising again. Through a complex series of events, it is actually Hurriya's enslaved sister, Ya-el (Jael), who wins the final victory of the book, pinning a zombie's head to the floor of her tent with a peg to secure her freedom from a life of sexual slavery, and in the process unwittingly allowing Devora to get away unscathed later.

The centrality of the Canaanite question cannot really be gainsaid in a reading, since it is with the Canaanites that Litore takes his most conspicuous liberty with Judg 4 and 5 (zombies notwithstanding). To put it baldly, Litore reverses the political scenario of the original text, making the Hebrews comfortably ascendant over Canaan. Gone is the Bible's complaint that King Jabin of Canaan "oppressed the children of Israel for twenty years" (4:3) and in its place are the complaints of Litore's overrun Canaanites, a spiritual and emotionally engaged indigenous population who, with the exception of a few roving bands and outlying camps, have been enslaved and put to work on the harvests, homes, and beds of their Hebrew masters. Thus Litore performs the fairly shrewd move of critiquing the ethnic dynamics of the biblical story by granting the original narrative exactly what its protagonists usually appear to want: meaningful mastery over the indigenous population of The Land. Litore thus explodes and undermines a number of themes that underwrite the biblical version of the tale, namely, the grasping of power through the dispossession of others ("the peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat in plunder, because you arose, Deborah"); the merciless treatment of the bested Sisera (5:26); and the text's celebration of Jael, "most blessed of women" (5:24), for the gruesome killing of a man cowering under a blanket.

So, to return to my point about literary faithfulness, Litore's Judges clearly takes some serious liberties with the story, but, that said, *Strangers* generally attempts to stage these elaborations within the ritual and political milieu implied by the original, and deviates in ways that seem primarily designed to highlight (rather than obscure or replace) the functioning of the biblical stories themselves. And much remains largely unaltered. Litore's Devora, like the biblical Deborah, is a bona fide prophet-judge who sits beneath a sacred tree to hear Israel's disputes; Israel, or "The People," operates as a fractured

tribal amphictyony which defines itself by adherence to a carefully defined and sacrosanct law (of which more in a moment); the Canaanites have been warred with but remain in "The Land" as a troublesome remainder. Devora reluctantly goes north with Barak, warning him that the victory will be won by women; the menace is quelled, if without finality; and a woman armed with a tent-peg ultimately wins the day. The Bible has been substantively re-imagined by the zombie sub-genre, but not entirely consumed by it.

My aim in the following pages is, first, to explore the ways in which *Strangers* passes comment on and contests the values of Judges. But more significantly, I also want to consider the possibility that the zombie is a figure that allows us to critique the *idea* of "Bible" itself. The zombie, as the bodily figure that confronts social systems with their own potential for failure, says something important about the problematic relationship that tends to exist between this notional Bible and the actual biblical texts themselves, the latter of which tends, often, to deny or undermine the former. In short, what I want to try to edge towards in this essay is an exploration of the correlations that run between the social functioning of the Bible on the one half-eaten hand, and the social functioning of the self-referential zombie on the other. The encounter *Strangers* stages between these two corpuses is instructive in that regard, and prompts a number of interesting questions. I begin however by addressing the figure of the zombie itself, asking the well-worn question of what, critically speaking, the zombie is supposed to *mean*?

## Zombie as Subtitle

Zombies cannot be translated. The prospect of neatly decoding the monstrous bodies of world literature into simple cultural drives is always tempting (golems representing the ego run amok, say, or vampires as feudal hegemony meets global capitalism). These are all problematic to a degree. But zombies are especially reluctant to play the translation game, being in a sense the very model of translation and transformation itself: one thing eaten up and taken over by another version of itself. If the zombie signifies anything, it is probably the human capacity for over- and re-signification, since the tousled and crumbly edges of the undead body can be shaped and reshaped according to almost any ideological proclivity imaginable. Much like Bibles.

To illustrate my point in respect of zombies, we might motion towards the array of rhetorical masters the zombie has served over the last century or

so (a brief foray, I promise, that will make more sense as the article goes on).[5] In Edward Halperin's inaugural movie, *White Zombie*,[6] the Haitian undead are colonial subjects, individually raised from death by a diabolical master who to all intents and purposes recreates the colonial slave-owner. These zombies image the loss of subjectivity, certainly, but as Gyllian Phillips explains, *White Zombie* primarily functioned as effective horror in its original context by manipulating "American anxiety, raised by the Haitian occupation, over race relations, and over the threat of an American inheritance of French colonial history."[7] In other words, what triggered fear in *White Zombie*'s first audiences was the idea of a white female operating under the control of a black Haitian man; it was the loss of western imperial subjectivity in particular that proved to be so petrifying. Precisely the same could be said of Jaques Tournier's *I Walked with a Zombie*,[8] where the drive of an imperial, missionary zeal again underlies the action and where the possible failure of Western cultural hegemony provides the main sense of peril in the film.[9]

More recently, zombies have ceased to highlight the injustices of overseas colonial experience and have stood in for the more localised terror. In George Romero's pioneering reinvention of the zombie, *Night of the Living*

[5] I begin with movies because, simply, the archetypal "texts" of the zombie oeuvre have been projected rather than printed. Exceptions exist, of course (Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, most obviously) but the zombie is peculiar in that its major cultural advances happened in cinemas; only subsequently did the zombie invade the library in any serious way. Sometimes the view surfaces that zombies have to function in the background in novels, or else have to be "remade" for literature (Kevin Alexander Boon, "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture" and Peter Dendle, "The Zombie as a Barometer for Cultural Anxiety," both in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007], 34–43, 44–59). This is of course first-rate nonsense. Zombies are not a platonic "ideal" to be unmade or remade. Zombies, rather, manifest themselves differently in different genres—as indeed does everything. Zombie is an umbrella term not an ethnic standard. Novels cannot exploit gore or visceral panic in quite the same way as Hollywood. This does not mean those elements are not present, or potent, in the written zombie genre, nor does it mean that filmic zombies have no relevance for the development of the written zombie, a fact I'm unashamedly exploiting here.

[6] *White Zombie*, dir. Edward Halperin, 67 mins (United Artists, 1932).

[7] Gyllian Phillips, "*White Zombie* and the Creole: William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* and American Imperialism in Haiti," in *Generation Zombie: Essays in the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, ed. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 28.

[8] *I Walked with a Zombie*, dir. Jaques Tournier, 69 min (RKO Radio Pictures, 1943).

[9] See Chris Vials, "The Origin of the Zombie in American Radio and Film: B-Horror, U.S. Empire, and the Politics of Disavowal," in Boluk and Lenz, *Generation Zombie*, 41–53.

*Dead*,[10] it is difficult to ignore the film's critique of America's social tensions, played out as the apocalypse is in a Middle American home. As Tom and Judy die, as the Cooper family destroys itself, as tensions emerge between Ben, the only African American on screen, and the catatonic Barbara, the domestic arena becomes the site of the disintegration of the everyday community. That Ben's death is ultimately at the hands of a white gang underlines the allegorical power of the Romeran zombie attack; it is an assault launched against the Same by the Same.[11] Romero's first sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*,[12] provides similar comment, this time on consumer culture, the zombies having colonised the shopping centre (it was "such an important place in their lives," says Stephen). The surviving humans' attempts to billet in the resource-rich mall are ultimately thwarted because, as Kevin Bishop puts it, the valiant band simply "find it impossible to see the shattered world around them in any terms other than those of possession and consumption."[13] Here the zombified body becomes a representative of the unseeing bovine mass of the market, to which the protagonists succumb in the end, eaten by its relentless hunger, and, of course, indistinguishable from it.[14]

[10] *Night of the Living Dead*, dir. George A. Romero, 95 min (Image Ten, Laurel Group, Market Square, 1968).

[11] As Kyle Bishop observes, the film explores "cultural anxieties connected to the American family of the 1960s, emphasizing in particular the breakdown of the nuclear family, the rising independence of women, the racial struggles of the Civil Rights movement, and the horrors of the Vietnam war," which the film addresses through the conspicuous condemnation of those who use violence to achieve their ends (*American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 121). For Bishop's comments on Vietnam, see 13–14 (where he notes how Joseph Maddrey called Romero's efforts "hippie gothic"); see also Karen Randell, "Lost Bodies/Lost Souls: *Night of the Living Dead* and *Deathdream* as Vietnam Narrative," in Boluk and Lenz, *Generation Zombie*, 67–76).

[12] *Dawn of the Dead*, dir. George A. Romero, 127 min (United, 1979).

[13] Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, 130.

[14] For Jane Pulliam, zombies are "a malleable symbol—representing everything from the horrors of slavery, white xenophobia, Cold War angst, the fear of death, and even apprehensions about consumer culture" ("The Zombie," in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares*, volume 2, ed. S.T Joshi (London: Greenwood, 2007), 724. Peter Dendle concurs: monsters are "marked by everything from concerns over environmental deterioration, political conflict, the growth of consumer capitalism, and the commodification of the body in contemporary biomedical science" ("The Zombie as a Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 45). As Boluk and Lenz point out, zombies simply "reflect whatever our greatest fears happen to be at the time" ("Generation Z, the Age of Apocalypse," in *Generation Zombie*, 2). See also Jessica Murray "A Zombie Apocalyspe:

If we accede for a moment to what is undoubtedly, but possibly forgivably, an historical simplification, these two traditions of zombie story make up two distinct species of zombified body. First, the colonial undead of Tournay and Halperin are individuals intentionally raised from death and made to perform as automatons. Second, and appearing initially in Romero's work, are the pandemical zombies: zombies who are raised by some kind of broader phenomenon, who far outnumber the human protagonists in the story, who feed on human flesh, and who have a highly contagious condition.[15] Shawn McIntosh points out that the major ideological differences between them determine their different cultural functions, and the different power structures that underwrite them. The peasants in *White Zombie* et al. fear the colonial zombie because it threatens their status as part of the community. The idea of the zombie threatens their removal from the "many" and their becoming "a one." Conversely, modern industrialist audiences fear the Romeran zombie because it threatens their individuality, making possible the dissolution of the one into the many.[16] The capitalistic and neo-liberal ideologies that regulate these fears would seem to be self-evident. Fear's triggers are not universal, after all.

In these admittedly fleeting examples, it is clear that the zombie does not "mean" a loss of subjectivity, or slavery, or the breakdown of the cosmic-cum-cultural system. The zombie is instead a ready and willing vehicle in and as which a variety of social tensions can be corporealised. This is one of the things that makes the undead at once so useful and yet so hard to "translate" into a two-dimensional cultural pathology. It is notable though that while different cultural forces take hold of the zombie's body—now voodoo, now Vietnam, now Versace—what remains is the familiarity of those forces. Unlike certain other creatures, the Martian for instance, or the Fates, whose difference can act as a main feature in their cultural usefulness, the undead activates our fears through what we recognise, both bodily and socially.[17] More

Opening Representational Spaces for Alternative Constructions of Gender and Sexuality," *Journal of Literary Studies* 29, no. 4 (2013), 1–19.

[15] A quick Google search will reveal that numerous discussions exist regarding the proper canonical "rules" of the zombie; whether or not they shuffle seems to evoke considerable ferocity of opinion.

[16] Shawn McIntosh "The Evolution of the Zombie: The Monster that Keeps Coming Back," in *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, ed. Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 3.

[17] See Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, 117. It would be a mistake to take my exposition here as an indication that I believe many/most monstrous forms to be eminently "definable"

obviously than any other monster, they are "us" and the horror they bring with them is not fantastic or eccentric but anthropological; it is a horror we already know, perhaps one in which we already participate. Consequently, the fear aroused by the zombie is not a horror of the alien but is always and necessarily a horror of the Same. This is why the zombie cannot be translated as though it is a social sign, for the zombie is a perceptive stance more than a sign, a mode of translation. Zombies translate "us" into "us."[18]

Obvious connections run between the mirroring power of the zombie and Julia Kristeva's sense of the abject: one's response to the vile, the unsightly, and, importantly, the distinctly *personal* items that human society rejects. Shit, pus, vomit, spoilt food, and, most importantly, the corpse, these all occupy the emotional space between the me and the not-me. They manifest a rupture between subject and object which forms part of our own formation of identity, since, in rejecting the not-me, I inaugurate a space that is "mine." Or, as Kristeva puts it:

> If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border

in culture or that the zombie represents an important exception to that rule. I certainly do not think many things—monsters included—are adequately served or circumscribed by definitions, which generally fail. And I do indeed think the zombie's resistance to anything approaching a non-self-referential characterization is a significant feature of its cultural usefulness. However, I cannot subscribe to the view sometimes tacitly implied by scholars that, since cultural "translations" of monsters do not finally hold, one monster can stand in for another; Frankenstein as not an understudy for the Terminator, much less for the golem. As Donna Haraway says of the cyborg, "unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and a cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (*Cyborg Manifesto*, 151). In other words, monsters have various forms that betray various kinds of underlying politics. These politics, like all relations of power, are unstable and amenable to reconfiguration, but that does not really make for a universal equivalency, which I think is the logical inference of these broader "translation-wary" positions. Batman and Superman, to change register slightly, are as different as the Art Deco and Corbusian architecture that both serves and sires their respective bodies. All monsters may remind us of us; but that is not all that all of them do.

[18] For a fuller expression of these points see Kim Paffenroth, "Zombies as Internal Fear or Threat," in Boluk and Lenz, *Generation Zombie*, 18–26.

> has become an object.… It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part.… It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.[19]

Many studies of the zombie make use of Kristeva, and for obvious reasons. The zombie, the corpse that literally comes back, is the ultimate abject figure, returning as it does to threaten the structural cohesion of society with an out-and-out apocalypse.[20] However, while many works mention Kristeva (it is fairly standard), few employ Kristeva's writings in close re-reading of the relevant zombie texts, nor do they necessarily consider the significance of the zombie for Kristeva's wider work on subject formation or the cultural development of the West. The undead are the margin of society folded in on itself, the edge threatening the centre with the reminder of the inaugural negations, the losses that allow the centre to function but which could return to claim it at any moment. As such, the zombie may well be useful not just as a target for a Kristevan reading, but as a mode of re-approaching Kristeva.

## Missing Skin, or, The Circumcised Undead

These foregoing observations on the evolution of the zombie relate to *Strangers in the Land* in some quite curious ways. At first glance *Strangers* would seem to follow quite carefully the rules of the latter, apocalyptic zombie oeuvre. Devora faces a massive and infectious force that threatens the structures of her way of life. But beneath this rather Romeran shape sits a colonial politics that appears to develop as a kind of response to the earlier zombie films, and the Haitian zombie tradition in particular. This double layering of the zombie's significance in the text seems to emerge from a particular tweak

[19] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

[20] The equivalency is not lost on either the critical theorist or the author-cum-scriptwriter. As Aalya Ahmad points out of the zombie virus in Tony Burgess's *Pontypool Changes Everything* (ECW Press, 2009): "In a nod to Julia Kristeva, 'the mature virus … resembles the figure of abjection,' leaving the reader to hopelessly try to imagine a figure of 'death infecting life', 'what disturbs identity, system, order', 'in-between,' 'ambiguous' and 'composite.' Another expert [in the text of Pontypool] adds Chomskyan linguistics to the mix: 'It gestates in the deep structures prior to language. Or, at least, simultaneous with language. In the very primal structure that organizes us as differentiated, discontinuous copies of each other".' ("Gray is the New Black: Race, Class and Zombies," in Boluk and Lenz, *Generation Zombie*, 140.)

Litore makes to the usual "rules" of the zombie's rise. For unlike much contemporary zombie literature, the zombie threat in *Strangers* is neither new, nor human-made, nor is it a technical aberration. The shambling hordes are written into the novel's own parallel version of sacred history, the first dead body to rise being that of Abel.[21] Zombies thereby become the rationale behind the law, which is somewhat reduced in *Strangers* to the level of ritualised washing (to limit the spread of the curse), a careful code of exclusions from the camp (to limit the impact of possible infection), and, naturally, the "proper" burial of corpses (crushing their heads with stones, and raising cairns over the bodies to prevent their rising). Like flu, excrement, poor harvests, and unclean heathen armies with goddesses at their shoulder, the zombie is a part of the ritual landscape—undesirable but theoretically and theologically manageable.[22]

> The stones she gathered had to be large ones—large enough to crush the dead to the earth. The corpse's head had been shattered; it would not hunger again. Yet it was unclean and might spread the blight to anything it touched. You couldn't know what might sicken from it—living people or living crops. So you pile stone above a dead body, any dead body, no matter how dead or how still the body may look. The time in the desert, when Devora's ancestors had seen corpses rise moaning to their feet had taught them to take no chances, none.[23]

The threat posed by Canaanite uncleanness therefore takes on a new poignancy. Because the zombies are precipitated by a lack of engagement with the cult, Litore's undead are implicitly linked to ritual uncleanness and the Canaanites. These native inhabitants must be tamed and indoctrinated if the land is to have a rest from its blight. As Devora herself puts it: "to be without restraint, without Law, is to be like one of the dead."[24] Colonial politics are literally connected to the zombie condition.

[21] Litore, *Strangers*, 400.

[22] Naturally, this has particular significance since we are talking about re-deploying (re-animating) the biblical texts—the alleged check on natural, social, or bodily unction par excellence, and a piece of cultural furniture, so to speak, as immoveable from the Western tradition as any common mytheme we might care to mention. Litore's zombies, like our biblical text, underwrite his storyworld's internal historical tradition.

[23] Ibid., 21.

[24] Ibid., 266.

As Bishop points out, zombies "are the ideal 'New World' terror because of their essential ties to imperialist hegemony and oppression."[25] What applies to the New World of the Americas, and its apparent longing to have its own imperial experience—displaced, it seems, into the zombie films of the 1930s and '40s—seems equally to appeal to the "new world" experience of Israel after crossing the Jordan. "The People" run their ancient world in eerily similar ways. When, for instance, Devora refuses to touch a weeping Hurriya after killing her unclean son for fear of becoming unclean herself, or later, when Barak pleads with Devora to find and to ritually cleanse his body should he be taken by the dead, the implicit threat being outlined is not that of untimely death, or of a gruesome demise, or even of the fracturing of the essential structures of society. What are in play are fears of becoming unclean, of becoming a "circumcised" subaltern. These fears reach their zenith, in fact, with just such an encounter. Devora, insistent that the zombie threat is contingent on the practices of the Canaanites is forced to check the genitals of the monster she has just dispatched. The missing foreskin of a dead Hebrew male has quite a theological impact on her.

Devora's horror at looking at the zombified cock is not prudishness on the part of the character or the author (fantasy scenes and an attempted rape grace the pages later on). The text stages an encounter between the female general, the bastion of the theocratic legal system, and the inversion of the racial discrimination upon which her position is predicated. The zombie is designed to give voice to those very dynamics of the text that are subjugated, politically in the story, and exegetically in most readings. In the early parts of Litore's text, the zombie represents, springs from, and re-creates the colonial experience of the subjected, abjected Canaanite. The circumcised zombie penis transfers the unction to be fruitful and multiply from being part of the covenant to being part of the contagion. It inverts Devora's own reading of the zombies and presents her with the possibility of her own subordination. The act of importing the figure of the zombie thereby becomes for both characters and readers a mode of commentary on the Law, the supposed check on the dead, and by extension on the Bible. Under particular scrutiny, I would suggest, is the Bible's colonial politics. The biblical text seems to activate in Litore a kind of fascinated revulsion that his story works to address. His narrative returns again and again, in the manner of abject captivation, to

[25] Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, 66.

these distasteful antics, and especially to the tropes of estrangement and the violation of the stranger.

A number of ready examples of estrangement, and of the eponymous stranger, present themselves. As the story unfolds, we see that Litore's Israel has bested the indigenous population only to be overrun themselves, making The People strangers of a sort in their own homeland. Barak's sense of his desiccated vineyards as places made decidedly unhomely is palpable in several sections of the book. The Canaanites are also estranged from the landscape following the violence of the conquest. The Canaanite protagonist Hurriya is isolated from her own family and customs, ultimately dying while under Devora's protection, and technically by the judge's own hand. (Indeed, she actually dies close to the Kenites from whom she originally fled, as though once she ceased to be a stranger the story could no longer cope with her presence.) Even Devora is a kind of stranger for much of the text, a female guest in the conspicuously male world of the Hebrew military. Her own gruesome experience as a "violated stranger" comes to the fore when she is nearly raped[26] towards the book's conclusion—pinned to the floor by the metaphorical tent-peg turned back into phallus.[27]

Extrapolating these dynamics of the novel, it become possible to think about *Strangers* as a question posed by Litore to Judges: how can biblical Israel's colonial suffering in their promised "homeland" be taken seriously by readers when the very telling of their story is enacted through the shattered skull of guest taking refuge under a blanket? Of course, there are no easy answers. But through this question Litore seems to wish to pose a broader inquiry to the idea of the Bible itself: can we justify the paradox that exists

[26] It is important to note that this is a rape that Devora herself averts in a moment reminiscent of Judith and Holofernes, beheading Omri with a phallic blade. In other words—and as I am sure the author would wish to stress—the novel does not use the attempted rape trope naïvely (as, for instance, a means of subjecting a strong female to male power to relieve male anxieties or else as a sort of cheap narrative trick to produce a strong female character). The entire novel sees Devora systematically subjected to male power but also resisting that subjection and negotiating its implications and its narrative.

[27] It is probably no coincidence that the end of *Strangers*, when Hurriya's sister turns out to be Jael, the zombie she kills with the tent peg is found in the tent used for her rape. The unleashing of the dead against the camp frees her, and she escapes largely because she pins a yet more abject body to the place where the Hebrew social order has kept her. Taking up the Hebrew Phallus that pinned her to that floor, she dispatches the revolting Other, both a reflection of her status and a repository onto which her subjection, her captivity and her abjective status can be transferred. It is in this action that she becomes a free woman.

between actual biblical content and the ideologue's Good Book? This is an old question certainly, but that it should arise in popular zombie fiction is singularly intriguing.

To put these same sentiments rather more poetically, and expansively, the whole edifice of *Strangers* appears to be pitched inside the tent of biblical Heber the Kenite. The novel visits and revisits the act of destroying the sheltered stranger as a way of conceiving of *The Holy Bible*'s awkward, abusive relationship with its own "inhabitants"—its texts—which the idea of "Bible" often shatters for its own political ends. Litore's reading of Judges is thus not an invasive fiction, nor a sympathetic gloss, but represents fascinated revulsion with the brains of Sisera, splayed out as they are, in the manner of zombie fiction, upon the wafer-thin pages of the Authorised Version. For if the zombie genre usually exploits the human audience's fascinated revulsion at the potential failure of their own autonomy, identity, or systemicity, if the zombie is the abjected self which terrifies us by troubling us with our own us-ness, then Litore's reading seems similarly enthralled at the horrifying failure of the original Judges and the troubling that text enacts on certain ideas about the Bible as holy writ. Judges seems already suitably zombified before it has even been bitten. It is a text in which the bested Canaanites can never be finally dispatched, a holy book in which enshrined injustices haunt the alleged social function of the corpus, and a cultural monolith whose fragmented contents return to trouble the idea of its unity and significance.

## The Sermon of the Slave

Within the narrative of *Strangers* itself, these dynamics are most visibly displayed through the character of Hurriya, a grieving Canaanite mother and a victim of slavery and of rape. Hurriya is always near death. Throughout the novel she remains in a dangerous fever, experiencing moments of delirium and periods of lucidity depending on the fluctuating demands of the narrative. She is neither entirely alive nor entirely dead for most of the plot, in fact. So one might say that the zombie does not simply image Hurriya's subaltern status, Hurriya's subaltern status also recreates the zombie. As a prophetic intermediary between god and Israel, receiving warning visions at several points in the text, Hurriya sits betwixt registers of foreignness and familiarity as well, and her complex relationship with Devora likewise situates her between the roles of daughterhood and motherhood. This triple liminal status means she rather suggests herself as a figure though whom Litore can

challenge, invert, and critique the Judges story. Perhaps predictably, Hurriya has very particular views on the function of sacred Law itself, which she voices in her characteristically unabashed manner:

> "You say your God gave you this Law in the desert when he looked at you, when your Lawgiver [Moses] looked at him. When they faced each other on Har Sinai."
>
> Yes, Devora said. Hurriya leaned forward, her eyes intent and far more lucid than they had been the night before. "When you see another's face—the face of a child, or another woman, or the face of the goddess, or the face of someone hungry or hurt—their eyes, they look back. They look at you. They ask your love, they ask you to hear their crying and know that you and they are both alive, and some day you may be hurt, you may be hungry.… Only the dead don't look back.… You think the Law is a pact with your God, a pact with others of your People. But it's not just a pact."
>
> Devora listened, thinking hard.
>
> "It's an answer," Hurriya said intensely. "You have rules for everything but it's not the rules that matter, it's that you want to make them … when you sit in decision at your olive tree, or on this horse looking at the burning town, you have to find the right answer to the suffering you see. Your Fathers in the desert found the law, found that answer. So it guides you, like I guided you into these hills. But you still have to find the right answer to each face you see."[28]

In much of the book, as we have seen, the zombie symbolically recreates the Canaanite's experience as a subaltern: the disposable not-Us whose unclean status threatens the individual's inclusion in the community of The People, and who, like the living heathen of the biblical texts, represents a theologically manageable malady against which the structures and strictures of the Law are arraigned. In the passage above, however, Hurriya's interpretation of the Hebrew legal corpus uses a critical engagement with the embodied experience of the Zombie as its starting point, in particular the faculties of recognition and responsiveness. The implication of this brief exchange is that

[28] Litore, *Strangers*, 291.

the law as an absolute, indiscriminate judgment, as a force that cuts across experience—that is, the law as Devora has practiced it for most of the story—is blind, unresponsive, and dangerous. It is already zombified. Devora's law is an undead corpus, an unseeing, unyielding body that does not respond to humanity so much as hunger after an escalating conformity to its own template. Halperin's concerns give way to Romero's as Hurriya's speech progresses. Like the consumerist monsters in *Dawn of the Dead*, Litore's "zombies" are more than a waiting void. They are a selfish outward momentum. According to Hurriya's claims, Devora and her tradition are already undead in all the ways that matter. And rather than save the Israelites from the zombie, the Lawgiver's minutiae and Joshua's conquest have served to transpose the undead into a social structure that enacts the very same kinds of violence.

The deconstruction of the line between the zombie and the not-zombie underlies quite a lot of the zombie genre, and *Strangers* also works with these concerns, replaying Romero's critique of consumer capitalism and developing it in slightly altered forms. If in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, the survivors "find it impossible to see the shattered world around them in any terms other than those of possession and consumption,"[29] if they become merged with the zombies through their unthinking need to consume commodities, then *Strangers* proposes an equivalent danger inherent in Devora and the sacral tradition she represents. Devora sees the shattered world around her only in terms of colonial subalterns, and her willingness to vie with it is only enacted in terms of military possession and socio-religious conquest. Is biblical Deborah very different? Litore's work does not use bald analogy to make zombies religious (and so religions zombified) but he seems rather to aim to dissolve the lines between the zombie and the not-zombie as a way of exposing the zombifying power of absolutism in religious discourse. Litore's zombies do not march to Shiloh with an instinctive, religious memory in the way *Dawn*'s Zombies flock to the shopping mall, nor do his dead grimly cast Urim and Thummim in the desiccated plains, or offer parodies of sacrifice. But by the end of the text we cannot tell who is truly a zombie and who is not. Even the experience of those who have survived the zombies is hauntingly familiar. They

> stumble away under the red moonlight, exhausted, spent, the ghost of a people. Perhaps they would make it to the camp and collapse … or perhaps they would not stop. Perhaps they

[29] Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, 130.

> would go on walking, with those same, slow, anguished steps. They would walk through the night and on into the next day and on.[30]

Wary as I am about authorial intent, being of that allegedly trendy band who with Barthes figures all authors dead, it is worth pointing out that these are the very terms on which Litore himself understands his marrying of zombie and Bible:

> What if reading the Bible is not an act of taking in information (which you may then either adopt or reject), but an act of *wrestling*? How might that be a different reading activity (maybe an exciting one—regardless of whether you are religious or not)? What if the reading experience is supposed to be tense and contradictory and sometimes laden with horror, and what if that isn't a bad thing? … What are we wrestling with, when we read the Bible? Well, God, clearly—regardless of whether or not God exists. We're also wrestling with ourselves—with our own assumptions. And we're wrestling with the dead. With our past, which always (if we ignore it) rises up to devour us.[31]

As with Hurriya, the project of *The Zombie Bible* finds its legitimacy in its responsiveness. The project of Litore's writing itself enacts the very same critique against the Bible's sacral status as Hurriya articulates against the deployment of Torah's. As I put it earlier, the biblical text is already zombified. If zombies are the process of abjection run in reverse, corpses come back to trouble the coherence of the body and the body politic, then the zombie Bible allows the zombie-ish quality of the original biblical texts to rise up and trouble the systemicity of the *The Holy Bible*, the Bible when it is deployed as theological and/or authoritative system. This is not performed in the simple, crass sense of bringing the biblical texts "down" to the level of populist prose—as if!—but instead through a more complex engagement with the politics of inhabitation and suppression: inhabitants of the land suppressed in the name of a coherent narrative, and the "inhabitant" books of the leather-bound text, suppressed in the name of the same.

[30] Litore, *Strangers*, 373.

[31] Stant Litore, "Stant Litore on the Bible: How and Why I Read It," *The Zombie Bible*, http://stantlitore.com/2013/07/17/stant-litore-on-the-bible-1-how-and-why-i-read-it/.

## The Magisterium's Bible

"The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he [sic.] comes to life again in signs."[32] So Kristeva makes every text a zombie and their authors along with them. All texts, bloody, broken, and frustrating things that they are, arise from a kind of phobic hunger and emerge hungry, animated by the need to make, contest, and manage connections. Reading is distinctly colonial in that sense, and as shamanic as any Haitian ceremony of raising. If Litore is a phobic then it is because he, like all authors, writes "in a language of fear … a language of want as such, the want that positions sign, subject and object" over and against a present reality. Writing is a means of resisting or recasting that reality.[33] Litore's *Strangers* sets out, I have been arguing, to resist the reality of what we might call the biblical magisterium: the Bible as aggressive authoritarian system.

This has already been indicated by Litore's comments on his "wrestling" with these texts. Indeed, if we take Litore at his word, this "wrestling," this "tense and contradictory" pulling towards and pushing away itself resembles the politics of abjection as outlined by Kristeva: something rejected but from which one does not part, the push-and-pull game that troubles "identity, system, order." The zombie as a sign of unravelling abjection becomes the mode through which Litore deploys the Bible as a set of texts against the Bible as a (his? my?) phobic object.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva discusses the fact that abjection is a response to fear. Fear instigates a rejection not to remove an object per se, but to create a border within which social order can be seen to reign. Her example, of course, is the very set of biblical purity Laws that Litore and Hurriya together take to task. Kristeva writes:

> To the extent that the Temple is the Law, one is biblically pure or impure only with respect to social order, that is, with respect to the Law or the cult (as Neusner would have it). If, on the other hand, one tries to go back further into the archeology of that impurity, one indeed encounters fear in the face of a power (maternal? natural?—at any rate insubordinate and not liable of being subordinated to Law) that might become autonomous

[32] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 38.
[33] Ibid., 39.

> evil but is not, so long as the threshold of subjective and social symbolic order endures.[34]

These sentiments make sense of the social function of Litore's Zombie Bible quite nicely. *Strangers* maintains the political structure of the Law, the broad ritual and political milieu, as I termed it earlier. But in introducing the Bible to the apocalyptic subgenre, Litore suspends the symbolic order of the Biblical Magisterium. With the orderliness of the biblical texts suspended, readers are allowed to face the zombie: an autonomous evil stripped of all subjectivity: the Bible itself.

Kristeva goes on:

> Biblical impurity is thus always already a logicizing of what departs from the symbolic, and for that very reason it prevents it from being actualized as demonic evil. Such a logicizing inscribes the demonic in a more abstract and also more moral register as a potential for guilt and sin. Purity or impurity are thus situated in relation to cult because the latter represents or serves a logic of distribution and behavior on which the symbolic community is founded: a Law, a reason.[35]

In other words, impurity is an idea that is distributed beyond the symbolic Law of a social system as part of the means of the founding of that Law, in the same way that the corpse is an idea of the body distributed beyond the social system as a means of establishing the body politic. Similarly, again, the Bible's inhumanity, its gore, and its political hypocrisies form part of an ideological schema distributed beyond (certain social deployments of) the Magisterium's Bible but that allow those ideas about the Bible to function. These are tropes that depart from the "Bible as Symbolic Law" as a way of establishing it.

So, if the zombie is the corpse crossing back over the line into the symbolic universe, and so troubling that line, haunting it with its own inaugural negations, then the Zombie Bible is similarly transgressive. Litore's novel abjects the text's content as a means of showing up the systemicity of the original story, as we have seen. But more than that Litore forces that biblical content back over the line of the Magisterium; forces, in other words,

[34] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 91.
[35] Ibid., 91.

the inhumanity of the biblical story into the economy of the Magisterium's symbolic Bible. Thus the real interest in Litore's text lies not in the zombification of the Bible, nor the exploration of the Bible through the trope of the zombie, but the way in which the novel signals an emergent desire in cultural engagement with the Bible, not simply to ignore the Magisterium's religious Law, but to wake it up to the inherently abjectionable quality of its own discourse, to the fact, that is, that the figurative excrement of the Magisterium's Bible is the biblical narrative itself.

At the end of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva prophesies that the analyst is "preparing to go through the first great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal) that mankind [sic] has ever witnessed; and it is necessarily taking place within that fulfillment of religion as sacred horror, which is Judeo-Christian Monotheism." Litore's work fulfils part of her prophecy. His reading of Judges effects a dissolution of the line between the zombie and the not-zombie as a way of exposing the zombifying power of particular kinds of biblical reading. *Strangers* succeeds in dissolving the lines between the I and the not-I as a way of presenting readers with abject forms of themselves. What *Strangers* also manages as part of this feat, and why this relatively modest text is of cultural and critical importance, is an exposing of the Bible to the Bible's own conditions of Bibleness. In other words, *The Zombie Bible* exposes *The Holy Bible* to its own inaugural negations, to the rejections that make it Bible, but which catch up to it eventually like, and as, a zombie horde. Like all zombies, *The Zombie Bible* runs the processes of abjection in reverse, teaching us about the borders of our condition in the process. In other words, if the zombie is the corpse that comes back to trouble our systemicity, our social structure, our cohesion and values, *The Zombie Bible* is the biblical content that comes back to haunt the publisher's blurb. For Litore's biblical zombies are nothing other than the Law revisiting itself, returning to life again as sign. Law translated into Law, and harried at the rendition.