

“Without Blemish or Defect”: Disability and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible

Lucas Cober

A Thesis
In the Department
Of
Religions and Cultures

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Religions and Cultures)
at Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

August, 2025

© Lucas Cober, 2025

**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Lucas Cober

Entitled: "Without Blemish or Defect": Disability and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor Of Philosophy

Religions and Cultures

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____	Chair
Naftali Cohn	
_____	External Examiner
Rebecca Raphael	
_____	Arm's Length Examiner
Norm Ravvin	
_____	Examiner
Carly Daniel-Hughes	
_____	Examiner
Naftali Cohn	
_____	Thesis Supervisor (s)
Lorenzo DiTommaso	

Approved by _____

Naftali Cohn Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

30 April 2025
Date of Defence

Dean,

Abstract

“Without Blemish or Defect:” Disability and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible

Lucas Cober, Ph.D.

Concordia University, 2025

This dissertation is an examination of several key Hebrew Bible texts that feature disabled characters in prominent roles, and focuses on the ways in which those characters’ disabilities are used to construct the boundaries of normative Israelite experience. I consider disability as an intersectional category that overlaps with other marginal identities such as animality, age, gender and sexuality. These identities are used in conjunction with each other by the authors and redactors of the texts in question to draw a boundary around what an acceptable human body should be like, primarily by showing what it should not be like. The dissertation uses novel interpretations of the relevant texts to demonstrate that ableist understandings of humans and the world are not necessary, and that the texts themselves can be read as undermining that very ideology, in order to add to a growing movement in biblical studies that sees the necessity of not only including, but centralizing, the experience of disabled people in our textual interpretation.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge that I carried out most of this project on the unceded ancestral territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation, and that the latter portions of the project were conducted on the unceded territory of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit people. This project is possible only through the ceaseless support and assistance from numerous people. First, I thank Munit Merid and Tina Montandon, who made the intentionally inaccessible bureaucracy of the university easier to navigate. Of course I owe considerable thanks to my supervisor, Lorenzo DiTommaso, for keeping me on track and preventing me from quitting. I am also indebted to the members of my committee and those who read drafts of this dissertation; Carly Daniel-Hughes, Naftali Cohn, and Norm Ravvin, who also all served as mentors and comprehensive examiners for me. I am also grateful to my external reviewer, Rebecca Raphael, for her extremely valuable feedback and insights. I am also deeply grateful to my friend Joe, who reminded me I was right about everything. To my nine siblings, who gave me somewhere normal to visit when I needed to, and my parents, who always supported me even when I changed my mind every week. Finally and mostly, I am forever profoundly grateful to my partner Eli, who was always on my side even when I was incredibly, incredibly obnoxious.

Dedication

To Eli. I love you more than anything.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Critical Terms	3
Disability	3
Impairment	4
Ableism	5
Normate Body	6
Animal	7
Methodological Considerations	7
The Position of this Dissertation	10
Synopsis of Chapters	11
Conclusion	13
Chapter 1: Literary Considerations	14
Introduction	14
Disability Studies Literature	15
Biblical Disability Studies	22
Conclusion	25
Chapter 2: Isaac the Amazing Goat Boy: Animality and the Construction of Human Boundaries	27
Introduction	27
Isaac's Disability	30
Passivity and Animality	33
Isaac's Blindness, Jacob's Deception	38
Interpreting Isaac	43
Ramifications	51
Conclusion	56
Chapter 3: (In)Fertile Subjects: Disability, Gender and Procreation	58
Introduction	58
Frameworks of Barrenness	61
Masculinity and Women's Bodies	63
The Disability of Barrenness	66

Barren Stories.....	69
Sarah and Hagar, Anxiety and Power	70
Hannah's Insistence and Cure	74
God's Fertility, Women's Death and Punishment	76
Gendered Powers	80
Conclusion	83
Chapter 4: Erectile (Dys)Functions: Disability and Sexuality in the Story of Samson	88
Introduction	88
The Figure of Samson	89
The Story.....	89
Samson Interpreted	94
Samson's Blindness	102
Seeing Is Believing?.....	102
Neutering a Wild Man.....	104
Samson's De(con)struction	108
Conclusion	115
Conclusion	117
Bibliography.....	122

Introduction

This dissertation considers the role of disability in biblical narratives and the role of disability as a central component of the creation of human identity in Hebrew Bible¹ politics. I acknowledge that these politics are many and varied due to the nature of the text and its lengthy composition history. The argument of the dissertation is that, when it comes to characters with disabilities, longstanding trends in biblical interpretation have led to the widespread interpretation of biblical stories and characters as being completely negative and without merit due to able-bodied normativity informing the readers' understandings. I argue that biblically disabled characters are nearly always cast in negative roles or negative light, and that all the texts in question are used to create and maintain the boundaries of acceptable humanity in ancient Israel.

The texts that I analyse in this dissertation contain disabled characters whose bodies are unruly or inappropriate for multiple reasons, their intersectional marginalities conspiring to cast these characters to the outside of the community, even when most and arguably all are the central figures in the textual traditions they occupy. Axes of animality, age, gender, racialization, and queerness converge with disability, an intersectionally constructed identity that serves to mark the non-normativity of bodies denoted as Other. I also contend, however, that many texts containing disabled characters contain subversive elements that undermine their own apparent goals. Therefore, reading the text without preconceived assumptions about the capabilities of a disabled person allows a reader to consider different positionality for the disabled characters in the text and show that readings are possible, which in turn positions the characters as neutral figures within their narratives or even as positive, powerful ones.

My goals in writing this dissertation are therefore twofold: First, to think through the ways in which the above-mentioned societal boundaries are constructed and consider not just the bodies that are being left outside them, but how those bodies are being used to create the boundaries themselves. Second and more importantly, to challenge and counter readings of a

¹ There is and never has been a single agreed-upon, universally authoritative English translation of the Hebrew Bible. In this dissertation I primarily read the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition. When it becomes necessary to use the Hebrew text, I typically use the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh. I do not critically engage with any New Testament texts in this dissertation.

foundational text that have influenced and determined how we as a society treat disabled and other marginalized people in the contemporary period. It need not be true that every instance of ableism arises from a consultation with the Bible for it to be true that interpretations of biblical texts have supported and perpetuated harmful and stigmatizing stereotypes about real people who deserve better. My goals for working in this field have always been to find ways to escape that stigma and to read texts in a way that uses material drawn from the texts themselves to argue against traditional and marginalizing ways of reading.

In this dissertation, I build on the work of many scholars of disability and the Bible to interpret a number of Hebrew Bible texts. My interpretations are intended to show potential in the text for readings that do not marginalize disabled people in the present day. The Bible is foundational to western culture, and readings and interpretations of it influence the way real people in the modern period relate to one another and treat one another. Biblical ideas about disability and other marginal identities persist into our time, and therefore, disrupting the text—not by altering it or inventing a new one, but by showing the disruptions that already exist in the text as it is received—is beneficial work towards creating a more inclusive and dynamic space for everyone, as well as fostering a more intellectually robust space. In addition to supporting bigoted agendas, many traditional disability-negative interpretations of texts quite frankly only read at the surface level, taking disability at face value and not asking questions beyond the superficial. I believe that reading deeper into the texts can help us understand our own identities, marginalities and privileges, and thus be better scholars, and so can also help real people who are affected by the way we read.

Each chapter of this dissertation will focus on a different narrative to highlight disability as it intersects with different marginal identities, outlining a connection between disability and several other identity markers that are all used to exclude select individuals. The chapters will dilate on interpretation history of the texts under scrutiny, and the question of why it is that so many texts featuring disabled characters have been interpreted negatively throughout their histories, when positive or neutral interpretations also exist. In addition, each chapter also will contain a novel interpretation of the texts in question, demonstrating how the textual attempt to silence people with disabilities often ends up highlighting the very real power that they do have, leaving open a space for alternative interpretations. These interpretations will highlight the ways in which disability and its related marginalities are used to construct and bolster normative Israelite

identities, constructed fictional identities that serve as a standard that people should try to attain² in the biblical text, as well as, in limited capacity, the way those marginalities continue to construct normative bodies in societies for which these texts are foundational. Finally, the dissertation will argue for the centrality of disability in biblical interpretation and discussions about normative humanity as constructed through biblical texts.

Critical Terms

Some of the central terms I employ throughout this dissertation have multiple, contested or unstable definitions. I acknowledge that any attempt at definition is subjective and that the ways in which scholars choose to define unclear terms can often betray their bias. I also, however, acknowledge that words have only the meaning that is ascribed to them, and in order to do any productive work, one must settle on one meaning in order to maintain clarity.

Disability

Perhaps one of the most complex terms in the dissertation to define, ‘disability’ has been used to refer to the effects of medical conditions, the conditions themselves, and the role of society in circumscribing those conditions and the people who have them. It is a well-known refrain in disability studies that disability is caused not by a bodily difference but by the society that refuses to accommodate that difference—constructing buildings with stairs and therefore intentionally or unintentionally excluding people with mobility issues, for example. Most definitions of disability therefore focus on this societal shortcoming, which is reasonable given the general disability studies goal of critiquing ableist societal structures. That said, I do not want to overlook bodily differences that do objectively exist.

Therefore, my definition of disability for this dissertation will echo that of most disability studies scholars³ and is as follows. Disability is *a social construction that is mapped onto a perceived deviation from a society’s bodily or mental norm, which causes the person*

² The term ‘normate’ is further defined on page 4.

³ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 6-9; Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2-3; and Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 22-23 are three examples of scholars of disability whose definitions are similar to mine.

experiencing said deviation to be marginalized from their society on the basis of a perceived lack of ability in some important area. Because disability is a social construct, its manifestations across time and culture will appear differently, as will the bodily differences that give rise to it. Disability is also a second-order category that is not native to any of the cultures that produced the texts in question for this dissertation. I use the category despite this, aware of its anachronism but also aware that it is unrealistic to expect modern people to speak only in the terms and with the categories of the ancient societies they study. Moreover, though avoiding second-order categories can be a technique to avoid flattening modern and ancient identities together, it has historically also been a tactic of those who prefer not to consider marginalized people in their work. For these reasons I use the term disability and other second-order categories because they are useful for my analysis of the text and of the text's reception into cultures that do have an analogous term, but also because the people these words describe existed in the past just as much as they do today, even if very differently.

Impairment

Contrasted with but also implicated in the term disability, an impairment is a medicalized condition that causes an individual's body to experience non-normate behaviour, for example blindness. When using the definition of disability laid out above, it is important to distinguish between the impairment and the disability even if *prima facie* they appear identical. For example, a blind individual's impairment might be their non-normate eyesight, meaning that their eyes do not function to the same degree that most people's do. This in turn causes them to experience the disability of blindness, whereby society's strictures about appropriate levels of eyesight cause them to be excluded from certain normative activities such as driving a vehicle.⁴ Where a disability is a bodily or mental difference experienced at a societal level, an impairment is the experience of the bodily or mental difference itself. Important to note is that, as Kafer recognizes, impairments are also social constructs, because the normative, normate body is a construct and impairments are measured by failure to live up to that body, which is different across cultures.⁵ However, that they are social constructs does not negate the fact that an

⁴ Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 13-14 discussed impairment alongside disability

⁵ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 7.

impairment *is* a bodily reality. A person who uses a wheelchair *is* likely to have difficulty mobilizing. A blind person *is* likely to have difficulty navigating without assistance. Though what those impairments mean over time can change, the bodily reality of them generally does not.

Ableism

Ableism and its adjectival form ‘ableist’ appear throughout this dissertation and describe attitudes and behaviours that cause individuals and societies to discriminate against disabled people on the basis of their disabilities.⁶ Formed by analogy with other -ism words such as racism, sexism and classism, ableism manifests on an individual level as open mistreatment of disabled people, dismissiveness of their concerns and needs, derogatory assumptions about what someone’s disability ‘means’ for them as a person (generally without ever consulting that person or group of people), or a simple refusal to acknowledge that disabled people exist. Culturally, ableism can manifest as exclusions from various places or cultural practices either intentionally (as in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 20, in which priests with certain physical impairments are forbidden from approaching the altar), or incidentally (such as in the city of Montreal in 2024, where a commitment to maintaining the city’s historical architecture means that a staggering number of buildings remain inaccessible to people with mobility impairments). I will generally not make a distinction between intentional and incidental ableism in this dissertation because we cannot know the motivations of authors either historical or modern, but the effect of both types remains the same—people without disabilities generally feel comfortable ignoring or mistreating people with disabilities.

⁶ Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 6-7, draws a distinction between “ableism,” which is the positive valuation of able-bodiedness, and “disablism,” which is the negative valuation of disability. I chose not to use this distinction in this dissertation, and use “ableism” to describe both phenomena.

Normate Body

A term I have already used more than once, the normate body is articulated by disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson in her book *Extraordinary Bodies*.⁷ In this book, Garland Thomson describes the normate body as the absolute ideal of a human body in a given culture. Societally defined and therefore different across cultures and times, the normate body is whatever the ideal is for that culture. For Americans in the early twentieth century, Garland Thomson describes the normate body as being White, able-bodied, heterosexual, male, Protestant, upper middle class, married with children and in good health.⁸ Disability studies scholars in recent years have continued to use this term, sometimes expanding it or suggesting different forms of the normate body, but generally not arguing against the fundamental premise.⁹ The most important element that distinguishes the normate body from the *normative* body, however, is that the normate body is not real. Nobody is in possession of a normate body. It is an ideal against which everyone is measured and everyone is found wanting. Lennard Davis makes a similar argument in his work about what he calls the ideal body, which existed in historical cultures prior to the invention of normalcy as a concept to which people were meant to strive,¹⁰ and was, similarly to the normate body, intentionally unattainable and always found everyone wanting and therefore societally lesser. I also use this term in the dissertation, generally in reference to God's presumed body, which is equally unattainable. Some people, however, approximate unattainable bodies more closely, and are able to occupy social power because of that. On the converse, others are found more wanting than others, and this is where disability and other forms of marginality are born. The usefulness of the normate body as a critical category

⁷ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ For examples of some recent studies that follow Garland Thomson, see, Joel Michael Reynolds, "The Normate," in *50 Terms for Critical Phenomenology*, eds. Ann Murphy, Gayle Salamon, and Gail Weiss (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 243-248; Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 22-23; and several chapters in Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁰ Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 92-93. Davis also discusses the ideal body in his other work, especially *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (New York: Verso Publishing, 1995).

lies in its flexibility. It describes not only disability, but marginality on the basis of sex, gender, race and many other factors, which is incredibly helpful when discussing these interconnected marginalities in tandem. Because it changes over time, it does not tie me to one particular culture's idealized body. It is also useful because, as there are no normate bodies, the term allows us to open an essential space for critique around the very idea of any body being substandard when compared with another.

Animal

The second chapter of this dissertation focuses on animals. This is a category that connotatively excludes humans despite denotatively including them, and therefore I follow other animal studies scholars in using the term 'nonhuman animals' to clarify that I am referring to 'other' animals that are typically seen as food, labour, or environmental dangers to humans. Animals and animality—the quality of being an animal—are relatively understudied in biblical studies, with only a few works focusing on them, mostly in the field of biblical posthumanism.¹¹ Biblical texts are anthropocentric, focusing on humans, and scholars typically only pay attention to nonhuman animals when they are relevant to the human characters—understandable considering the biblical writers arguably only *included* nonhuman animals when they were relevant to the human characters. The terms 'animal' and 'animality' are often used in reference to creatures to indicate a lower status than humans possess, but I use them neutrally to refer to nonhuman creatures and their experiences. I also employ the term 'animacy' infrequently in the second chapter, a term traditionally denoting the 'aliveness' of a creature, but repurposed by Mel Chen in *Animacies*¹² to refer to a spectrum of life that includes all things, as a way of critiquing hierarchies of being that place certain types of humans above other creatures.

Methodological Considerations

This dissertation primarily engages with the biblical text through the methods and techniques of narrative criticism. I consider the texts as stories with characters and narrators, all

¹¹ Arthur Walker-Jones and Suzanna R. Millar, eds., *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2024) and Hannah M. Strømmen, *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2018) are two such examples.

¹² Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

occupying a fictional world that is informed by the cultural expectations of the authors and redactors. When necessary and relevant, I also engage with historical-critical methodologies, including considering the cultures in which the texts were likely composed, as well as their presumed intended audiences. I also consider the language in the text when necessary, highlighting individual Hebrew words or sentences that are relevant to understanding the stories therein. As well, I include excerpts of each text in Hebrew at the beginning of the major interpretive sections of the dissertation so the words and phrases I draw out can be seen in context. These techniques have long been used to discover more about the cultures that produced the biblical texts, but this is work I am content to leave to others. Though they form a significant portion of my interpretive methodology, I use them only to further highlight the necessity of interpretations like my own. Using the same techniques as scholars who came before me, I arrive at often vastly different interpretations. This demonstrates the extent to which approaching a text with different sets of presuppositions changes the interpretation of that text. Reading consciously while being careful to avoid ableist presuppositions is key to my methodology in this dissertation.

I draw on the work of many disability scholars throughout this dissertation, but most notably on the work of a few scholars in particular. Rosemarie Garland Thomson's work on normate bodies provides the most important framework to understand how bodies are measured against one another and some found wanting. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's work on the narrative prosthesis is also very helpful for me for the way it articulates the function of disability as a literary trope. It is very hard to discuss the presumed implicit assumptions and biases of our own culture, let alone an authorial culture that no longer exists. However, the nonexistent and ever shifting normate body, invisibly determining differing normative embodiments in every culture and time period, allows me to attempt that feat by considering what bodies were and are valued and why, and what bodies appear in their stories and why and how. The normate body and the narrative prosthesis are best described for the purposes of this dissertation as heuristic devices to assist me in revealing the mechanisms of marginality present in the texts and beyond into the real world. Both of these are anachronisms, but I use these intentionally.

A certain degree of anachronism is typically acceptable in the study of historical texts. In this dissertation, I make use of a large amount of anachronistic, second-order terminology and concepts to describe phenomena that existed in the past in a way that would be incomprehensible

to people living in that time. Even words like disability, race, gender and queerness, when applied to literature from the distant past, describe analogous but not identical phenomena to the things we use those words for now. I use these words because to not do so would leave me with no vocabulary to talk about things and people who did exist, and with no ability help people who do exist now. Though I acknowledge the tension it may occasionally create in my work to use modern critical theory or terminology that is foreign to the text, I find it helpful in articulating the way I understand disability to be working in these texts, and I find enough similarities between the ancient world and ours that the connection is valuable. The other reason I chose to use this work despite the challenges it gave me is that it speaks about people in the real world that we live in, and those are my primary concern.

My texts were selected because their intersectionality is clear, and because they are effectively able to demonstrate the interpretive centrality of the disabled characters, contra traditional understandings, and because they are all texts that have been repeatedly analysed and which have had real consequences for their readers. I don't purport to be analysing or speaking for all disabled characters and stories in the Hebrew Bible text, or to be representing the entire history of each story. For the purposes of length in this dissertation I intentionally left out several texts that may have been relevant, and hope to treat those texts properly in the future. The texts I've chosen are the deception of Isaac in Genesis 27, a series of stories of barren women in Genesis 16, 18, 21, 25, 29 and 35, as well as 1 Samuel 1, 2 Samuel 6 and Judges 13, and the story of Samson in Judges 14-16, with a primary focus on chapter 16. I chose these texts because there are several thematic similarities between them despite their superficial differences. They are all texts in which a disabled person, also marginalized by some other form of difference from the normate, is put in a position apparently meant to diminish them, to steal agency or something else from them. These are also all texts where I interpret that positioning as having failed, and where the apparent necessity for that positioning in the first place hides the true power that the character in question wields. My readings all include novel interpretations of the texts that lay bare the power dynamics that run through stories of disability, and that highlight the intersectionality of disability, as well as its tremendous value in the creation of normative humanity.

The Position of this Dissertation

I write from the positionality of a queer, visually disabled, white, male-presenting scholar, and I approach texts in a way that assumes their foundational nature in much of Western culture. Although I engage with the Christian bible, I do not approach these texts from a confessional standpoint. My reading hermeneutic is secular and considers the biblical texts as a corpus of highly influential works that has had a broad impact on the language, history, culture, and ideology of the society in which I live. I treat the texts as though they are important, because I believe they are, but my attitude toward the texts studied in this dissertation is not reverent. I believe it is important for non-Christian and non-Jewish scholars to engage with these texts, because they are just as affected by them as everyone else, but I follow the roadmap drafted by Jacques Berlinerblau in *The Secular Bible*¹³ in reading the text as a text only, and interpreting it in ways that are, at times, completely antithetical to what many Christian and Jewish readers would expect or appreciate.

While biblical disability studies has been a growing field for three decades, there is very little interest in religious studies broadly from disability scholars. Though one could speculate on the reasons for this, the fact of the matter is that disability studies would be strengthened as a field by further attention to religious matters and the way that religious ideologies shape the world we live in. One of the aims of this dissertation is to speak not only to biblical scholars, but also to disability scholars and advocates, demonstrating a manner in which religious texts can be used constructively for disability advocacy and scholarship. I do not need to explain the foundational nature of the Bible in Western culture; that status allows its interpretations to carry considerable weight even outside of explicitly religious spaces. Whether we care about the Bible or not, it plays a large role in constructing the way that we view each other and are viewed by the society in which we live.

The purpose of this dissertation is to continue an ongoing dialogue between disability and biblical studies. There has not been a sustained academic discussion of the role of disability in the construction of normative human experience through biblical ideologies. Rather, the focus of

¹³ Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Most pertinently, Berlinerblau argues on pages 10-11 that Hebrew Bible scholarship is the “theological equivalent to the Loyal Opposition,” and that reading with a specifically secular intention “frees us, or perhaps forces us, to speak the unspeakable truth, truths or truthlessness of the Hebrew Bible.”

biblical disability studies has been largely (but by no means entirely) focused on the role played by disability in ancient contexts and how ancient disabled people may have fit into their worlds. This is valuable work that should be continued, but my intervention is to focus rather on the way modern interpretations impact and are impacted by modern prejudices.

Demonstrating that positive or at least neutral interpretations of biblical texts that discuss/mention/turn on disability is a core goal of this dissertation. The interpretations that I arrive at in my reading are grounded in the text and its interpretive and authorial contexts, but are not themselves the purpose of the dissertation. They are demonstrative of what is possible when one chooses not to accept able-bodied normativity as the guiding interpretive force for reading disabled characters. They, and this dissertation, are meant to demonstrate what can be possible when one chooses not to use prejudice as an interpretive lens. Once again, I am far from the first scholar to point out prejudicial interpretations of the Bible. Pointing out, and even arguing against, these interpretations is not my goal. Rather, my goal is to offer a space and an interpretive toolkit to allow the text of the Bible to be transformative in a positive way for our understanding of disability and disabled people.

Synopsis of Chapters

My argument unfolds along four chapters. In the first chapter, I more thoroughly articulate the methodological background of the dissertation and position my research and its intervention in the field. The chapter presents a review of relevant literature, in which I consider the history of scholarship on biblical disability studies, as well as survey some select works analysing other relevant texts. Following this chapter are three analytical chapters, each focusing on a different biblical text and a different way in which disability is co-constructed with other marginalities and all building on the larger theme of the construction of the disabled body as a unit of measure against which normative humanity is co-constructed.

The second chapter is titled “Isaac the Amazing Goat Boy: Animality and the Construction of Human Boundaries,” and focuses on the character of Isaac as he appears in Genesis 27. In this story of Isaac’s deception; his younger son Jacob and his wife Rebekah conspire to kill two goats and convince Isaac they are game animals in order to disguise Jacob as his brother to steal the familial blessing and inheritance. My chapter considers Isaac’s blindness and his relationship with nonhuman animals as interconnected marginalities that the text uses

together to construct him as an outsider, and that later audiences have used to construct real world disabled people in the same way. The chapter argues, however, that these marginalities also allow Isaac to be the central character of this story and ultimately come out as the victor in a complex game of deception. I argue that the text contains sufficient narrative elements to undermine the traditional (and very likely intended) reading and therefore to undermine able-bodied understandings of the disabled body as non-ideal.

The third chapter, titled “(In)Fertile Subjects: Disability, Gender, and Procreation,” is a study of a narrative trope rather than a specific text. The barren women of the Hebrew Bible are mostly found in Genesis, but also appear in the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings. In biblical parlance, barrenness is the quintessential female disability; women are rarely disabled in any other way. I consider the role of the disabled female body and its role in constructing the abled male body and, following this, real-world beliefs surrounding women’s bodies and the necessity for societal control of same. I read this as happening first through the handover of procreative control to the male divinity, and then the centralization of that control in the hands of the male patriarchal culture. This is a subject that has been well studied by feminist scholars, and I build on their work by also considering the role of disability in the construction of gender writ large. As in the previous chapter, I also reflect that the repeated insistence on removing power from women and women’s bodies in these texts only serves to affirm that women *have* this power and that all attempts to mitigate it represent anxiety on behalf of able-bodied men.

Finally, the dissertation’s fourth chapter, “Erectile (Dys)Functions: Disability and Sexuality in the Story of Samson,” is centred around the figure of Samson and primarily his experience in Judges 16. The blinding of Samson is an oft-ignored element of his punishment after he is captured by the Philistines that is as narratively potent as the removal of his hair, and, I suggest, a more powerful castration metaphor. Samson’s sexuality has been commented on by several queer scholars and plays a prominent role in his characterization in Judges. Most of his actions, and especially his mistakes, are due to his inappropriate sexual urges, which despite being directed at women, have been read as queer by many scholars, myself included. In this chapter, I build on these queer readings to consider the way that Samson’s disability is linked to his queer sexuality, an unmarked intersection that is meant to define both queerness and disability as other from normative experiences. I further argue that it is Samson’s disability *more* than anything else that makes him more powerful than other people, and that the

curtailing of his heterosexual urges through his symbolic castration and the curtailing of his excessive hyperability is what allows him to finally be accepted as a normative Israelite male. This chapter also considers the role of race and ethnicity in the articulation of disability, as Samson's status as an Israelite is a frequent point of tension for him. Ultimately, I find that this text, like the other texts under consideration, undermines itself, the negative reading of Samson's disability challenged by an interpretation that centralizes it.

Conclusion

My method of reading texts allows me to find interpretations that are possible and grounded in the text, and to find that such a reading challenges dominant assertions that disability must always be a negative, dehumanizing trait that exists only to marginalize biblical characters and real people. Any text, especially one composed in a world so different from the present day, may freight a range of meanings that extend well beyond the author's intention, beyond even what it was possible for them to think. What is more, people with disabilities, constructed in various ways, exist and have existed across cultures and times, no matter that they have only recently become the subject of academic enquiry. For this reason, I contend that such readings as I propose are possible even if they are unlikely to have been consciously intended by their original authors or later redactors, though I also contend that in many cases, my readings of the text provide a clearer, closer reading of the text than many other interpretations. In providing alternative readings of disabled characters, the overall arc of this thesis will demonstrate that hegemonic disability narratives always end up overturning themselves when examined closely, and that disability is a central factor in the construction of normative humanity in the Hebrew Bible and in the cultures that are built in part on its ideologies. Far from being a marginality, this dissertation will argue that disability is at the very centre of human experience and should be considered as such.

Chapter 1: Literary Considerations

“Oceans of ink have been spilled on the inner lives of paper people.”¹⁴

“Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” (Eccles 12:12)

Introduction

This chapter will review the literature that is relevant to this dissertation. Like many works in biblical studies, my work takes place in an intersection with another field. Disability studies is a growing subject that created a space for itself in the academy beginning in the late 1970s, seeking to consider the way that disabled people fit, or don't fit, into surrounding society. Scholars in this field also critique the way that modern societies construct access barriers for disabled people, intentionally or not. Disability studies has been in the ambit of biblical studies for decades, mostly in the subfield of historical disability studies, focused on the role of disabled people in the biblical world.

This chapter will first present a review of select disability studies literature that will provide the theoretical framework and academic background for my work in this dissertation. The focus will be mostly on intersectional disability studies, because like all fields studying marginality, disability studies broadly recognizes the necessity of studying marginalities together. Therefore, I consider works of feminist and queer disability studies, as well as some race and class-critical disability studies, as part of the background for this dissertation. My reasoning for choosing these subfields is that my readings of disability are also entangled in sexuality and gender, with two of my three main chapters being entirely focused on these intersections. Part of the argument of this dissertation is that disability is being used to co-create other inappropriate bodies, and that sex, gender, and ethnicity are three of the main criteria by which many societies typically regard a body as inappropriate, especially in the Bible. My own analyses of disability in the biblical context are intersectional throughout this dissertation. I will

¹⁴ Stephen D. Moore, *Gospel Jesuses and Other Nonhumans: Biblical Criticism Post-Poststructuralism*, (Atlanta, Society for Biblical Literature, 2017) 28-29.

consider works that touch on disability in both literal and abstract theoretical senses, as each mode of disability studies has something to contribute to the field and to this dissertation.

The chapter will then turn to disability studies within the field of biblical studies itself. It will consider the major works in this subfield and their impact on biblical studies and our understanding of biblical history, which are important for the background of my own work as well. Highlighting these works in detail and discussing their importance will make clear not only the state of the field of biblical disability studies, but also the gaps in that field that this dissertation aims to fill. Disability studies of biblical literature are, as previously stated, primarily historical in orientation, and this is a field that is full of useful discoveries to be made about ancient people and their contexts. That said, my own work focuses more on the received text. Thus, I analyse this literature mostly for its benefit to the field and my work, but also in part to demonstrate where I find it lacking, and where I plan to make up for that lack.

Disability Studies Literature

Disability studies is a broad and growing field with a considerable body of literature. For the purposes of this dissertation, I consider works in disability studies that approach disability as an intersectional marginality that is constructed alongside other forms of oppression. I do this because my own understanding of disability is that it is always co-constructed with other marginalized identities. Histories of disability are full of politics of gender, sexuality, race, class, animality, and other marginal identities. All of these identities are social constructs with political motivations. Even so, and much like with gender, sexuality, race and other forms of marginality, saying that disability is an invented category does not negate the reality of people living within that category, but rather highlights the societal, not natural, nature of their oppression. This oppression all stems from reactions to non-normative bodies.

Various types of marginal bodies are implicated in discussions and realities of disability, all of them set off from an imaginary “normal” body. To describe this (nonexistent) body, many disability theorists follow Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s iteration of the “normate body.”¹⁵ Garland Thomson describes the normate body as that which occupies a central place in any society. In the modern American context in which she is writing, she describes the normate body

¹⁵ Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8.

as belonging to a white, healthy, upper middle class, cisgendered heterosexual man who is married with children and is able-bodied and able-minded.¹⁶ This body is not a real body that belongs to any real people, but is rather an ideal against which *all* bodies are measured and potentially found deficient by some measure or another. Nobody is in possession of the actual normate body, but some people's bodies are able to approximate it much more readily than others.

The normate body is an eminently useful theoretical concept because it is not rooted in a particular society's conception of normalcy; it inherently changes based on the society in question. Unlike much critical theory, applying it in relation to an ancient society is not too challenging as long as one is aware of what would likely constitute a normate body in that culture. For example, in ancient Israel, the textual evidence suggests that the normate body would be an able-bodied, circumcised Israelite male who is married to an Israelite woman and has or is able to have children, and who is in a state of ritual purity and observes all the appropriate ritual and sacrifices to the divinity. The normative rules for the bodies of priests in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17-26 support a reading of this as the normate body for some Israelite people, but it appears only to be the case for priests, though there are rules for ritual purity that are in effect for everyone and could be read as a similar ideal. Furthermore, ritual purity is a state that no one, priest or not, could ever permanently occupy, as it could be disrupted by, among other things, contact with normal bodily fluids (Lev. 15:1-3). The ideal of the normate body is always something to chase after, and exists outside of the hierarchy of life into which all living things are sorted.

One of the most important works of literary disability theory is David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, in which they analyse the "opportunistic narrative device" of disability as it used in modern literature.¹⁷ For Mitchell and Snyder, disability is often reduced

¹⁶ Ibid. Many other identity markers could be added to this list; for example, in a precursor to Garland Thomson's work, Erving Goffman (*Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Hoboken: Prentice Hall, 1963)) discusses that people with hooks for hands do not fit into normative society. Garland Thomson also included 'Protestant' in her articulation of the concept, because the normate body is determined not only by its corporeality, but by its performance as a subject in the society that formed it.

¹⁷ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 47.

to nothing but a narrative trope in order to inaugurate a narrative, which must then be ‘corrected’ over the course of the narrative, either through healing or death.¹⁸ One recent example of this phenomenon is Guillermo del Toro’s 2017 monster film *The Shape of Water*, in which the Deaf protagonist,¹⁹ whose disability allows her to identify with the imprisoned sea monster for the entire film, dies as the monster escapes captivity.²⁰ Rather than allowing the disabled character who sustains the narrative tension live as a disabled person, the writers choose to kill her. Mitchell and Snyder’s work is widely cited by disability critics of literature and will form the background methodology by which I approach these biblical stories of disability.

There is no shortage of feminist disability research that is concerned with how disabled women are particularly affected by disability rhetoric. Susan Wendell’s *The Rejected Body* is not the first work of feminist disability studies, but it is arguably the most noteworthy of the early monographs on this subject.²¹ Wendell’s work brought disability into the ambit of feminist theory, asking feminists to consider which women they were (and were not) including in their discussions. Wendell cites feminist arguments that most societies are built for men: “life and work have been structured as though no one of importance in the public world...has to breast feed a baby or look after a sick child.”²² She then takes the argument farther by pointing out that society is similarly structured to the benefit of only healthy, able-bodied men and says that “Not only the architecture but the entire physical and social organization of life tends to assume that we are...strong and healthy and able to do what the average young, non-disabled man can do.”²³ She lands on the well argued disability studies point that disability is created not by bodily difference, but by society’s refusal to accommodate certain differences—the person in the wheelchair did not create the disability, the architect who designed the building without a ramp did.²⁴ The biblical characters who experience bodily difference are framed as the problem in the

¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹ Though Deaf persons today do not generally self-identify as disabled, the film positions the main character as such through the emphasis on her stigmatization and distance from others, her identification with other marginalized people, and the absence of any Deaf community in the film of which she can be part.

²⁰ *The Shape of Water*, directed by Guillermo del Toro, (Searchlight Pictures, 2017), 1:57:00.

²¹ Wendell, *The Rejected Body*.

²² Ibid., 39.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

text, when the reality is that the problem lies with the society that structured itself to exclude them.

Wendell's work is also strongly focused on the embeddedness of gender and disability in the body. Human beings can only know the world through their bodies, and disability studies scholars as Tobin Seibers describe the ways in which the "situated knowledge" of disabled people informs how they behave in relation to other people.²⁵ Feminist scholars such as Iris Young have long argued that perceived bodily differences between men and women are not biological but rather due to the fact that women have learned to "live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us."²⁶ It is clear that disabled people also largely live within the context of a culture that assigns expectations and meanings to their bodies. Alison Kafer, whose *Feminist, Queer, Crip* flips Wendell's intention to bring disability readings into feminism by bringing a feminist interpretation to disability studies, understands disability as a naturalized but not natural category that intersects with female and queer identities to push people far to the margins of society.²⁷ She argues that the imagined futures of too many feminists erase disability uncritically, depoliticizing disability and eugenics by nonchalantly removing some people from the imagined world.²⁸ Kafer is concerned with futures that do not include disabled people, wrestling with the notion of "cure" and its incumbent eradication of disabled bodies, and considers what disabled futures might look like.²⁹ Her text brings feminist, antiracist and queer disabled scholarship into concert, acknowledging that each subfield has separate issues but that they have overlapping goals.

Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory*³⁰ is centred on the intersection between queer and disability studies, with its explicit thesis being to "theorize the construction of able-bodiedness and heterosexuality, as well as the connections between them."³¹ McRuer argues that both queer

²⁵ Tobin Seibers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 22.

²⁶ Iris Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2005), 171.

²⁷ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24, 74.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 149-169.

³⁰ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

and disabled bodies and identities are “deployed to buttress” heterosexual and able-bodied identities, but must always be safely located in “other” people so they can buttress without threatening.³² For McRuer and other scholars, disability theory is ideologically and methodologically closer to queer theory than to any other form of critical theory. Topics pertaining to sex, sexuality, and gender permeate the field of disability studies, with collections such as *The Sexual Politics of Disability*³³ having been published decades ago and dealing with a range of topics about the sexuality of disabled people. Outside of the academy, queer and disabled authors such as Eli Clare, whose work touches on the intersection of disability, class and queerness³⁴, have written extensively on this intersection. For many scholars and activists, disability is a form of queerness or at least something very closely related, an embodied difference that causes people to live their lives differently, often in spaces where everything they do is seen as transgressive in some way.³⁵ Given that disability and queerness were co-constructed in the modern period, this is not surprising.

Jay Timothy Dolmage is one author who addresses the subject of disability’s co-construction with queerness and also with race, via the state-sponsored mechanism of immigration law.³⁶ In order to prevent an influx of people who would become a burden on the state, both the United States and Canada strictly controlled immigration in the early twentieth century, turning away disabled people for the same reasons they turned away people of undesirable racial and ethnic backgrounds and visibly queer people.³⁷ In so doing, they co-constructed race, disability and queerness as three elements of the same problem. The eugenic projects of “America” and “Canada” would be irreparably damaged by the immigration of too

³² Ibid., 24.

³³ Tom Shakespeare, Katherine Gillespie-Sells and Dominic Davies, eds. *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires*. (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

³⁴ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2009 [1999]) and *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

³⁵ McRuer. *Crip Theory*, 2; Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 84; Abby L. Wilkerson, “Normate Sex and Its Discontents,” in *Sex and Disability*, eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012,) 183-184; and Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 17 are some examples of important works in disability studies that draw this parallel.

³⁶ Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018).

³⁷ Ibid., 11.

many “defective” people³⁸ and therefore those people needed categorization and removal. The eugenic project never really ended, and Robert McRuer comments in *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization and Resistance* that disability is central to modern neoliberal economic and social policies worldwide, but especially in the west.³⁹ Race, disability and queerness are all modern terms and modern categories for embodiments and behaviours that have always existed, and the admittedly different ethnonational projects of settler colonial North America in the 20th century and of 21st century neoliberal economics bear considerable similarity to the ethnonational project of ancient Israel—not because their policies or aims or governments are similar, but because they both, like most societies, deem certain bodies different and therefore threatening to the nation. But it is through these threatening bodies that the nation is constructed.

Race as a modern concept has a difficult place in the study of history. Like most of our other “identity” terms, the word is a modern one that did not exist in any premodern cultures, and describes a phenomenon that, while occasionally similar to frameworks of social ordering that operated in the ancient world, is not identical to them. Geraldine Heng’s *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* deftly considers the importance of continuing to use the word ‘race’ in the study of history because the strategic essentialization of certain characteristics is used to “construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment” in both modern and non-modern cultures.⁴⁰ As such, it is possible to continue to speak of what Heng calls the “structural relationships for the articulation and management of human differences”⁴¹ even in cultures that structured, articulated and managed those relationships differently than we ourselves do. Heng contends that refusing to use the term “race” in discussion of historical cultures enables the reproduction of “a certain kind of past” and removes a critical tool from scholars who are studying history and trying to trace histories of racism into the modern period.⁴² Heng also

³⁸ Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

³⁹ Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization and Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5.

⁴⁰ Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 23. Preceding Heng by over a decade, Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), argues against the “conventional wisdom [that] usually denies there

briefly traces the way that “deformed and disabled” bodies are morphed with racialized bodies and how “disabled peoples inherited from classical tradition [harness] the inheritance of the past to a medieval survey and anatomization of the world that reflects on the meaning and borders of European self-identity and civilization.”⁴³ In other words, Heng argues that the co-construction of disability and race in the Medieval period was used to stake the boundaries of appropriate human embodiment, just as I argue is the case in the biblical period. I prefer to use the term ‘racialization’ in most cases both because it is an action rather than a state, and also to create some distance from its modern instantiations. The construction of Israelite and Jewish people in particular as a “race” is rooted in antisemitism, and I do not use the term to indicate an ontological distinction between any groups of people, but as description of a perceived hierarchy of human difference on the basis of appearance, nationality or religious background. Racialized bodies have always been read as deficient in some way, as part of various eugenic or national projects to Other non-native people, often by associating them with nonhuman animals.

To date, the only sustained discussion of disability and animality with which I am aware of is Sunaura Taylor’s *Beasts of Burden*, a monograph attempting to bridge the gap between animal and disability studies.⁴⁴ These two fields have been distant and often at odds for many years, but Taylor attempts to bridge them with her work, considering the axes of marginality that affect both disabled humans and nonhuman animals. Though the two are not the same, Taylor discusses the ways in which their similarities contribute to each other, and the marginalization of disabled humans and the mistreatment of nonhuman animals becomes one and the same.⁴⁵ The contributors to *Animals, Disability and the End of Capitalism*, edited by Anthony J. Nocella II, Amber E. George and John Lupinacci, also consider the intersection of animality and disability

was any race hatred in the ancient world.” (1). Isaac argues that “Obviously [racism] did not exist in the modern form of a biological determinism which represents a distortion of Darwin’s ideas, nor was there systematic persecution of any ethnic group by the other,” but that it is clear that prejudices and the ordering of peoples by skin colour, national origin, cultural background and the behavioural characteristics mapped onto those things did exist (5).

⁴³ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁴ Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 57-81.

across their chapters, towards the goals of ecology and radical animal liberation.⁴⁶ Studying nonhuman animals and disabled humans together, then, makes it possible to consider the ways in which the slotting of nonhumans into categories like ‘food’ and the slotting of disabled humans into categories like ‘invalid’ achieve similar ends: the reification of normative, able-bodied humanity. Including animals in this dissertation’s theoretical background is a critical component of its primary argument that disability is used in conjunction with other forms of marginality to construct a set of boundaries into which normative humanity is expected to fit, and is immediately relevant to the second chapter on Isaac’s animal associations.

Bodies of all kinds are central concerns in disability studies, and are also a central concern of this dissertation. Of course, the bodies I am analysing are not real bodies but constructed ones, relevant because of how they are used to imagine real bodies and their place in society. Because my bodies are textual, however, it is necessary to place the dissertation in the body of literature specifically aimed at considering disabled bodies in biblical literature.

Biblical Disability Studies

The work of disability studies narrows considerably when it moves into biblical studies. A small but growing number of scholars have approached biblical texts from the perspective of disability, which has proven very fruitful. These studies have been primarily either historical or literary in orientation (or both), in alignment with the two major fields within biblical studies generally. Historically speaking, Saul Olyan’s *Disability in the Hebrew Bible* considers the role ‘disability’ played in ancient Israel, reading native terms and parsing their meaning, and considering the ways in which people living with the conditions listed as “defects” might have existed in ancient Israel.⁴⁷ He considers the way in which disability can be used to help us understand how the writers and editors of the Bible “construct hierarchically significant difference and privilege certain groups over others.”⁴⁸ Another example is Rebecca Raphael’s *Biblical Corpora*, which is a thorough literary examination of disability in the Hebrew Bible, which frequently and quite reasonably and adeptly uses the literary approach to comment on the

⁴⁶ Anthony J. Nocella, Amber E. George, and John Lupinacci, eds. *Animals, Disability and the End of Capitalism: Voices from the Eco-Ability Movement*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2019).

⁴⁷ Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

historical situation surrounding the production of the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁹ For example, she considers the ways in which idols are constructed as disabled,⁵⁰ non-Israelite divinities being marked as disabled to mark them as lesser and other.

More general literary studies on this topic include *This Abled Body*, an essay collection with a slightly historical-critical bent,⁵¹ with contributions ranging from a chapter on ancient conceptions of disability as divinely originated⁵² to a chapter by Kerry H. Wynn criticizing the so-called “normate hermeneutic,” an interpretive hermeneutic in which able-bodiedness is centered to the point of being invisible even to the interpreter, and the lesser status of disabled people being therefore naturalized.⁵³ This chapter provides a critical term for this dissertation, with each chapter considering how normate hermeneutics have led to particular interpretations of biblical characters and stories. Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper’s *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*⁵⁴ is a similar collection with a focus on disability rhetoric in biblical texts, including a chapter by Joel S. Baden on how barrenness functions critically as a disability in biblical literature.⁵⁵ Jeremy Schipper is a scholar of some note in the field of biblical disability studies, having written a number of books on subjects pertaining to disability narratives.⁵⁶ A recent commentary, *The Bible and Disability*, focuses on the disability narratives in the Bible,

⁴⁹ Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in the Hebrew Bible Literature* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41-45.

⁵¹ Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper, eds, *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

⁵² Neal H. Walls, “The Origins of the Disabled Body: Disability in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 13-30.

⁵³ Kerry H. Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 91-101.

⁵⁴ Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper, eds, *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁵⁵ Joel S. Baden, “The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 13-27.

⁵⁶ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006) and *Disability & Isaiah’s Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

drawing much needed interpretive attention to them while maintaining a generally detached perspective on the subject.⁵⁷ Finally, Julia Watts Belser's 2024 monograph *Loving Our Own Bones* flips the question of what Judaism and Christianity have to say about disability by asking what the experience of being disabled can bring to a person's spiritual life, interpreting biblical texts in light of this question.⁵⁸

Most biblical work that includes reinterpretive perspectives similar to my own has been done in feminist and especially queer biblical studies. Collections such as *Bible Trouble*⁵⁹ and *The Queer Bible Commentary*⁶⁰ demonstrate a methodology for reading texts that foregrounds subversive elements within the text, reads with modern sensibilities in mind, and foregrounds alternate readings that have been suppressed by traditional scholarship, proving that they were already indicated by the text. Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden's *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, for example, argues among other things that *fertility*, not infertility, is a curse from God bestowed upon all women in Genesis 3 in payment for Eve's sin.⁶¹ Other works, such as *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible*,⁶² *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics*⁶³ and *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s)*,⁶⁴ demonstrate reading methods informed the intersections between feminist theory and marginal readings from racialized, colonized minorities who are each staking their own claim on the biblical text. These readings are innovative but not arbitrary, taking the contexts of the readers as a starting point to

⁵⁷ Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Yong, eds, *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017).

⁵⁸ Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2024).

⁵⁹ Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds, *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2011).

⁶⁰ Deren Guest, Robert Shore-Goss and Mona West, eds, *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006).

⁶¹ Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), 88.

⁶² Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, eds, *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2016).

⁶³ Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia, eds, *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2014).

⁶⁴ Jione Havea, David J. Neville and Elaine M. Wainwright, eds, *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2014).

understand the biblical text and to surface tensions and struggles that were not as readily noticeable when reading from a more traditional, White Christian male standpoint. Many scholars, including Renita Weems,⁶⁵ Gale Yee,⁶⁶ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz⁶⁷ and Vincent Wimbush⁶⁸ contribute to this style of reading across different axes, while a growing trend of posthumanist studies in biblical literature focuses on the role of non-human animals in the text.⁶⁹ The prominence of many of these scholars speaks to the growing awareness within the field of the necessity of such work. No work of disability studies that I am aware of, however, exists in this space, a gap which this dissertation aims to fill.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the relevant literature on biblical and disability studies as it informs the background and research of this dissertation. Despite the depth in the field of disability studies and the variety of work done by disability scholars, religion and religious texts tend to be understudied by experts in disability. Whatever the reasons, disability scholars who are not also scholars of religion almost never mention or discuss the impact of religious ideologies, texts, and institutions in their work. Similarly, many mainstream biblical scholars do not tend to consider the role of disability in understanding biblical texts and how they impact our knowledge of ancient Israel and our contemporary interactions with real people. This chapter has also surveyed the available literature on disability in the Bible that does exist, taking selections from the growing subfield of biblical disability studies to highlight common methodologies and conclusions that are helpful to this dissertation.

⁶⁵ Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

⁶⁶ Gale A. Yee, *Towards an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics: An Intersectional Anthology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021).

⁶⁷ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996).

⁶⁸ Vincent L. Wimbush, *The Bible and African-Americans: A Brief History* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁶⁹ Walker-Jones and Millar, eds., *Ask the Animals*; Strømme, *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida*; Moore, *Gospel Jesuses and Other Nonhumans*; Stephen D. Moore, ed., *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology. First Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), Jennifer L. Koosed, ed., *The Bible and Posthumanism* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2014), are several examples of work in this field.

In surveying this literature, I have also highlighted elements of biblical disability studies that I find are limited in their usefulness. Biblical disability studies that are focused only on historical circumstances and do not comment on modern issues very much have value and should be lauded, but I believe that studies of disability should be oriented towards the benefit they can give modern-day disabled people, which necessarily means commenting on current issues. Therefore, my survey of this literature has also highlighted the interpretative gaps that biblical scholars of disability have left in their wake, in order to demonstrate where this dissertation intervenes. It is into these gaps that my own research stands, with competing interpretations of biblical texts about disability highlighting the fact that there is not only one narrative about disabled people to which we all must adhere.

Chapter 2: Isaac the Amazing Goat Boy: Animality and the Construction of Human Boundaries

“In myth time, animals are humans, humans are animals . . . there is no distinction. Yes, we see the animal characteristics emerging at the end of the tales, a constant reminder to us that the blending is in force, that the ancient Age of Mythology is giving way to the world that we know, when animals have animal characteristics, when humans have human characteristics, when we move into the differentiated world that we know.”⁷⁰

“Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me.” (Gen 27:3)

Introduction

This chapter considers the patriarch Isaac’s disability in conjunction with his relationship with nonhuman animals, and how that relationship informs his relationships with all the members of his immediate family. Isaac is a disabled character who is regularly associated with nonhuman animals in complex ways, and I argue that these two marginalities are interrelated and both serve the same goal as narrative devices. Thinking about Isaac’s disability in conjunction with his animality enables me analyse the figure of Isaac, the other human characters, the nonhuman animal characters, and the divinity that guides them all in a way that not only exposes the inequalities that are inherent in the text, but also provides a means of combatting those inequalities.

Arguably no character in the Hebrew Bible is more disabled than Isaac, son of Abraham. This is not a comment about the severity of his disabilities or a value judgement about the nature of his impairments. Isaac famously goes blind in his old age, allowing himself to be deceived by his sons Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27), but his existence as a disabled figure begins much earlier in the text. Throughout his life, Isaac is precluded from the category of the able-bodied due to identity markers beyond his control. Childhood, old age, and blindness all conspire in Isaac to

⁷⁰ Harold Scheub, *Trickster and Hero: Two Figures in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 30.

disable him repeatedly at critical stages in his life according to the narrator, who leaves gaps in the text that the majority of its interpreters have chosen to fill with readings emphasizing Isaac's supposed weakness, stupidity, and inadequacy. In addition to his age and disability, Isaac is also associated with nonhuman animals throughout his life, an association that serves to further marginalize him from his human family. His disability and animality are in fact co-constructions that support each other and allow the ancient Israelite audience to erect a boundary around appropriate, normative humanity.

Isaac's stories, taken together, highlight two uniting conflicts: one conflict between agency and passivity, and the other between animality and humanity. Isaac appears in person in nine stories: Isaac's birth (Gen 21:1-7), Hagar's banishment (Gen 21:9 specifically), his binding and near-sacrifice (the "Akedah") (Gen 22:1-19), the end of his wife Rebekah's introductory scene, (Gen 24:62-67), the death of his father Abraham (Gen 25:7-11), the birth of his children (Gen 25:19-27), his extended conflict with Abimelech (Genesis 26), and finally his blessing of Jacob (Genesis 27), before he reappears briefly to die (Gen 35:27-29). In only three of these stories does Isaac speak. In the others he is a passive participant, including in his own death, which is unlike the death-accounts of the other patriarchs, who typically deliver some form of deathbed testimony. In two of the three stories where he speaks, Isaac's life is in tension with those of nonhuman animals. The latter of these two stories, the blessing of Jacob in Genesis 27, is also the story in which Isaac's life is in tension with his disability, and seems to drive home the apparently intended reading of Isaac as a blind fool. The narrative is one of deception, with Jacob stealing the blessing that would normally have been granted to his older brother Esau by tricking the blind Isaac into believing that he is Esau. His mother Rebekah helps him with this trickery, using two slaughtered goats as tools to aid the deception. Isaac's disability both inaugurates and sustains the narrative, and forms the central axis around which his character orbits.

In this chapter I will review some of the dominant interpretations of Isaac that have been in place since the advent of modern biblical criticism. Readers of the Bible, including professional scholars, traditionally either have ignored Isaac in this story, focusing on his wily son Jacob, or have interpreted him as an ignorant, weak old man who was easily fooled. These interpretations ignore alternative ways of reading the story that do not bow to this ableist interpretation and require the reader to consider disability in a different way than able-bodied history has taught them to. The perceived lack of agency on the part of scholars using an able-

bodied hermeneutic has in part led to the marginalization of disabled people as lesser than able-bodied people, by way of removing the very humanity of disabled people and placing them in the category of nonhuman animals. At stake in the interpretations of these stories is the very humanity of disabled people.

After having considered some traditional interpretations of Isaac, I will re-read the text myself and offer a novel interpretation to counter suppositions of able-bodied normativity and of human-animal power dynamics. My interpretation will read the story as a deception *by* Isaac rather than *of* Isaac, in which Isaac and his wife Rebekah trick Jacob into believing he is pulling a fast one over on his blind father. They do this in order to instigate a conflict between him and his brother that will force him to go to his mother's ancestral home and marry a woman of whom his parents will approve. The interpretation will first dismantle the role of Isaac's supposed weakness in the text and contend that Isaac is a powerful figure in the story who is feared by the other characters, and who ultimately is doing the will of God. From here, my interpretation will focus on Isaac's blessing of Jacob and its central place in both this story and in the grander narrative of the Israelite patriarchy.

Next, I will focus heavily on the role of nonhuman animals in the narrative. The roles played by these figures are both critical and critically ignored, and I will interpret them in relation not only to Isaac, but also to Rebekah and Jacob. All three characters are imbricated in matrices of humanity and animality throughout this drama, and highlighting the animal presence in the story, especially *vis à vis* Isaac's disability, is a pivotal juncture for the interpretation. Jacob's association with animals especially continues beyond this story, and is related to his role as a trickster-style figure throughout his narrative.

My interpretation will conclude with a re-consideration of Isaac's disability with regard to the trick, and will unpack some of the tangled relationships of people lying to and tricking each other that comprises this family dynamic. In this disability-centered reading, the "victor" of all the trickery is God, who is able to continue to grow the nation of Israel without their being forced to ethnically mix with outsiders. I will consider the ramifications of the foregoing interpretation on scholarly conceptions of the body in ancient Israel, using the idea of the normate body to consider the role played by disability in structuring Israelite masculinity and therefore participation in the Israelite community. My interpretation allows the Isaac story to subvert traditionally assumed normative forms of the human body in ancient Israel, troubling the

boundaries that are supposed to exist between the appropriate Israelite body and inappropriate other bodies.

More importantly, however, are the boundaries that are said to exist between normate and non-normate bodies in the world today. The primary consequence of disability-centric interpretations such as mine is that they encourage the reader to rethink the way that our own societies place and police boundaries between ‘normal’ and ‘not-normal.’ Disability and animality are the sites of such boundaries, and the true critical contribution of this chapter, both to my overall dissertation and more broadly, is in identifying the existence of those boundaries. I do this not to attack them but to show that they have always been unsteady and porous, and that any attempts to codify them only serve to reinforce their malleability. Disabled people and nonhuman animals are in a unique position to disrupt hegemonic normativity of all kinds in modern Western society, and the purpose of my interpretation is to highlight that positionality and empower it. The chapter will therefore end on the question of where the boundaries of normate humanity actually reside, and whether those boundaries are necessary at all.

Isaac’s Disability

וַיְהִי כִּי-זָקֵן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶינּוּ עֵינָיו מִרְאֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-עֶשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲגִנִּי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה-נָא זָקֵנִתִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי וְעַתָּה שָׂא-נָא כְלִיךָ תְּלִיךָ וְקִשְׁתְּךָ וַצֵּא, הַשְׂדֵּה וְצוּדָהּ לִי צִידָה וְעָשֵׂה-לִּי מִטְעָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲהַבְתִּי, וְהִבִּיאָהּ לִי--וְאָכְלָה: בְּעֶבְרִית תִּבְרָכְךָ נַפְשִׁי בְּטָרֶם אָמוּת

(Gen 27:1-4)

Isaac’s blindness is mentioned only briefly in the biblical text, but it is so central to his characterization in the deception narrative that the story opens with it. “When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see...” (Gen 27:1). It is unclear exactly what the text means when it claims that Isaac’s eyes were dim (וַתִּכְהֶינּוּ). In other biblical passages, the same verb is occasionally associated with blindness (cf. Job 17:7 and Zech 11:17), with weakness or physical failure (Isa 42:4 and Ezek 21:7), and even, in its pi’el form, with Eli’s more abstract failure to stop his family’s constant sin (1 Sam 3:13). However, the clearest literary association being drawn here is a contrast with an occasion when someone’s eyes were *not* dim. Upon Moses’s death, the reader is told that “לֹא-כָהָתָה עֵינָיו וְלֹא-נָס לַחֶה” (his sight was unimpaired and his

vigour had not abated” (Deut 34:7)). It seems likely that the redactor hoped the reader would read the Isaac passage and think forward to Moses, comparing the two figures.⁷¹ Moses, a character himself disabled by a life-long speech impediment, dies with the assurance that his eyesight never dimmed, but Isaac gets no such assurance and indeed, appears to presume that his dimmed eyesight indicates his impending death (Gen 27:2). Benno Jacob argues that Isaac’s blindness is the reason he feels he is going to die,⁷² and Julia Watts Belser states the audience is trained to assume Isaac is near the end of his life because of his disability and because he says so, ignoring that he does not die for two more decades, part of a broad trend across the literature of several cultures in which disability represents the end of a person’s life.⁷³ Disability regularly represents (impending or actual) death, but it has other symbolic valences as well.

A widespread association between clear sight, knowledge, and wisdom is found in most classical cultures, and is carried through in time into the contemporary period in the West.⁷⁴ Because Moses already had a speech disability, it was important for the textual redactors to make clear that his sight, and therefore his wisdom, was not impeded by his impairment. It is not merely an ancient distinction that the original authors and redactors chose to make. In translating the two verses in question, the translators of the NRSV elected to use the ambiguous “grew dim” to describe Isaac, as though to cast him into a cloud of confusion regarding what is happening,⁷⁵

⁷¹ There are several comparisons between Isaac and Moses that could be made which are outside the scope of this study, including the extraordinary circumstances of their births, encounters with God atop mountains, conflicts with Egyptian brothers, and wives who take active roles in ensuring that God’s plan is enacted.

⁷² Benno Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974), 560.

⁷³ Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 144-145.

⁷⁴ See, among many studies on this subject, Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light: Especially in the Case of Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), and especially Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁷⁵ There is a valid question to be asked as well of *how* blind Isaac is in Genesis 27. Sighted people tend to assume blindness as a totality, when in fact most blind people have at least some eyesight. David B. Friedman, *Bereshit: The Book of the Beginning, A New Translation with Commentary* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), suggests on page 77 that Isaac “had serious problems with his eyesight,” and he is not the only interpreter to posit the possibility that Isaac has some sight. See also August Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded, Vol. II*, translated

whereas they opted for a clear “his sight was unimpaired” to describe Moses. This extremely liberal translation of the Hebrew would seem to leave no room for ambiguity. Moses’s sight was perfect, but Isaac’s has some nebulous failing. In the ancient imaginary as in the modern, this is not only a commentary on how well their eyes work, but on the cognitive processes thought to be linked to the external sensorium.⁷⁶ Moses is depicted as intelligent, powerful, and agentive even unto death, while Isaac is foolish, weak, and passive even while still alive. This contrast is not only one of able-bodiedness but of normativity more generally—Moses more closely approaches ancient Israel’s normate body than does Isaac. Throughout the Isaac story, what will be clear is that the writers of the text are attempting to distance him from normate Israelite bodies to a considerable degree, using his animality and disability as markers to trouble the ideal body of the nation, while simultaneously affirming a version of that body. The writers of the text claim that its assumed Israelite audience is descended from Isaac, contesting all claims of what it means for them to be human.

No further comment is made about Isaac’s blindness throughout the biblical narrative, but it determines the behaviour of the other characters. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder comment in *Narrative Prosthesis* that disability is an inaugural force in storytelling,⁷⁷ and Isaac’s disability is most certainly the inaugural point for the drama of the deception narrative. Without a blind patriarch to attempt to deceive, there is no story, and this is why it is so critical that in the first

by William Barron Stevenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 214; and Martin Kessler and Karel Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 150. However, I hesitate to suggest these works are knowledgeable about blindness as a condition, and suspect their insistence on Isaac not being totally sightless has more to do with confusion over how a blind man could pose a danger to Rebekah and Jacob. Loren R. Fisher, *Genesis: A Royal Epic: Second Edition* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 126, notes that, regarding Jacob’s objection to the plan in Gen 27:12, most commentators and translators ignore that his objection is rooted in fear that Isaac will *see* him. Fisher argues that this translation issue arises out of commentators not wanting to create confusion about Isaac’s blindness, but I wonder if it is to occlude the nature of Isaac’s sight loss.

⁷⁶ Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 11-26. Bernidaki-Aldous also argues that blindness exists as a state of contradiction in much ancient literature, especially Greek, in which it stands in for an intellectual or moral failure, but can also be an indicator of great spiritual power or metaphysical wisdom (50, cf the figure of Tiresias). Though this is true of many surrounding cultures, I find no evidence that this positive association between blindness and spiritual wisdom existed in the literature of the ancient Israelites. Indeed, blindness here is often constructed as a punishment from God, as is illness or disfigurement more generally.

⁷⁷ Mitchell Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 6.

few verses of the story, Isaac be characterized as blind, feeble, and near death. But Isaac's disability does not stand on its own in this narrative, because, as the review of literature in the previous chapter demonstrated, disability is always a co-constructed marginality overlapping with others. On the contrary, Isaac's disability is heavily linked to his association with nonhuman animals, which positions him on a hierarchy of animacy vis-à-vis the other characters.

Passivity and Animality

Considered together, the stories about Isaac form a character arc with two uniting conflicts: one conflict between agency and passivity, and the other between animality and humanity. In all of the stories in which he is an active participant (Gen 22:1-19, Genesis 26 and 27, as well as arguably at the end of his children's birth narrative in Gen 25:27), Isaac is associated in different ways with animals that are typically consumed by humans. Through this association, his animacy and humanity are consistently ambiguous, leaving open potential readings that interpret him as weak or passive, as is traditionally the case. But this ambiguity also creates the opposite possibility, allowing a reading of Isaac as setting the boundaries of humanity himself. The work of linguist Mel Chen is helpful in this discussion; Chen's employment of animacy⁷⁸ as a means of understanding the spectrum of life is extremely useful for considering disability and animality together. Including the animacy heuristic in my analysis lets me consider Isaac, the other human characters, the nonhuman animal characters, and the divinity that guides them all on a spectrum that exposes the inequalities inherent in the text and provides a means of combatting them.

Considering Isaac's place in a hierarchy of living beings starts with the binding narrative in Genesis 22. Prior to this, Isaac's conception, birth, and inheritance are all subject to considerable drama, and its resolution would seem to position him as the inevitable heir to the Abrahamic promise, until God appears again and speaks to Abraham.

⁷⁸ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 6-8.

קח-נא את-בנך את-יחידך אשר-אהבת את-יצחק ולך-לך אל-ארץ מוריה והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד
ההרים אשר אמר אליך

Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah,
and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.,
(Gen 22:2)

God appears one day and gives this order to Abraham, apparently apropos of nothing.⁷⁹ The first living being with which Abraham interacts after rising the next morning to obey this order is his donkey (חמור), then two (possibly enslaved) boys (נערי), and only then “Isaac his son” (יצחק בנו), Gen 22:3). Upon reaching the place where God has instructed them to go, Abraham takes the wood of the burnt offering, presumably off the back of the donkey, which is a pack animal and would have been brought for this purpose, and, strikingly, puts it on Isaac’s back instead (Gen 22:6). This is the first of three animal substitutions that occur in this narrative.

The second substitution happens at the level of rhetoric when Isaac, obviously noticing something wrong (and perhaps also noting that his father is carrying both objects that could be used to cause harm), instigates the only conversation that he and Abraham ever have. Isaac asks, “where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (הנה האש והעצים ואיה השא לעלה, Gen 22:7), to which Abraham ominously replies, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (אלהים יראה-לו השא לעלה בנו), Gen 22:8). The ‘my son’ here could be read as an address, as it was in the previous verse, merely Abraham acknowledging their relationship—or reaffirming it. But it can also be read as an appositive noun, which is to say a word that further describes another word in the sentence. Read this way, “my son” is merely an elaboration of “the lamb for a burnt offering.”⁸⁰ Considering that this episode comes very shortly after God has “provided” Abraham with Isaac, I argue that it is possible to read this interaction as Isaac’s being narratively substituted for the lamb. Though this is a rhetorical construction, the reader understands that

⁷⁹ “Showing” and “seeing” are ongoing themes in the binding narrative, with both God and Abraham consistently seeing things, verbs never applied to Isaac. Cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 70.

⁸⁰ Radak’s thirteenth-century commentary *On Genesis*, trans. Eliyahu Munk (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 2003), posits such a reading, for example.

Isaac is substituted for the lamb just as he had earlier been substituted for the donkey. Chen writes that “The figurative substitution of a human with an animal figure often accomplishes both of these things [i.e., the removal of human qualities and active transformation into a nonhuman animal] and constitutes a displacement to lower levels of the animacy hierarchy,”⁸¹ and these are processes that happen in the binding narrative. Isaac’s human qualities are removed and replaced with the qualities of a pack animal, and very shortly he will be transformed into a ram, if not literally then functionally so. In displacing Isaac’s humanity, the text makes it easy for its interpreters to scale Isaac’s animacy lower than that of the other human characters, which serves as the basis for interpretations that he is feeble and easily controlled.

With the idea of Isaac-as-sacrificial-lamb established in the reader’s expectation, Isaac and Abraham proceed up the mountain. There, Isaac is bound and nearly killed, rescued at the last minute by God, who intervenes and reverses his decision, insisting that Abraham not sacrifice Isaac:

וַיֵּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אֲחֵר נָאֵחַז בְּסֹבֶב בְּקִרְנָיו וַיִּלְךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֵיל
וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ

Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering *instead of his son*.⁸²

(Gen 22:13)⁸²

⁸¹ Chen, *Animacies*, 44.

⁸² Emphasis added. In *Bereshit Rabbah* 56.9, the ram symbolically becomes Isaac, whereas Christians preferred an interpretation of the ram standing in for or ransoming Isaac. Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch*, vol. 1, trans Nicholas P. Lunn (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 153, argues that the ram, representing Christ, offered itself instead. This perhaps echoes an ancient Greek sacrificial logic in which the sacrifice could not proceed unless the animal was understood to have consented to being killed, as first argued by Walter Burkert, “Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 7 (1966): 87-121. More recent scholars such as F. S. Naiden, “The Fallacy of the Willing Victim,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 127 (2007): 61-73, have argued that the evidence for this belief is rather quite weak and that the Greeks actually wanted their sacrificial animals to demonstrate a vitality that made them worthy as sacrifices, which itself recalls biblical insistence that sacrificial animals be unblemished (Lev. 22:20).

The fact that the animal that Abraham kills (אֵיל) is not the animal that he promised Isaac (הַשֶּׁה) makes clear that a third substitution is happening—a ram for Isaac,⁸³ who was already standing in for both a donkey and a lamb. In Hebrew it is not entirely clear what these two animals are. The distinction is possibly one of a domesticated animal versus a wild animal, rather than two distinct species of animal. In either case, I read this interchange as a comment on Isaac’s coming-of-age—the next time the audience sees Isaac after the substitution is as an adult, so the replacement of an immature and domestic animal with a mature and wild animal is symbolic of this transition in Isaac’s life. As he transitions into adulthood, he also transitions through a series of animals who are less and less domesticated—which he himself comes to prefer as an adult. The difference in the type of animal appears not to matter textually,⁸⁴ for all nonhuman animals in this text are denied animacy to the same degree. God treats Abraham as though nothing has gone amiss with the sacrifice and reaffirms covenantal promises to him, and the scene ends.

The figure of Isaac in the binding narrative therefore appears to be literally interchangeable with not one but three nonhuman animals. Though his animality narratively precedes his disability, the final redactor who composed the present versions of the texts would have been aware of both. Animality and disability, though not identical identities, are often conflated in the marginalization of both.⁸⁵ Isaac is also, in the later interpretations by Christians, almost interchangeable with another nonhuman animal, Jesus of Nazareth,⁸⁶ who is not only superhuman but is also portrayed as a lamb.⁸⁷ Indeed, the image of the sacrificial lamb is one of

⁸³ Fisher, *Genesis: A Royal Epic* 102 (n151), argues that a potential translation of “אֵיל” in this verse is “another ram,” implying that Isaac was the first “ram.”

⁸⁴ A number of medieval Jewish commentaries including that of Rabbeinu Bahya (*Torah Commentary*, translated by Eliyahu Munk. New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1998) find relevance in the placement of a אֵיל in this passage and its relation to creation and the later sacrificial cult, but do not comment on how it differs from the animal that had previously been promised.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 57-81.

⁸⁶ Moore, *Gospel Jesuses and Other Nonhumans*, 107-108, argues that Jesus is not only an animal, but a variety of things including inanimate objects and plants, all drawn from the Fourth Gospel.

⁸⁷ A thorough work on this subject is Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Kessler goes into great deal about the history of Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpretation of the text, including the symbolism of the lamb as Jesus Christ, at the end of

the most common images of Jesus in Christian theology, beginning with the New Testament itself, where the imagery is used to reference Jesus in the Fourth Gospel and the Book of Revelation (John, 1:29, Rev 5:1-7). The image appears earlier in at least one Pauline epistle (1 Cor 5:7), in which Paul references Jesus as the Paschal Lamb in a seemingly throwaway line in a passage otherwise about incest, suggesting that the image was common enough to be recognized by believers without explanation, and to be used in a variety of contexts. Many early Christians understand Isaac and his near-sacrifice as a prefiguring of Jesus and his actual sacrifice.⁸⁸ Unlike Jesus, however, who goes willingly to his death on Mount Calvary, Isaac is deceived about the nature of his trip up the mountain, precluding him from consenting or participating in the sacrifice.

Isaac's animality renders him mostly mute and casts him in a passive role for much of his narratives thereafter. He is unlike other characters and people, and that is enough to put him in the world's background. As the linguist John Cherry observes: "We are necessarily oriented to other entities in the very terms implicit in our orientation to our own selves. Phenomenologically, the first figure against the background of the world is always oneself."⁸⁹ It seems self-evident to say that people are wont to understand the world with their own experience at the forefront, but it is worth reiterating in this context (as in many others), because that form of filtering experience leads to serious interpretive problems in Isaac's narratives. Able-bodied readers use their own experience as the water mark for understanding "humanity" and thus scale down the experience of a character like Isaac—and people like Isaac—placing them lower in an animacy hierarchy, evacuating them of human characteristics, and potentially justifying the poor treatment of them. Or, to put it in Chen's words, "[l]anguage users use animacy hierarchies to manipulate, affirm and shift the ontologies that matter the world."⁹⁰ The way we choose to talk about certain people has consequences, both for them and for us, and also for the way our world is structured.

which he concludes that Christian interpretations that focus on the ram's sacrifice "minimize the significance of Isaac," because the ram/Christ ends up suffering *instead* of Isaac, who therefore did not do anything (151-152).

⁸⁸ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 101, contends that Isaac doesn't prefigure Jesus so much as Jesus supersedes Isaac, taking his place in the narrative, leaving Isaac fully substituted for Jesus/the lamb.

⁸⁹ As cited in Mutsumi Yamamoto, *Animacy and Reference: A Cognitive Approach to Corpus Linguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1999), 1. Cf Chen, *Animacies*, 29.

⁹⁰ Chen, *Animacies*, 42.

Fortunately, however, no amount of linguistic structuring can make the taxonomies humans impose upon the world less porous, and in that porosity we see the fundamental failure of those taxonomies to reliably sort the world as they are meant to.⁹¹ Chen asks “[i]f language normally and habitually distinguishes between human and inhuman, live and dead, but then in certain circumstances wholly fails to do so, what might this tell us about the porosity of biopolitical logics themselves?”⁹² This is a question I take up in my interpretation of the deception narrative. In that narrative Isaac appears to be cast as an inappropriate person, someone who others should seek not to resemble. I challenge that casting, and ask why social boundaries that are implicitly erected through the creation of a character like Isaac are thought of as boundaries at all.

Isaac’s Blindness, Jacob’s Deception

The deception of Isaac in Genesis 27 is a short narrative with only four characters, but it is nonetheless complicated. Isaac, having grown blind in his old age, requests that his favourite son Esau hunt him game meat to eat in exchange for the family blessing. After Esau leaves, Rebekah, having overheard Isaac’s command, immediately finds *her* favourite son Jacob and begins to conspire with him to steal the blessing. She instructs Jacob to bring her two kids so she can kill them and make them into stew, and informs Jacob that he must impersonate his brother to secure the blessing for himself. Though Jacob is skeptical, he agrees to bring the stew and wear goat fur to pretend to be Esau, and enters the tent. Notably, Isaac is also clearly skeptical, asking Jacob repeatedly who he is, remarking that Jacob’s voice is dissimilar to his brother’s, and insisting on touching his arm to feel Esau’s hairy arm. Only after several requests for the truth are denied does Isaac assent to giving Jacob the blessing, at which point Jacob immediately leaves for Rachel’s homeland, leaving Esau and Isaac to lament the smaller blessing that Esau receives.

Traditional interpretations of the deception narrative do not often focus on Isaac or his blindness any more than they must, but when they do, their framing and interpretation of his disability is laced with ableism, reproducing stereotypical attitudes about the agency of disabled

⁹¹ Ibid., 46.

⁹² Ibid., 7.

people in contrast to that of able-bodied people. Modern scholars of Genesis typically understand chapter 25 to be the beginning of the “Jacob cycle.”⁹³ Although this is correct from the standpoint of the received biblical narrative, most scholars seem content to dismiss Isaac from the story and ignore the clear thematic linkages between the deception narrative and the earlier Isaac narratives. “Isaac is portrayed as a little man governed by little goals with little closeness to bequeath to the next generation,” writes Dennis Sylva in a 2008 article on the deception narrative, in which he argues that Isaac is himself unworthy of receiving the divine blessing.⁹⁴ Gerhard von Rad, in his commentary on Genesis, characterizes Isaac—whose name he frequently elides in favour of “the blind man”—as pathetic, arguing that “Isaac’s questions [to Jacob in the tent] show pathetically how the blind man cannot at first master a feeling of uncertainty.”⁹⁵ Despite acknowledging Isaac’s attempts to get Jacob to admit the truth, von Rad goes on to describe Isaac’s “helplessness”⁹⁶ in his inability to retract his supposedly erroneous blessing of Jacob because he was nothing but a vessel for God’s power.⁹⁷

⁹³ This is a relatively new phenomenon in the study of Genesis. Works published prior to the mid-twentieth century and especially the mid-century focus on source criticism typically considered Genesis 25:19 to be the origination of an “Isaac narrative.” See for example Benjamin Wisner Bacon, *The Genesis of Genesis: A Study of the Documentary Sources of the First Book of Moses in Accordance with the Results of Critical Science Illustrating the Presence of Bibles within the Bible* (Hartford: The Student Publishing Company, 1893); Georg Woosung Wade, *The Book of Genesis: Edited with Introduction, Critical Analysis and Notes* (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1896); Dillmann, *Genesis*; and Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Sophia Taylor (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1894) for just four examples. Most works omit Isaac as a narrative locus. Some exceptions include Fisher, *Genesis: A Royal Epic*, 117 (n.1), who notes that this section of the text opens with a line indicating that these are the “stories of Isaac” (Gen 25:19) and that the opening of Abraham’s narrative does not warrant such a notation, and Craig A. Smith, “Reinstating Isaac: The Centrality of Abraham’s Son in the “Jacob-Esau” Narrative of Genesis 27,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31.4 (Winter 2001): 130-134, who argues that Isaac is the central character in the text, which is about his failings as a patriarch, notably drawing attention to the fact that Isaac must have known about Jacob’s status as God’s chosen heir (132).

⁹⁴ Dennis Sylva, “The Blessing of a Wounded Patriarch: Genesis 27.1-40,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32.3 (March 2008): 273.

⁹⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 272

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

Though he is in disagreement with a certain strand of scholarship on blessings,⁹⁸ von Rad is arguing against Hermann Gunkel, who famously claims that the deception narrative was a comedy which, though not funny to modern people, was meant to make its ancient audiences laugh. Gunkel also cautions the reader that though we might take offence at certain aspects of the text, it is not the interpreter's place to moralize over it.⁹⁹ In the preface to the same book, however, Gunkel has no issue reproducing stereotypes about the blind by claiming that Isaac's blindness made him easy to deceive,¹⁰⁰ nor is he the only scholar who is content to do this.¹⁰¹ The degree to which able-bodied normativity is embedded in his worldview causes him to ignore the reproduction of these stereotypes as 'moralizing' in and of themselves. In fact, scholars of Genesis on the whole cannot seem to help themselves from describing Isaac's blindness in excessive terms. Jacob was "ready to deceive a blind, helpless, trusting father," writes Julian Morgenstern.¹⁰² Laurence Turner describes Isaac as a "duped, senile, passive character, unaware of what is taking place outside his tent, and as we shall soon see, confused about what takes place within it."¹⁰³ J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee ask their audience to "[p]icture the scene: an old man, blind and senile, lying on his deathbed," before going on to explain why the story is funny.¹⁰⁴ James McKeown spends a number of paragraphs describing Isaac's inability to tell the difference between game and livestock meat, before insisting that "Isaac is old and blind, not stupid."¹⁰⁵ E. A. Speiser takes care to affirm for the reader that the role of the interpreter is not to judge or justify, but only to try and understand meaning—before on the very same page judging and justifying Jacob's behaviour as having happened under the auspices of a "strong-

⁹⁸ Dillmann, *Genesis*, 217.

⁹⁹ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted by Hermann Gunkel*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 301.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

¹⁰¹ Dillmann, *Genesis*, 213; Jacob, *Genesis*, 560; Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 117; Clare Amos, *The Book of Genesis* (Werrington: Epworth Press, 2004), 171.

¹⁰² Julian Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 216.

¹⁰³ Turner, *Genesis*, 117.

¹⁰⁴ J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," *Semeia* 32(1984): 17.

¹⁰⁵ James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 135.

willed” mother.¹⁰⁶ Speiser also feels that the “literary aspects” of the deception narrative, apparently including Isaac’s blindness and the theatre with the goats, require no comment and can be taken entirely at face value.¹⁰⁷ When read against Speiser’s introduction, during which he claims that Isaac is not a memorable biblical personality,¹⁰⁸ and his insistence on translating Isaac’s dialogue to make his meaning “clearer,”¹⁰⁹ this is a very curious claim to make.

The joke on Isaac becomes possible because Isaac is assumed to be ignorant or stupid by Jacob, as he is by most interpreters. Even the rabbinic tradition ascribed Isaac’s blindness to moral failings; *Bereshit Rabbah* claims that “He who raises a wicked son or a wicked disciple eventually suffers dimness of sight,”¹¹⁰ claiming that Isaac’s blindness is a result of his bad parenting. Later works attribute the blindness to foolishness or weakness, and specifically to his receiving “bribes” from Esau in the form of game meat, stating that his eyes “became weak because he beheld the countenance of the wicked Esau; also because he ate the venison he brought him.”¹¹¹ Writers across traditions conflate Isaac’s blindness with some form of moral or spiritual failing, and never seem to suggest that he is blind simply because he is elderly. Much like what Chen calls the “segregating frame” of the category *animal*,¹¹² disability is used as an exclusionary category that renders those within it as *less* than they would be were they not disabled, which is reflected in the way most readers interpret Isaac.

Some interpreters even make problematic claims about how a blind man *should* experience the world, such as Martin Kessler and Karel Deurloo, who comment that “Isaac, though almost blind, should have, but did not, rely on his hearing; he had forgotten the divine word (25:23). Instead, he was driven by taste, touch and smell,”¹¹³ before further commenting that “[t]ouching is really unsatisfactory to the poorly sighted and Isaac’s sense of smell was still good.”¹¹⁴ The audacity of two presumably sighted authors explaining how a blind fictional

¹⁰⁶ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007[1964]), 211.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, lvii.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹¹⁰ *Bereshit Rabbah*, 65.10.

¹¹¹ *Midrash Tanchuma*, Toledot 8, translated by Samuel R. Berman (New York, KTAV Publishing House, 1996).

¹¹² Chen, *Animacies*, 50.

¹¹³ Kessler and Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis*, 150.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

character *should* use his senses is staggering. Kessler and Deurloo also appear to be unaware of the fact that Isaac *does* rely on his hearing to determine that the voice of his interlocuter is Jacob's (Gen 27:22), contextualizing his remaining questions and use of other senses throughout the interaction.

Even *The Bible and Disability, A Commentary*, which, as its name implies, is a disability-oriented commentary on the Christian Bible,¹¹⁵ grants Isaac and the deception narrative but one short paragraph in which Sarah Melcher concludes that "There is nothing that indicates a negative assessment of his disability other than Jacob and Rebekah using his inability to their advantage."¹¹⁶ Melcher, a scholar of disability and the Bible, elides Isaac's blindness into a vague "inability" that is taken advantage of by his family. Hence, even to scholars who are attentive to Isaac's disability, his passivity in the narrative remains unquestioned, leaving him at the lower end of the animacy scale. The only two scholarly works of which I am aware that discusses Isaac's disability in a way that counters traditional readings are Rebecca Raphael's *Biblical Corpora*,¹¹⁷ which argues that Isaac's blindness is textually nearly lifelong and agrees that Isaac is a powerful figure, and Julia Watts Belser's recent monograph *Loving Our Own Bones*,¹¹⁸ which approaches several biblical stories from the perspective of a disabled author. Raphael states that "[t]he passive-Isaac line of interpretation fails to account for too much in the Isaac cycle,"¹¹⁹ referring to Isaac's centrality in the narrative, an argument I will shortly follow and expand on. Belser considers Isaac's characterization as a disabled man and wonders how it is possible he could fall for such a ruse. She says that this "is one of the ways that ableism cuts against my heart," because it trains people—including disabled people themselves—to expect excellence from disabled people at all times, when this is not always possible.¹²⁰ Belser considers Isaac as a recently disabled person still learning how to navigate his disability, rather than someone with a long-term disability who is near death, ultimately wondering "[w]hat kind of

¹¹⁵ Melcher, Parsons and Yong, eds., *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*.

¹¹⁶ Sarah J. Melcher, "Genesis and Exodus," in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, eds. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Yong (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 43.

¹¹⁷ Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*, 63-73.

¹¹⁸ Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*.

¹¹⁹ Raphael, *Biblical Corporal*, 71.

¹²⁰ Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 141.

blind man is he?”¹²¹ She concludes that he is one who has spent his life striving in a world of able-bodied normativity and is struggling to adapt to his circumstances as a blind person.¹²² Belser also considers an interpretation of the deception in which Isaac is aware of the trick, and that the story is a failure of Jacob to tell the truth about who he really is.¹²³

Not one scholarly work contains a sustained discussion of the role of animals in the Isaac story, or of the intersection between animality and disability in the character of Isaac and the construction of his agency. Even studies of biblical animality do not comment on Isaac’s story at all.¹²⁴ This represents a large gap in the study of this text where animality is such a prominent theme, which the following analysis attempts to fill. Animality and disability are two ways through which the boundaries of acceptable humanity is formed, both in the modern period and, as I argue, in the biblical text.¹²⁵

Interpreting Isaac

וַעֲתָה בְּנִי שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי--לֹאֲשֶׁר אָנִי מַצְוֶה אֹתָךְ לֵךְ--נָא אֶל-הֶעָאן וְקַח-לִי מִשָּׁם שְׁנֵי גְדֵי עֲזִים טָבִים וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אֹתָם
מִטְעָמִים לְאֲבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר אָהֵב וְהִבֵּאתָ לְאֲבִיךָ וְאָכַל בְּעֵבֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבְרָכְךָ לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-רַבְּקָה אִמּוֹ הֵן
עָשׂוֹ אָחִי אִישׁ שֹׂעֵר וְאֶנֶּכִי אִישׁ חָלָק אוֹלִי וְיִמְשְׁנֵי אָבִי וְהִיִּיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כַּמִּתְעַתֵּעַ וְהִבֵּאתִי עָלַי קֶלֶה וְלֹא בִרְכָה
וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִמּוֹ עָלַי קֶלֶהְךָ בְּנִי אֵךְ שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְלֵךְ קַח-לִי וַיִּלְךְ וַיִּקַּח וַיָּבֵא לְאִמּוֹ וַתַּעַשׂ אִמּוֹ מִטְעָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אָהֵב
אָבִיו

(Gen 27:8-14)

¹²¹ Ibid., 154.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 155-158.

¹²⁴ Walker-Jones and Millar, eds. *Ask the Animals*; Strømme, *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida* and Moore, ed., *Divinanimality*, are three examples of works on the Bible and animals that do not mention Isaac, or, in the case of Moore’s edited volume, mentions him only twice in passing.

¹²⁵ Chen, *Animacies*, 127; Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), xiv-xv. Chen and Puar are both attendant to the ways that hierarchical social constructs are wielded to structure the boundaries of normate humanity, marking certain people as outside those boundaries and therefore able to be subjected to violence and mistreatment.

Reading the deception narrative in isolation might allow the reader to dismiss the rhetorical link between Isaac's disability and animality as merely a contrivance of the plot,¹²⁶ but when read together with the binding narrative and Isaac's donkey/lamb/ram-substitution in chapter 22, a pattern of Isaac's life being intertwined with the lives—and deaths—of livestock becomes apparent. This hitherto unrecognized pattern is extremely important to the understanding of Isaac as a disabled character. I aim to fill this interpretive gap and comment on the way that animality is intersecting with Isaac's disability. In Isaac, these two factors co-create the boundaries of the acceptable body politic of biblical Israel while at the same time keeping the original family on track to fulfill God's patrilineal will.

The rhetorical use of Isaac to construct the boundaries of "normal" human embodied experience means that this story can be re-read against the interpretive grain, examining the flaws in the boundaries that are constructed, and the artificiality and malleability of those boundaries. My interpretation of this text does away with two major presuppositions. The first is that because Isaac is disabled, he is therefore weak, ignorant, passive or otherwise disqualified from being a fully functioning person with goals that he works towards under his own power and in consultation with others. The second presupposition is that a relationship with nonhuman animals means that one is somehow less than other humans, or that one's humanity is in question. I also challenge the connection between human disability and nonhuman animal status as imparting a lesser value on both groups represented in that equation. My interpretation takes into account the uniqueness of Isaac's perspective and centres him and his experience, rather than pushing him to the margins of a narrative in which he is the central character. It also assumes that God is working with his people, and not in spite of them, to fulfill his promise of descendants to Abraham.

Although, as we have seen, it is easy to read this text as a deception of Isaac thanks to his blindness, I read it instead as a deception *by* Isaac of Jacob,¹²⁷ with Rebekah's help, to the end of

¹²⁶ As does Gunkel, *Genesis*, 302.

¹²⁷ Some examples of scholars who have previously argued that Isaac was either complicit in or actively participated in the deception are Reuven P. Bulka, "Isaac's Blessing: Who Was Deceived?" in *Dor le Dor* 17.3 (Spring 1989): 185-189, whose primary argumentative thrust is that Rebekah and Isaac wanted to spare Esau's feelings and his relationship with his father by not telling him directly they'd chosen Jacob over him; Joseph Rackman, "Was Isaac Deceived?" in *Judaism* 43.1 (Winter 1994): 37-45, who argues that Isaac's trauma over his father's fraught

making sure that the preferred heir marries appropriately. My justification for interpreting the story this way lies in having done away with the presupposition that Isaac's disability makes him weak or passive. If one does not approach the story with that assumption in mind, one quickly finds that there is no real reason to assume Isaac was unaware of what was happening. Isaac and Rebekah have worked together to deceive people in the past (albeit badly) in Gen 26:6-11, and Rebekah knew that Jacob was the child whom God had chosen to be Isaac's successor thanks to the oracle she received in her pregnancy (Gen 25:23). Likewise, Jacob had a history of using deceptive means to get what he wanted (Gen 25:29-34), and indeed one potential meaning of his name (יַעֲקֹב) being 'he who supplants,' carrying a connotation of deceptiveness or untrustworthiness, which Esau points out once the deception has taken place (Gen 27:36). In order for Isaac to have been deceived in this scene, the reader has to assume that he has never spoken to his wife about their son or was told about the divine experience that she had. One would also have to assume that Isaac did not know his son well enough to predict his behaviour, and indeed was unaware of the meaning of his son's name. In addition, Isaac's probing questions to the disguised Jacob imply that he knows Esau is not the tent with him. It is ludicrous to think that anyone would confuse the tactile sensation of goat fur for a hairy human arm, especially in this case, as Isaac knows this is not Esau because he can hear Jacob's voice. Believing Isaac is deceived here is to believe that a blind man is a one-person comedy of errors, the butt of a bad joke with an obvious punchline.

The belief that Isaac is worthy of being the butt of such a joke is founded in the dominant reading of the deception narrative's interplay of disability and animal thematics. In most interpretations, these thematics conspire to cast Isaac in this role by aligning him with two historically marginalized populations: disabled people and nonhuman animals. In my interpretation, this intersection is a rich field for interpretation of human boundaries in which the constructed nature of those boundaries and the stigmatizations that come with them is exposed.

relationship with Ishmael led him to want to split his blessing between both sons and that Rebekah only stopped him from blessing Esau at all; Mignon R. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 114, who finds that Isaac must be "playing along" due to the foolish nature of Jacob's attempted deception; and David J. Zucker, "The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39.1 (Spring 2011): 46-58, whom I follow in arguing that Isaac and Rebekah worked together to deceive Jacob, knowing that he was God's preferred heir.

My reading of these themes foregrounds animality and disability, and in so doing, lays bare the foundational distinctions that create normate humanity. Constructing that kind of humanity is a central project of Genesis, as it attempts to establish Israelite heteropatriarchy as the result of providence from a creator God. But the boundaries and distinctions between disabled/nondisabled and human/nonhuman are not as clear-cut as the text would have its reader assume, and in the deception narrative, the porosity of those boundaries cannot be disguised. Normate humanity's troubled relationship with the nonhuman environment is moved to the foreground and focusing on that factor is the centre of my reading.

As part of this reading, I argue that it makes more sense in the context of the story to interpret Isaac and Rebekah as working to deceive Jacob—and more importantly Esau. As a result of this story, Jacob goes to live with Rebekah's family and marry his cousins, and Esau and his half-Hittite children are disinherited, and Isaac is absolved of any wrongdoing because the deception was not his fault. Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and God—and presumably the intended audience—all get exactly what they want in this story. And in doing all of this, an important lesson is imparted onto Jacob, namely, that an association with livestock is beneficial for him. Not long after this, Jacob will become extremely wealthy through animal husbandry and further livestock-based deceptions as he tricks his father-in-law Laban into letting him grow his wealth with a flock of strong sheep that he selectively breeds (Gen 30:37-48). Jacob's connections with livestock do not distance him from the human here, but they do seem to bring him closer to God and God's plan for his family. Rather than the animal being used to define that which exists outside the ideal human, here the reader finds nonhuman animals being used to characterize Isaac and his family, the progenitors of Israel. Neither Isaac nor this story's goats are what most interpreters of the Bible would consider a "normal" person. Instead of stopping the conversation there and assigning value to Isaac based on his marginal identities, I find it more productive to address his non-normate status, and use it to reconsider the supremacy of normate bodies in contemporary Western society.

Despite its centrality in many traditional interpretations of the text, Isaac's disability does not sap him of his power as a patriarch. Kerry Wynn has pointed out that the fact that Jacob fears retribution indicates Isaac's power within the family. He is not an impotent patriarch who cannot manage his own family, but a powerful figure whose displeasure commands concern from its

members.¹²⁸ To this I will also add that it is clear that Isaac's blindness is not a factor in this fear—though the deception is predicated on Isaac not being able to see Jacob; Jacob clearly knows and expects that Isaac has other ways of determining the truth. Presumably his father has been losing his sight for some time now, and Jacob is aware that it has not led to the end of his ability to navigate the world, or to the end of his cognitive ability. Isaac remains the patriarch by birth and social tradition, and in his capacity as the patriarch, passing on the blessing—a transfer of authority, power and status—is the most important thing he can do.

The blessing is an extremely important constant in Genesis, and the central set piece for this drama. It represents the transference of patriarchal power from father to son and is tied to inheritance and birthright for first-born sons. The patriarchal drama involving Isaac and Jacob's family reverses the laws of primogeniture and favours the younger son (Gen 21:12; 37:6-7; 48:14; a theme which, critically, repeats in 1 Sam 16:11:13 and 1 Kings 1:30), but the text always makes clear that this is an exceptional circumstance and is only done due to God's will. Therefore, when Abraham favours Isaac over Ishmael, it is at God's explicit order when Isaac's birth is promised (Gen 17:19), and when Joseph's younger son Ephraim is blessed over his older brother, Jacob defends this as an intentional act because God has a specific plan for the two (Gen 48:19-21). The transference of a blessing, then, is a critical moment in the patriarchal family structure, and is also irrevocable, as Esau learns at the end of this story—not because Isaac is too weak to reverse it, but because the act of transferring a blessing is powerful and permanent.

In no other case, however, does the transference of a blessing call for a specific ritual or moment aside from the actual blessing itself, so Isaac's insistence on making the blessing transactional is unusual and perhaps betrays that he is planning for something unusual to happen with this transference, as it always does in his family. Patriliney and primogeniture are always troubled and disrupted in Genesis; the continuation of the family that will become the nation of Israel is often thrown into doubt by human mistakes and conflicts. This creates narrative tension before arriving at the foregone conclusion, but also illustrates the point that God is at the heart of Israelite patriliney. There is never truly any doubt that the "correct" son of Isaac will receive the blessing, because all narrative patrilineal disruptions only serve to carry the family on the path God has chosen for them, a teleology that was imparted on the biblical record by the authors and

¹²⁸ Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic," 95.

redactors of Genesis The subversions of primogeniture may appear problematic to the human characters in the story, but the patriline of Israel is never truly disrupted, because if one were to place the various players here in a defined hierarchy, no matter how one chose to place Isaac and the nonhuman animals, there is no doubt that God is at the top. Genesis establishes an unbroken patriline from the first couple, Adam and Eve, to the origins of the twelve tribes of Israel, and that patriline is not a straight line, always curving and shifting in unexpected narrative directions. Disabled people, nonhuman animals, and other non-normative bodies exist in all these curves, exposing the underlying complexities of the supposedly straightforward patrilineal line and taking advantage of it to carve out their own places in the world.

Complex relationships between disabled and nondisabled humans, as well as between humans and nonhuman animals, define the boundaries and continuity of God's promise to endlessly propagate the people of Israel. In the deception narrative, Isaac's loves Esau because of Esau's hunting prowess. However, given the fact that he apparently cannot taste the difference between game meat and goat (Gen 27:25), I interpret this as another deception that prefigures those that will come later in the text, making it the first of many animal-themed lies that will be told by nearly every member of this family. This first association of Isaac with animality is the one that allows for the rest. Because he evidently cannot taste a difference between game and livestock animals, one must assume there is another reason for this preference. Isaac's already-established connection with livestock animals, thanks to his near-sacrifice as a child, is one possible reason—he does not want to consume something with which he feels he is close.

Rebekah asks for two “kids of the goats” (גְּדֵי עֵזִים) to kill in order to carry out her part in the deception. She sacrifices two nonhuman youths to secure her own offspring's future over that of his sibling, creating a narrative parallel between the sacrificed goats and Jacob. Nonhuman animals in this instance are a utility through which the human family will grow and prosper. At the same time, however, she occludes the actual violence being done to the goats by saying she is going to make food from them (Gen 27:9), implying but not mentioning that they will be butchered in the process. Contrast this with Isaac's upfront attitude as he tells Esau to bring his bow and hunt game animals (Gen 27:3), not hiding at all that he knows the animals are going to have to die to feed him. Rebekah clearly knows this as well, but refuses to directly engage with the concept. She and Isaac express different attitudes towards the animals they are having killed, though the end product remains the same.

Some scholars argue that animals in the Hebrew Bible, even when they are understood as food, generally tend to be treated with a good deal of respect, or at least an understanding that their suffering is morally relevant and should be avoided as much as possible.¹²⁹ The primary value of animals outside of sacrificial contexts is financial,¹³⁰ so the slaughter of goats to the end of securing Jacob's blessing is a financial investment. The great value of nonhuman animals is perhaps one of the reasons they are so commonly used in sacrifice rituals, aside from the possibility that they invariably replace human sacrifices.¹³¹ All that to say it may not be fair to claim that Rebekah's treatment of the goats in this is callous but rather generous considering the value of what she is sacrificing for Jacob. However, that does not change the fact that she is intentionally and unnecessarily destroying the bodies of nonhuman animals to benefit her (mostly) human son. From this point onward, Jacob's life is entangled with livestock animals just like Isaac's is. This goes beyond what can reliably drawn from the text itself, but does Jacob see his father's relationship with nonhuman animals and associate his family with them as well? Is Rebekah concerned that foregrounding the killing of a nonhuman animal in her quest to secure the blessing for Jacob will seem too much like symbolically killing Isaac? The text does not demand answers to these questions, but raising them provokes the reader to reconsider the characters and their relationships with each other and their environment.¹³² Here, Laurence

¹²⁹ Idan Breier, "Animals in Biblical and Ancient Near-Eastern Law: Tort and Ethical Laws," *Journal of Animal Ethics* 8 (2): Fall 2018, 174-176.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 168.

¹³¹ James W. Watts, "The Rhetoric of Sacrifice," in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2011), 5.

¹³² Jacob's partial animality foregrounds another element of his character. As many scholars have observed, Jacob functions in this story as a trickster figure, engaging in plots and schemes using his wiles rather than his strength to overcome a more powerful opponent. A trickster, often associated with different types of animal, such as foxes, generally speaking is a character who wants something from someone who is his physical superior (Scheub, *Trickster and Hero*, 24), and in Jacob's case, he seems to want things from multiple people fitting that description, starting with his brother Esau, and then his father Isaac, and then his uncle and future father-in-law Laban. Tricksters tend to embody liminality and movement and tend to appear at points of change in one's life, such as the transition into adulthood and the leaving of one's family home (Scheub, *Trickster and Hero*, 33). Jacob's trickster status becomes more apparent the longer he spends with Laban, when he uses his wit to grow his own wealth and influence over the course of his time there (Gen 30:37-43). What is interesting about Jacob is that more often than we see him

Turner also notes the similarities between Jacob's obtaining the goats and Abraham's sacrificing the ram in the binding narrative:

In addition, just as Abraham 'went (*hlk*) and took (*lqh*) the ram' (22.13), so Jacob 'went (*hlk*) and got (*lqh*) [the kids]' (27.14). While not an uncommon word pair, it occurs four times in ch 22 (22.2, 3, 6, 13), and three times in this chapter (27.9, 13-14). The going, taking and killing of these animals provides in each story the means to evade the seemingly inevitable—the death of Isaac and the blessing of Esau.¹³³

Jacob's association with animals is walked back for a moment here as he takes the role of the human shepherd, causing those deaths for his own gain. The deaths of all these animals, therefore, are integral to the survival of family of people who are all represented by those animals.¹³⁴

All the questions that Isaac asks Jacob imply that Isaac is aware of the deception and is giving Jacob the chance to come clean. Esau later gets no such probing questions, because he is not lying. Isaac immediately believes him, trembling violently (which the text makes sure to emphasize in a several-word hyperbole in Gen 27:33: **וַיִּתְרַד יִצְחָק תְּרַדָּה גְדֹלָה עַד-מָאֹד**, which might literally translate to “and Isaac trembled, trembling greatly, exceedingly and to abundance”), claiming (with no narratorial comment on whether this claim is true) that he cannot revoke the blessing, and that he can only give Esau a secondary blessing which is in truth a curse. The story ends with Esau swearing revenge on his deceitful brother Jacob, who is sent away to Rebekah's homeland on the (presumably true) pretence that Rebekah would prefer him to marry a woman

tricking people, we see him being tricked, by Laban (Gen 29:25), by his sons (Gen 37:33), and, I argue, most importantly by his father in this text, a figure who is cast as being craftier and physically weaker than Jacob himself.

¹³³ Turner, *Genesis*, 116.

¹³⁴ Later in life, Jacob, renamed Israel, is also struck with a lifelong disability after a wrestling match (Gen 32:24-25). The text never mentions the later ramifications of his injury, but such an injury would likely have left him mobility impaired. Much like Isaac, who is identified with animals in his youth and disabled later in life, Jacob's animal associations are a feature of his youth and his disability a feature of a later stage in his life. Nonetheless that they overlap in both characters cannot be a coincidence, and nor can the fact that Jacob's own sons deceive him with goat's blood (Gen 37:31) when he himself is old and disabled. The twin forces of animality and disability continue to structure and guide the formation of the patriarchal narrative long after Isaac does eventually die.

from her own family rather than a Hittite (Gen 27:46). Though Isaac has transgressed several normate bodily boundaries to get what he wanted, his son will now focus on another important boundary in ancient Israel: appropriate endogamous marriage, once again returning the text to the correct line of patriliney that God has always wanted.

Ramifications

The consequences of this text and its interpretation are wide-reaching, as Isaac's body is used to construct the normate body of ancient Israel. The identity politics of the Israelites are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the modern world. The majority of critical theory, including that with which I have engaged in this chapter, describes or deconstructs modern phenomena, and this is a space in which ancient texts can speak back to theory rather than merely being spoken to. The worlds inhabited by biblical characters and readers are not the same as those inhabited by the subjects of Mel Chen, for example, and considering the two together can deepen both.

The normate Israelite is an able-bodied man who produces children with an Israelite woman and is himself descended from a man who did the same. The racial and ethnic considerations of Israelite identity are central—they are the people of Israel, not of Moab or Edom or Anatolia—but are not the primary focus in this chapter. Before geographical background, gender, sexuality or able-bodiedness, the normate Israelite embodied one more important category: a person who is subject to and imitates the ultimate normative template, God, in whose image, Genesis affirms, humans were created. “From the very beginning,” writes Deborah Sawyer, “arguing from the sequence in Genesis 1.26 [sic], the essential human characteristic, according to the Bible, is the ability, conjoined with the imperative, to imitate God.”¹³⁵ *Imago dei* is a concept central to Israelite self-understanding, and is a central reason the ancient Israelite people conceptualized themselves as being higher in hierarchy than not only animal and plant life, but also other humans. As Sawyer writes,

The concept of *imago dei* set up in Genesis 1.26 constructs a multistratified hierarchy with absolute power at the pinnacle, and a recognisable but diminished power in its

¹³⁵ Deborah Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 18.

human reflection. Although limited, the power of that reflection is affirmed by the subjection of the lower strata that range from mammals to insect life.¹³⁶

The normate Israelite body is also normatively and hegemonically masculine. Masculinity, as Rhiannon Graybill writes, “is not the necessary and inevitable consequence of a male-sexed body; neither is it a rigid binary identity. Instead, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, masculinity is a matter of degree.”¹³⁷ Masculinity is established not in a vacuum, but through relations with other gendered subjects, perhaps most especially other men. Virginia Burrus has called this “a dynamic spectrum or gradient of relative masculinities,”¹³⁸ in which everyone figures their masculinity in relation to everyone else. Masculinity in this conception becomes something like animacy, only active as a category of identification when in perspective with the relative animacy of other people and things. Masculinity is not only theoretical; it is tied implicitly to performance. Howard Eilberg-Schwarz elaborates that

[b]eing a man in ancient Israelite culture involved marrying, having children, and carrying forward the lineage of one’s father or tribe. Thus ancient Judaism’s concept of masculinity was deeply entangled in images of what is now called heterosexuality.¹³⁹

Heterosexuality as an identity is a modern invention, but the practices associated with it are what matter, just as the practices associated with what is now called homosexuality matter. “It is the particular practice of anal intercourse between males that causes the problem and attracts the prohibition [against same-sex sex] – because it is a practice that confuses gender and,

¹³⁶ Ibid., 19. The relevance of this concept in the later P text of Genesis 1 shows that control over, and therefore difference from, nonhuman animals, was a critical part of later Israelite humanity, because to do or be such was to imitate God. The beginnings of such identity imperatives can be seen in the earlier J text under consideration.

¹³⁷ Rhiannon Graybill, “Masculinity, Materiality, and the Body of Moses,” *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015), 520.

¹³⁸ Virginia Burrus, “Mapping as Metamorphosis,” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, eds. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 4.

¹³⁹ Howard Eilberg-Schwarz, *God’s Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 3.

by extension, power relations,”¹⁴⁰ writes Graybill. Sexuality and sexual activity will be discussed more directly in chapters three and four, but like ethnicity and closeness to God, they are important facets of the overall identity politics of normate Israelite masculinity. This is why appropriate endogamous marriage is an important structure for the ancient Israelites, because it supports heteropatriarchal matrices of gender and sexuality. Superficially, Genesis is about the creation of the human race and the establishment of the world according to God’s plan, before narrowing to a family drama that still manages to mythically encapsulate most of the political world of the text’s presumed audiences.

The normate body is a male one for the Israelite people, because God’s ideal body is male. This is true in the J texts where the anthropomorphized God appears, (and even in J texts where he does not).¹⁴¹ Even later, when God’s body has faded from the tradition’s view, the fact that the divinity is a masculine noun in Hebrew implies that if it *did* have a body, it would be a male body. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the female body in many ways is always already disabled, an imperfect copy of the male body. The disabled male body is also a failure in this regard—failure at normate humanity through failure at normate masculinity. The “perfect” body given to humans by God at creation was a male body that performed within certain parameters,¹⁴² which is a normativity reinforced throughout various Biblical texts including Leviticus 21, 2 Samuel 5, and most of the book of Genesis. But as Roland Boer reminds his readers through his reading of Gramsci, “despite the effort in the Bible to present a series of overlapping ruling and dominating perspectives, all the way from social organization to sexuality, not to mention religion, they are very shaky indeed.”¹⁴³ Hegemonies are always undermined from within, by themselves, or more specifically by rogue or unstable elements within them, and Israelite masculinity—and Israelite normativity writ large—is no exception.

¹⁴⁰ Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*, 33

¹⁴¹ Graybill, “Masculinity, Materiality, and the Body of Moses,” 537 discusses the “longstanding” question of whether the “feet” touched with the circumcised foreskin of Moses’s son are Moses’s, the baby’s, or Yahweh’s.

¹⁴² Thomas Hentrich, “Masculinity and Disability in the Bible,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 77.

¹⁴³ Roland Boer, *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity and Carnality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 72.

Graybill demonstrates how the body of Moses, for example, appears on frequent occasions to counter the hegemonic understanding of Israelite masculinity,¹⁴⁴ and if such subversions can happen within the body of arguably Israel's most important religious figure, then they can happen anywhere.

Subversions to normative Israelite embodiment are example what come to the fore of the deception narrative on close inspection and with disability in mind. Animals and disabled people conspire in this text to challenge the normativity that seeks to define them as other, pushing themselves to the centre of Israelite self-understanding. The normate human in the biblical imaginary is not the normate human in the contemporary Western liberal imaginary, and in that difference a challenge rises to both normates and to the theories that seek to define them. To what degree is the normate body a useful concept, and to what degree does defining it actually help anyone?

This question of the utility of boundaries raises the issue of what epistemological value disabled humans and nonhuman animals have for these texts outside of their use as rhetorical structures. That is to ask: though these stories are rife with disabled people and animals to allow the plot to function, what are the inclusions of those characters saying about the roles of those identities broadly speaking? I argue that disability and animality play critical roles in the story, not only as plot devices, and those roles do comment on the perceived value of actual people and nonhuman animals in ancient Israelite society. This story appears to tell the reader that disabled people and nonhuman animals are interchangeable and that they are both representative of the boundaries of Israel, examples of how not to be. However, as I have shown, the representation of them is ultimately neutral in the biblical texts. Disability and animality are both extremely important and highly politicized markers that are rarely allowed to exist neutrally, but in this case, they are also simple features of the characters. These traits—blindness or animal-likeness—carry no inherent epistemological value of their own, devoid of secondary interpretation.

If the text contains the potential to read Isaac as a positive, animate figure whose association with animals is a benefit to him and his family, and whose disability has no bearing on his character or intellect, then a series of questions arise regarding the nature of disability, nonhuman animals, and the human itself. First, if the text contains this potential, why have

¹⁴⁴ Graybill, "Masculinity, Materiality, and the Body of Moses," 539.

modern interpreters been so insistent and rigid in defining Isaac as passive and weak? The answer for this can only be pre-existing bias, conditioned by histories of interpretation and texts like this one, that leads one to assume that a disabled character cannot but be anything else. Doing away with those presuppositions allows for a range of readings of many other foundational texts, and hopefully to a re-examination of the social roles assigned to disabled people as a result of those biases.

One must also ask, if rhetorical linkages with nonhuman animals are not necessarily negative—and even if one does not want to go so far in this story as to call them positive, it should be clear at least that they are not inherently a negative association—then why must we consistently construct nonhuman animals as though they are less than human, instead of different from human? Here arises a tension in the story, even within my interpretation. Even if we consider the affiliations with animals in-story to be overall positive, the nonhuman animals are killed to service the needs of the human characters. I believe that highlighting these linkages, and their deadly ends, can encourage the reader to reimagine this story and other stories like it, stories where nonhuman animals are present only to say something about humans, and consider what the stories might look like without such a power dynamic. Thinking with Chen on spectra of experiences and lives, and on the necessity of being critical of hierarchies that allow certain creatures to kill certain other creatures with impunity, asks the question of the reader: *why* are goats' lives valued as so much less than the comforts of the human characters? This is an especially present question when reading from a modern perspective where the lives of billions of livestock animals are treated as eminently disposable—and consumable—by the factory farm industry that draws its validity from, among other sources of authority, a general history of textual interpretation that reads animals and nature as being present for humans to control how they see fit (cf. Gen 9:1-3) and whose modes of production are a major factor in the degradation of the environment. This is not the orientation that ancient peoples, and specifically the peoples about and for whom this text was written, had towards livestock animals, but indeed even in a culture in which animals were treated with more respect than we see in our own, at the end of the day those nonhuman animals are still treated as destructible to the ends of filling normative human need.

This leads into the final major question I feel is forced by this interpretation of the story. Where do the boundaries of the human lie, and who drew them there? Who benefits from the

exclusion of certain people and groups from the artificially constructed category of the normative human? Clearly, the people who drew those boundaries and put themselves at the centre: able-bodied men. In the redactional context of the Hebrew Bible, these men were likely priests, as were, by a different meaning of the English word priest, some of the later interpreters of the text. However, most of the constant affirmations of the truth of these boundaries were historically carried out by theologically minded biblical scholars—academics participating in ableist university structures. I am far from the first to ask or suggest answers to these questions, of course, and do not imagine that reinterpreting one biblical text will put them to rest once and for all. But in challenging the dominant interpretation of this foundational text, in asking these questions and foregrounding the ways that animality and disability inform the boundaries of humanity, I hope to further these ongoing discussions by complicating two already complicated questions: what makes a human, and what makes humans distinct? Further, it is my hope that in asking these questions of and with the biblical text, I can make an ally of an important cultural text to speak back against modern animacy hierarchies—and the institutions both religious and secular that support them—that categorize the bodies of nonhuman animals and disabled people with regard to an imagined ideal, and to criticize a system that imagines clear boundaries where none exist.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered how Isaac is doubly marginalized by virtue of his animal associations and his disability. Using Mel Chen and other critical scholarship, I have re-read Isaac's story with a new perspective, quarantining major presuppositions about disability and animality that have traditionally informed readings of the text and encouraged a certain type of interpretation of Isaac and of blind people speaking more broadly. My interpretation draws out the text's potential to be a positive text for disabled people by reading Isaac's activities in the story as self-directed and motivated by clear goals, which he achieves, rather than as passive and controlled by others. My reading also troubles this text from an animal rights perspective, because if the reader is encouraged to consider the animality of humans and to think that the lives of nonhuman animals have inherent value, the fact that nonhuman animals are sacrificed to human goals is disturbing. I do not claim that this text is liberatory for nonhuman animals, but Isaac's associations with livestock might represent a step in that direction that animal rights

thinkers can use to critique the use of nonhuman animals elsewhere in the text, and in the world more broadly.

Definitions of the normate body change cross-culturally, and the value in assessing the shape of those definitions lies in what it can tell its audience about the cultures they are studying, but more importantly in what knowledge of those cultures can do to clarify contemporary normativities and the oppressions that stem from them. But there is also great value in letting the boundaries of the body remain malleable and un- or underdefined, because in that shapelessness lies the ability for marginalized people to speak back and claim the centre (or at least a part of it) for themselves. The deception narrative is a text that informs many of the texts that follow: several instances in Jacob's life mirror or call back to this narrative in significant ways, for example. Isaac's very centrality in the text disrupts the interpretive traditions that, intentionally or not, seek to marginalize him. Therefore, due to its place of privilege as part of the Western scriptural canon, the deception narrative along with other texts informs many of contemporary Western culture's attitudes towards disability.

In re-reading the text, I hope to provide an avenue to challenge those attitudes, and to demonstrate that biblical texts such as this are not only useful for the oppression of marginalized people, but can be liberating as well when looked at from a different position. I also hope to encourage the reader to rethink how we consider nonhuman animals in relation to humanity, and to reconsider what we think humanity must necessarily be in terms of its relationships with nonhuman and especially livestock animals. Disability and animal rights activists and scholars have considerable work in common, and I join a growing number of voices calling for unity in two fields that have been artificially divided for many decades now.

Chapter 3: (In)Fertile Subjects: Disability, Gender and Procreation

“The traditionally most revered women from the Hebrew Bible are those whose fertility is specially marked by having overcome barrenness with divine assistance.”¹⁴⁵

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...” (Gen 1:28)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the disability of female barrenness in the Hebrew Bible. It argues that barrenness is a feature of several key female characters who exist in positions to support or challenge the genealogical heteropatriarchy of Israel. Just as we saw in the previous chapter how Israelite identity is constructed and maintained throughout the Hebrew Bible by appropriate masculinity, so too is it by motherhood. Barrenness is a repeated trope that is introduced by the narrators to create trouble for the developing genealogies of Israel by seemingly throwing their inevitability into question, and to introduce the fear of non-Israelite bodies entering the lineage. These challenges, though, are always overcome.

In this chapter, I argue that disability is used to form and structure gendered identities among Israelites in the nation’s mythical history. Just as male disability is often co-constructed with a failure of masculinity, disability and femininity are often necessarily co-constructed. The disabled body and the female body are rhetorically linked, and in this the disabled body becomes a site at which the boundaries of gender are negotiated. This is an elaboration of the boundary-setting seen in the previous chapter, in which disability was used as a negotiating identity to form the boundaries of both human and societal identities. Disability is also used to mark the boundary between Israel and God, who maintains ultimate control over the bodies of all Israelite women. In so doing, the text asserts the importance of men having control over women’s unruly and unpredictable bodies. However, the emphasis on the importance of that control also narratively necessitates a reading that places extreme importance on women’s procreative power and therefore their central place in the construction of the boundaries of Israelite identity. The rhetoric creates the space for its own subversion, which is the space in which this chapter works.

¹⁴⁵ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 12.

In many ancient cultures, according to Jana Bennet, all women are disabled in some way by virtue of their not being men.¹⁴⁶ The very fact of having been born with the “wrong” anatomy—intrinsically tied to gender identity in the ancient imaginary—constrained women in many historical societies to the margins, to the status of those in need of charity, protection, or scorn. Marked for future disability by their lower status in comparison to the power-holding men of their culture, women in ancient Israel existed in a permanently precarious position of hoping their bodies would do what men wanted them to, or losing all privilege. Indeed, Cynthia Chapman argues that “the introduction of women and maternally defined subgroups of kin disrupts the neatness of a patrilineal genealogy, marking divisions within a paternal line,”¹⁴⁷ which is to say that the very presence of women is disruptive to the imagined patriline of Israel, marking them as troubling and/or problematic to the patriarchal culture. Defining bodies through these disruptions is one of the ways in which people with social power issue control over disordered bodies,¹⁴⁸ and the bodies of the women in these stories *are* disordered, behaving in ways counter to what is expected of them by the patriarchal culture around them. Many scholars have discussed the “tragic flaw”¹⁴⁹ of fertility and infertility in Israel’s mythic history and the importance of procreation and childbirth in securing the patrilineal promise made to Abraham by

¹⁴⁶ Jana Bennet, “Women, Disabled,” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition, A Reader*, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 427.

¹⁴⁷ Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁴⁸ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 21.

¹⁴⁹ Phyllis Trible, “Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 34.

God.¹⁵⁰ Many other scholars have argued that infertility constitutes a disability for female characters in the Bible.¹⁵¹

I take the conclusions of this scholarship as given. I argue that the disabling infertility experienced by various female characters in biblical narratives serves not only to control women's bodies and assuage men's anxiety about their place in the Israelite hereditary narrative, but also to construct the definitional difference between men and women, as well as to affirm the gendered, masculine power of God. Commenting on this power dynamic helps contextualize the discussion of barrenness in this thesis. With this in mind, I will re-read the most relevant texts about infertility, considering the means by which they serve to structure and bolster gender norms and identities, but with a critical eye to the subversive undercurrents in the text that allow for different readings. These readings will reconsider the gender roles in question in the text and expose their fundamental fluidity and fragility. This in turn undermines the naturalness of those categories rather than supports them.

Gender and disability are always linked, but the ways in which this is true are not universal or ontologically necessary. I will close this chapter with a discussion of gender roles in procreation and the relationship of different genders with a monotheistic and apparently parthenogenic God who famously does not have sex, but maintains control over all procreation, human or otherwise. This is a move many of the scholars cited above have read as reflecting how patriarchal leaders use the divine to solidify their power. However, it also necessarily undermines that agenda by implying that men are not necessary in procreation while women are.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 115-30, is one of the major contributors to this scholarly consensus. Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) argues that because women bear the children necessary for the promise to function, they are the key figures in the text (p. 15). Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives, Second Edition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 92-100, argues that this recurring trope is a way of undermining the power of biblical matriarchs and putting it in the hands (or perhaps feet) of their patriarchal counterparts. Exum also argues that this centres procreative power within men (p. 95), a conclusion I will argue against later in this chapter.

¹⁵¹ Jeremy Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership: 2 Samuel 6:23 and Other Images of Disability in the Deuteronomistic History," in *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, eds Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 105, is one such example. Baden, "The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible," is an example of a scholar who has built on this work.

Through my readings, the theme of barrenness will be considered for the way it serves to shore up gendered norms, and that this shoring up reveals those norms to be malleable in the first place. Despite what appears to be true, the women in the Hebrew Bible are not “naturally” barren, but the patriarchal system of ancient Israel marks them as such, using God to justify male control of female bodies.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to substantiate this reading and to highlight the “unnaturalness” of disability vis-à-vis gender and sexuality. This is not to claim that bodies with different corporeality are unnatural, but to highlight that the narrative marking of them as disabled in various ways is a purposeful construct, and not a natural or neutral description. This chapter resists such descriptions and destabilizes the naturalness of the body, exposing gender, disability, and sexuality as different but similar axes of power and oppression layered over people who are regarded as non-normate.

Frameworks of Barrenness

In most languages, ‘barrenness’ and ‘infertility’ typically evoke agricultural imagery in addition to procreative peril. In the Ancient Near Eastern contexts in which these biblical stories were composed, the chief male deities tended to be associated with storms and rain, which fell on and made fertile the female deity of the land and soil. Fertile ground is that in which something can be grown, but a barren field is one in which nothing can take root. Whether or not the relevant Hebrew term עָקָר (aqar) also carries this connotation is unclear, since it is only ever used to refer to infertile humans,¹⁵² but it is certain that the processes of procreation and the processes of agriculture are linguistically constructed using parallel language. This shared language serves to reduce the female body to a field to be ploughed and inseminated, perpetuating an image of women as being “made for” procreation both in a biblical and modern context.

Candida Moss and Joel Baden argue that the use of this terminology creates an ontological state for women in which barrenness is an intrinsic part of their identity or, I argue, the erosion of their identity under patriarchy.¹⁵³ Unfortunately, no other language exists that permits one to speak coherently about procreation without using these metaphors, and “barren” is

¹⁵² Deuteronomy 7:14 is the only instance of this word being used to refer to men and women; all other instances of it refer only to women.

¹⁵³ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 2.

the literal translation of עֲקָר insofar as scholars can tell. Moss and Baden interchange between ‘barren’ and ‘childless.’ The latter term, less gendered, more properly presumes a wider range of reasons why a couple might not have procreated. This is valuable, but the vast majority of biblical characters whose childlessness is a critical point are women. Therefore, in this chapter I will use the terminology of barrenness for lack of alternatives, but do so with the knowledge that this language is problematic for the way that it conceptualizes women and their experience.

The stories under consideration in this chapter feature several themes that are oriented around the broader issue of female infertility. They are, in textual order, Genesis 16, 18 and 21 (featuring Sarai/Sarah and Hagar); Genesis 25:28-29 (Rachel and Isaac); Genesis 29:15-30:24 and 35:16-21 (Rachel and Leah); Judges 13 (Samson’s unnamed mother); 1 Samuel 1 (Hannah); and 2 Samuel 6:20-23 (Michal). Taken as a group, these stories relate anxieties about gender, procreation, and bodies, and who has the power to define the appropriate boundaries of those things. Disability is implicated throughout this discussion, as the entire locus of the issue is on the inability of some (female) bodies to function according to the presumed intention of their creator.

This is a great deal of material, but many of these stories share elements that allows them to be considered together. Indeed, the disability narrative of the barren woman is essentially one narrative that is repeated with several different characters. Scholars such as Robert Alter¹⁵⁴ have long noted the archetypal scene of the barren woman, where a woman who is unable to bear children is given miraculous news that she will bear a child, and whose son plays a significant part in Israel’s history. This type scene appears throughout Hebrew Bible literature and was sufficiently recognizable or important as to recur into the New Testament hundreds of years later, where the narratives of Jesus’s birth, as well as John the Baptist’s, follow the same trope, with the stigma of barrenness removed from Mary due to her virginity (Lk 1:5-2:21). The expectations of the narrative pattern no doubt aided the oral storyteller and the aural hearer to construct the background of the story and supply some its expected details. But it also conceptualizes female gender as something that is oriented around procreation and male heteropatriarchy as something that is always endangered by unruly women’s bodies, justifying

¹⁵⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011 (1981), 69.

the control of female bodies by presumptively normate male bodies in service to the ultimate ideal body, the divine masculinity, or God.

The story of Sarai/Sarah will be my primary focus, with the other women being discussed as their narratives become relevant to the larger themes of the chapter and a specific focus put on Rachel and Leah at the end of the discussion. That said, there are notable differences between the different variations on the pattern. For example, Sarah's story also contains axes of racialization and social status, as does Hagar's story.¹⁵⁵ Bilhah and Zilpah's inclusion in what is otherwise Leah and Rachel's story connote something similar, but they receive less authorial attention, and also complicate the pattern by being two women in competition. Michal's barrenness is a punishment, which opens a discussion of disability being used retributively in the Bible, and the connection with sickness and disease that are considered signs of divine disfavour. Another important point of divergence in these stories is agency. For example, Sarai tells Abraham to go into her maid to produce a child, whereas Leah and Rachel conduct an entire drama regarding which of them will bear Jacob's children, Samson's mother speaks to the angel herself, but Hannah goes to the high priest of her own volition to ask for a child. All these differences are important, but less so to the points that I want to make in this chapter.

Masculinity and Women's Bodies

As noted, disability and gender are co-created because ability and masculinity are co-created. In most cultures, the normate body is a male one. In pre-modern societies, women were typically regarded as disabled—i.e., experiencing a non-normate deficiency—primarily through

¹⁵⁵ As discussed in chapter 1 on page 14, I consider racialization a useful heuristic in the study of antiquity. Though 'race' as commonly understood in the modern period is a product of scientific racism and the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, the process of racialization, that is, the hierarchization—and critically, utilization—of different groups of people as understood through their geographic background and skin colour, is far from a new phenomenon. Black scholars in Classics such as Patrice Rankine have noted recently that "the race-neutral, colorblind position" historically taken by scholars "was simply an unconscious strategy of concealment" (Patrice Rankine, "Racializing Antiquity, Post-Diversity," *TAPA* 154:1 (Spring 2024): 6) that occludes how ancient people imagined one another and allows white scholars to avoid talking about an uncomfortable subject. I refer to Hagar as a racialized person because the only two things the reader knows about her are that she is Egyptian and that she is a slave, and that the first element, that she is from another culture that is oppositional to the Israelite culture that produced the text, justifies the second element.

their gender, which was perceived as having negative physical,¹⁵⁶ social,¹⁵⁷ mental, and emotional implications. This is only slightly less true in modern society. Considerable work has been done on the entanglement or co-creation of gender and disability in the modern period, and it has long been argued that disability and gender are co-constructed.¹⁵⁸ Many scholars have done work drawing out the details of this linkage.¹⁵⁹ Two notable works that stand at this intersection are Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip*,¹⁶⁰ and Susan Wendell's *The Rejected Body*.¹⁶¹ The body as a gendered and abled thing is a recurring motif in disability studies, and broadly speaking in the literature of any culture where the normate body remains the abled male body.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the ancient Israelite/Jewish¹⁶² normate body was likely a heterosexual, married, healthy and ritually pure man with good lineage and many children, and who was able-bodied and able-minded. The insistence on his having children is an important one to which we shall return presently, but for the moment, notably, the normate body is constructed as a male body. This, obviously, is a gendered construct. The rhetorical and scholarly linkages between gender and disability are an important facet of this chapter. Not all disabled women in the Bible are barren, but infertility is the most common female biblical disability and can be used to discuss the co-construction of disability and gender writ large.

¹⁵⁶ Carole R. Fontaine, "Be Men, O Philistines! (1 Samuel 4:9) Iconographic Representations and Reflections on Female Gender as Disability in the Ancient World," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, eds Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 64. Fontaine is specifically discussing Egypt here, but later in the article draws several parallels to pre-Davidic Canaan.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵⁸ Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 2. Samuels is one in a line of scholars to comment on this and specifically on the solidification of various categories in the modern West through nineteenth century science. Disability and gender were co-constructed along with race in this period, a third facet of identity that will also be addressed in this chapter. I cite a work about this century because 19th century vocabulary about race, gender and disability forms the vocabulary about those intersections for all subsequent understandings of them.

¹⁵⁹ Kim Q. Hall, ed., *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) is one of the most exhaustive volumes dedicated to this topic, but there are others.

¹⁶⁰ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.

¹⁶¹ Wendell, *The Rejected Body*.

¹⁶² I will primarily use the term "Israelite" in this chapter as elsewhere in this dissertation, acknowledging the complicated relationship between ethnicity, nationality and religion.

From birth, because of their gender, women are susceptible not only to disability through barrenness but also to violence and especially sexual violence. Biblical rape culture is not the focus of this chapter, but it does arise in conjunction with stories of barrenness as in several of these stories, insofar as one woman's barrenness means another woman ends up raped—Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah are three enslaved women discussed in this chapter who are raped by their barren owners' husbands to make up for a lack of children.

I characterize what happens to these three women as rape, following the work of feminist biblical scholar Suzanne Scholz, who, in her monograph *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible*, writes that “biblical scholars do not usually characterize [these stories] as rape texts,” before going on to explain why they are.¹⁶³ Speaking of Hagar, Scholz says, “An enslaved woman is forced into sexual intercourse. Her consent is irrelevant because as a slave she has to do what her owners ask of her.”¹⁶⁴ Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah are given no choice in the matter of sex and childbearing, and though this does not meet Deuteronomy's criteria for rape (a man attacks a woman in a place where she is unable to call for help, Deut 22:25-29), the lack of consent from the women and the power disparity between them and all the other characters does mean the interactions meet our criteria to be classified as such. “Should we assume,” asks Scholz, “that an enslaved woman in the Ancient Near East did not feel violated to the core of her being when she had to submit sexually to the husband of her owner?”¹⁶⁵ All of this becomes possible through the marking of women as socially *less*—less normate, less human—and thus making them subject to harm from humans who more closely approximate that ideal, and, I argue, more subject to disabling by God, who has ultimate control over all human bodies and willingly causes some bodies to be more at risk for harm than others. All women's bodies are potentially subject to this harm, including Israelite women, but enslaved women such as Hagar are even *more* so because they are property.

Insofar that the cultic authority of ancient Israel insisted that women's bodies are inferior to men's, the biblical texts in question serving as prooftexts to that assumption, and to the conclusion that their bodies must be controlled. We also see how women's bodies are controlled through procreation. Women's bodies bleed and lactate and become pregnant and create other

¹⁶³ Suzanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 54.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

bodies. They are very unruly, and their procreative potential is used against them as an axis of social control in these texts. Especially in a reading that is concerned with the status of modern readers in regards to the text, connecting the history behind the text to the present in front of it is not only helpful, but critical.

Violence against women is also naturalized as a result of this ideology. Consider the story of Jephthah the judge and his unnamed daughter (Judg 11:29-40), where Jephthah rashly vows to make a sacrificial offering to God if he wins a certain battle. After the battle is won, he is bound by that vow to sacrifice his daughter in a dark inversion of the Akedah that does not see God's intervention to save his female child. The parallel stories of the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19) and the gang-rape of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19) feature this theme prominently as well. In both stories a crowd of people want to sexually abuse male guests, and in both stories a woman is offered in the men's place—though an actual gang rape only occurs in Judges, after which the woman's body is dismembered and sent across Israel (Judg 19:29-30), dispassionately reducing it to a device that drives the rest of the story's plot and laying bare the extent to which all biblical women are at risk of such destruction. Certainly the text cannot be said to be endorsing any of this behaviour, and both stories clearly critique the social structures that produced their characters. However, the ease with which women's bodies are destroyed in the text makes clear that that is what they are for. Women's bodies are there to be controlled, used, cured, damaged, and destroyed at will by men and especially by the male divinity. This is the ultimate root of all barrenness narratives: women's bodies are there for men to use.

The Disability of Barrenness

The argument of this chapter also relies on the supposition that the inability to have children is regarded as a disability in the biblical literature. God's first command given to humans is to reproduce (Gen 1:27).¹⁶⁶ Later, God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5, 17:6). In fact, all the narrative drama and theological weight in the Genesis stories that are analysed in this chapter surrounds the anxiety of this promise. Having children is critically important, not least because doing so represented social and

¹⁶⁶ Moss and Baden argue on p. 101 that this order is antediluvian and was not intended to be extended beyond the flood. Their argument is sound, but the verse is nonetheless frequently used to refer to the entire biblical lineage of Israel.

economic stability for the women involved.¹⁶⁷ Outside the Genesis stories, Susan Ackerman has argued convincingly that there is sufficient textual evidence that reproductively disabled women are considered rhetorically on the level with reproductively disabled men and similarly barred from entering “the house,” of 2 Sam. 5:8.¹⁶⁸ Given that the primary role of women in the patriarchal narrative is to bear children, their inability to do so represents a disabling failure of feminine identity. This failure in turn threatens the entire ethnonational project of Israel with disaster.

Narratively, however, these are the mythic ancestors of the people who wrote, transmitted, and listened to these stories, and God has promised them that they will propagate endlessly. Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel *will* have children, because they must. The threat of infertility is an obstacle for the characters to overcome. It is a narrative prosthesis, to use David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s term; an “opportunistic metaphorical device,”¹⁶⁹ which allows the narrative to function by disabling one of its characters in order to provide a problem, in this case by opening a question of whether Genesis’s all-important patriliney will succeed.¹⁷⁰ But we know it will be solved, as nearly all cases of barrenness eventually are in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷¹ However, the constant human failure to bear children without help means that there is no way, within the suspension of disbelief with the barrenness narratives, for God’s plan for the Israelite people, as it is stated in the redacted text, to come to fruition. God’s promise is tied to the capacity of human beings to procreate, and that capacity is constantly threatened by disabled women. To overcome that failure, God’s miraculous interventions in human life become a

¹⁶⁷ Chapman, *House of the Mother*, 173.

¹⁶⁸ Susan Ackerman, “The Blind, the Lame, and the Barren Shall Not Come into the House,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, eds. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 39.

¹⁶⁹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 47.

¹⁷⁰ Chapman, *The House of the Mother*, 7, notes that many anthropologists are wary of the term “patrilineal” in the last twenty-five years, and prefer to qualify it by “describing societies as favoring, preferring or valuing male kinship links over female kinship links while nonetheless depending on both.” I will continue to use the term “patrilineal” in this chapter while noting that this longer description is the phenomenon that I am describing, because, to continue reading Chapman, the idea of a “pure” patrilineal model is an ideal rather than a reality, and these texts are attempting to set forth an ideal.

¹⁷¹ Moss and Baden claim that *all* cases of biblical infertility are eventually resolved (p. 107), which is not true, as we know that “Michal the daughter of Saul had no child until the day of her death,” (2 Sam 6:23).

necessary part of Israel's history. As a result, the biblical record features repeated triumphs of Israelite patriliney. One of the goals of this chapter is to demonstrate that these triumphs are troubled by the consistent struggle the characters face to carry that patriliney cleanly through the generations.

Rebecca Raphael asserts in *Biblical Corpora* that female infertility is “the defining female disability” in the Bible.¹⁷² Referencing specifically the curses of Genesis 3, Raphael notes that the woman is cursed with issues pertaining to fertility in a cultural context where fertility is paramount. Elsewhere, Jeremy Schipper has argued that “[b]iblical, comparative ancient Near Eastern, and early rabbinic material all contain examples of infertility treated as a disability or illness” before going on to list examples from all three corpora of texts.¹⁷³ Moss and Baden analyse the discourse of infertility and find that “infertility as a description of childlessness embodies perfectly the modern definition of a disability”¹⁷⁴ because it shifts depending on the person's background, social status, and needs. In sum, the majority of scholarship available on this topic agrees that infertility is a disability in biblical (and many post-biblical) cultures, and I take their conclusions as given. I further posit that in many cases, merely being female is disability enough for the biblical authors, and female characters with non-procreative disabilities are rare. Leah's eyes, we are told, are ‘weak’ (רַקוּת, the meaning of which is slightly unclear in this context but which could mean ‘soft’ or ‘delicate’ (Gen 29:17)), Miriam is afflicted with a skin condition that has her cast out from the community for seven days (Num 12:10),¹⁷⁵ and Tamar's post-traumatic stress (arising from her rape) appears to have affected her throughout her life (2 Sam 13:20).

Though these three women are not disabled through their infertility, it is notable that, like barrenness, sexual attractiveness and status as victims of sexual violence are gendered traits in

¹⁷² Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*, 57-58.

¹⁷³ Schipper, “Disabling Israelite Leadership,” 105.

¹⁷⁴ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 4.

¹⁷⁵ The array of skin diseases covered by the umbrella term translated as ‘leprous’ (מִצְרַעַת) can be disabling in a physical sense depending on their severity, but also in a social sense as they literally require the afflicted person to be cut off from the community. In the Pentateuchal context, these conditions are occasionally used as punishment from God, and in the case of Miriam, she is then explicitly compared to a “stillborn” (כְּמֵת, אֲשֶׁר בָּצְאָתוֹ מִרְחֶם) creating a point of reference with procreative failure where there may not have been one inherently.

the biblical text, and so female disability remains inflected by their gender. Moreover, the women discussed in this chapter are very much in line with that tradition, the one that assumes that gender is a master category that defines women's experience in contradistinction to male/normate experience. Female disability cannot be separated from the experience of being a woman in these texts. Disability is being used as a tool to form the female identity, becoming integral to the tradition's understanding of womanhood. Infertility becomes the "exclusive quality" of the women in these texts,¹⁷⁶ the sole datum that the text can mention, because there is simply no other information about their lives. As J. Cheryl Exum succinctly notes in *Fragmented Women*, the matriarchs of Genesis are conspicuously absent from the text during most critical narrative moments, except for those pertaining to their primary function: to be wives and mothers.¹⁷⁷ As with the figure of Isaac in chapter two, disability is deployed to affirm acceptable identities and to reinforce the boundaries of those identities in the stories of infertile women.

The discussion and analysis below is oriented around four major themes: disability as a source of anxiety and shame; disability being healed through divine intervention; the loss of disability through death; and finally disability serving as a divine punishment. These four themes together bind the stories of barrenness, and make clear that through disability, acceptable gender identities are being formed and maintained.

Barren Stories

Rather than analysing the barrenness narratives in textual or chronological order, I arrange them by the thematics, even if they are interconnected and are informed by the broader trope that disability causes great anxiety to the person who experiences it. The construction of people as suffering eternally through their disabilities, and as being in need of correcting through medical, divine or other means, is a recurring motif throughout the Hebrew Bible and continues into the New Testament and beyond. Echoing the well-known sentiment that disability occurs at the level of the social rather than the level of the physical, my analysis of the texts using this theme will consider the ways in which the perceived shame of infertility drives the behaviours of various characters and frames the audience's understandings of them *as* disabled, but also how

¹⁷⁶ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 23.

¹⁷⁷ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 78.

this space might be subverted and turned into a point of pride. My analysis will also consider the naturalness of barrenness in the biblical context, and why that naturalness is constructed. My analysis thus moves through the evolution of the thematics of disability in the text, in order to demonstrate a rhetorical development of the barrenness trope that has continued into the contemporary period.¹⁷⁸

Sarah and Hagar, Anxiety and Power

וְשָׂרָי אִשְׁתֹּ אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ וְלֵהָ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית וַשְּׁמָה הָגָר וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָי אֶל-אַבְרָם, הִנֵּה-נָא עֲצָרָנִי יְהוָה מִלְדֹת--
א-נָא אֶל-שִׁפְחָתִי אוּלַי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרָי וַתִּקַּח שָׂרָי אִשְׁתֹּ-אַבְרָם אֶת-הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָהּ
מִקֶּץ עֶשְׂרִי שָׁנִים, לְשִׁבְתֹּ אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתֵּמֶן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִישָׁהּ לֹא לְאִשָּׁה וַיָּבֵא אֶל-הָגָר וַתֵּהָרֵם וַתֵּלֶד כִּי הָרְתָהּ
וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ

(Gen 16:1-4)

The Abrahamic covenant includes a promise of multiple descendants (Gen 15:5). Immediately after God makes this promise to Abraham, however, the reader is told that וְשָׂרָי לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ ("Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children," Gen 16:1). This haunting line, foreshadowed in Gen 11:30, serves as the beginning of a long drama surrounding the descendants of Sarai and Abram. Despite the covenantal agreement both requiring and promising many offspring from Abram's family, his wife is unable to produce children.¹⁷⁹ This sets off a series of events in which Sarai offers Abraham her maidservant (שִׁפְחָה) Hagar to bear children for Abraham. Sarai intends to claim Hagar's children as her own (Gen 16:2), evidently a

¹⁷⁸ Janice Pearl Ewurama De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), is an example of a recent work of scholarship demonstrating the continued relevance not only of the narrative of barrenness, but of the biblical framing of it as a spiritual failing, in the modern day.

¹⁷⁹ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 46, notes that none of the early covenantal promises of offspring to Abraham say anything about who the mother will be. Levenson follows this up by arguing that Abram stayed with Sarai despite her not being named because to seek out a younger or more fertile wife would have been to indicate distrust in God's promise.

typical action for slave-owning women across the Ancient Near East.¹⁸⁰ But this causes conflict between Sarai and Hagar after Hagar becomes pregnant, and Sarai's mistreatment causes Hagar to run away (Gen. 16:7). After an annunciation from a messenger that her son will be a great nation (an interaction during which Hagar insists on referring to the divinity through her own Egyptian framework, rather than an Israelite one¹⁸¹), Hagar returns to give birth to Ishmael (Gen 16:15). This, though, is not the end of the drama, for not long after, God promises the newly renamed Abraham and Sarah a biological son and heir. This is a prospect so outlandish that it causes them to laugh (Gen 17:17; 18:12), but which later comes to pass (Gen 21:1). The fulfillment of God's promise of procreation culminates in a final conflict between Sarah and Hagar¹⁸², and Hagar and her son are exiled from the camp (Gen 21:14).

Sarai is not the first woman in the Hebrew Bible, but she is meant to be the first matriarch, the mother to the chosen child from which the lineage of Israel descends. For that reason, her fertility is of vital importance to the overall narrative, and therefore her barrenness is all the more anxiety-inducing. Nearly all of her actions throughout her appearances in the text are oriented towards obtaining a child for her husband. Unlike the other barren women in the Bible,

¹⁸⁰ Tivka Frymer-Kensky, *Rereading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 227, gestures to what we know of Ancient Near Eastern legal codes to support this supposition. Other scholars, such as Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Hagar Requite," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 87 (2000): 77-80; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 199, imply the existence of a folk belief that adopting a child could make a person fertile, but there is no hard evidence for this.

¹⁸¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 25.

¹⁸² That barrenness causes conflict between women is a recurring theme in these stories. Many analyses of the barrenness narratives, in fact, include little to no mention of the barrenness of the women at all, focusing instead on the conflict. See for example James C. Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 16 and 21," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 32.2 (2007): 163-175; Andrew Judd, "Hagar, Uncle Tom's Cabin and Why We Can't Agree on What the Bible Says about Slavery," *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 31.1 (2021): 1-15; Frederick J. Gaiser, "Sarah, Hagar, Abraham—Hannah, Peninnah, Elkanah: Case Studies in Conflict," *Word and World*, 34.3 (Summer 2014): 273-284; Elizabeth Durant, "It's Complicated: Power and Complicity in the Stories of Hagar and Sarah," *Conversations with the Biblical World* 35 (2015): 78-93; and Autumn Reinhardt-Simpson, "My Sister, My Enemy: Using Intersectional Readings of Hagar, Sarah, Leah, and Rachel to Heal Distorted Relationships in Contemporary Reproductive Justice Activism," *Feminist Theology* 28.3 (2020): 251-263.

it is unclear whether Sarai's inability to have children is due to some reproductive disability or simply because of her advanced age, which is the reason that she cites for laughing when she is promised a son (Gen 18:12). The narrator seems to agree with her about this cause in the previous verse (Gen 18:11 "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women," presumably indicating that she has entered menopause). However, when she is introduced in chapter 11, the only thing the audience is told about her is that "Sarai was barren; she had no child" (וְהָיָה שָׂרַי, עֲקָרָה: אֵין לָהּ, וְלֹד, Gen 11:30).

The narrative ambiguity about the source of Sarai's barrenness is curious as Sarai later blames God for her lack of children (Gen 16:2). It does stand to reason that, because Sarai/Sarah never had children throughout her life despite presumably having attempted to do, there was indeed a reason aside from advanced age why she was unable to conceive and that her being elderly was only one more reason on top of a pre-existing condition. Moss and Baden also note that anyone who has not conceived and birthed a child is theoretically barren, as the only proof for fertility is the actual act of having a child.¹⁸³ In the end, however, whatever physical reason that Sarai was unable to conceive is irrelevant, because, as the narrative surrounding her makes clear, the ultimate reason is because God did not (yet) want her to, and exerted his control over her gendered body in order that he could enact his own plans through it, and on his own schedule.

In contrast to Sarai's infertility, Hagar conceives immediately after Abram "goes into" her (Gen 16:4). Although we are not told whether Hagar has already borne children, the point is that God has not prevented her from having children as he has with Sarai, and what follows is a tense drama between the two women in which Hagar looks on Sarai "with contempt," while Sarai treats her poorly in exchange. The conflict between these two women drives the narrative, and of course at the end of the first part of the story Sarai does not get what she wants. Hagar has borne Abram a son, and the reader is very pointedly told, three times in two verses, that Ishmael is *Hagar's* son (Gen 16:15-16), in clear contrast to Sarai's plan that she will "obtain children through [Hagar]" (Gen 16:2). Sarai obtains no children through this plot, and indeed arguably makes her own situation worse. The anxieties of her disability and the problems that it and the anxieties which it triggers in Sarai cause her to take drastic action against Hagar, but in taking that action, she only seems to have further marginalized herself.

¹⁸³ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 4.

As is generally the case in disability narratives, God intervenes to rescue Sarai from her plight, insisting to the newly renamed Abraham that his wife will indeed be the one to bear him a son who will carry on the promised lineage, even against Abraham's protestations that Ishmael is the son he wants (Gen 17:16-19). Here Abraham's satisfaction underscores the theological fact that God is ultimately responsible for fertility and lineage: Abraham is content with the son he has, but God is not. It is nothing Sarah or Abraham did that allowed Isaac to finally be conceived, but God, who expressed his ultimate control over Sarah's body—and through her the unruly bodies of any and all Israelite women.

The conflict between Sarah and Hagar is one about procreation that intersects the axes of gender, age, racialization, and class. Tammi Schneider reminds us that all the Israelite matriarchs come from "correct" ethnic groups,¹⁸⁴ which one of the women in this conflict, Hagar, does not. Hagar is an Egyptian, and though Benjamin Isaac and others remind us that race did not exist in antiquity as we understand it now, it is clear that geographic origin and phenotypical differences did play a part in the ordering of people and determining their value in a society.¹⁸⁵ Hagar is a younger, fertile, racialized, and enslaved woman whose body and procreative power are used as currency to raise the status of her older, infertile, Israelite owner, whose own failure to carry out the primary duty of a wife has put the divine promise to Abraham in jeopardy. Sarai's body is simultaneously powerful because she is the matriarch and Hagar's owner, and vulnerable due to her lack of children, which she uses to justify her abusive treatment of Hagar, whose body can become the commodity that Sarai lacks. Because of her slavery, Hagar has no say in whether her body is given to Abram to be raped and forced to carry a child, or to carry that child to term. She is also subject to harm and even mortal peril by Sarai without repercussion.

Yet it is important to recognize that Sarai's body is also, as noted, vulnerable to harm. To reiterate, from the beginning, the Israelite female body is marked for reproductive disability by the text and by God. This positioning inaugurates the patriarchal narrative. Racialization, class and disability continue to collide with each other and with gender, and though they are co-constructed and therefore interrelated identities, disability is often used to create boundaries between them. It is primarily through Sarai's disability that she and the racialized Hagar are

¹⁸⁴ Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 16.

¹⁸⁵ Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 5; Rankine, "Racializing Antiquity," 5-6.

differentiated in the text, and this is the surface-level reason for their conflict. There are many anxieties evident in this story, but anxieties about ability and its relationship with racialization and gender are paramount among them on the deeper level of the text's rhetoric. What becomes clear as the stories about barrenness progress is that *all* of them are concerned with ethno-patriarchal continuity, even if a hierarchization of bodies based on appearance, birthplace and religion that we might call "race" (and which I am calling racialization to distance it from modern social constructions) as a vector is only openly implicated in Sarah and Hagar's story.

Deeper still is the way that gendered bodies are constructed in Sarah's story. What becomes very clear throughout the Sarah/Hagar drama and the rest of Sarah's story is that all women, the named ones like Sarah and Hagar around whom the story revolves and the unnamed ones who appear in the background like the women in Abimelech's court who are struck with barrenness (Gen. 20:18), are under God's control. Barrenness, for all that it is a problem that the text seeks to overcome, is an inevitability for women as Baden and Moss argue.¹⁸⁶ The women in these stories are not disabled through random chance or environmental factors, but through God's will. Their social disabilities are not natural in their origin, they are supernatural, caused, constructed, and continued by the Israelite divinity. God insists on controlling their gendered bodies—'gendered bodies' because the feminine nature of corporeality is what pulls them away from the ideal, and what makes them unruly and dangerous. Male control over female bodies is cast as necessary purely because those bodies *are* female.

Hannah's Insistence and Cure

וּתְקַם חֲנָה אַחֲרֵי אֲכָלָה בְּשִׁלְהָ וְאַחֲרֵי שָׁתָה וְעָלִי הִכְתֵּן יֵשֵׁב עַל-הַכֶּסֶּא עַל-מְזוֹנֹת הַיְכָל יְהוָה וְהָיָא מֶרֶת
נִפְשׁ וְתִתְפַּלֵּל עַל-יְהוָה וּבָכָה תְּבַקֶּה וְתִדְרֹךְ נֶדֶר וְתֹאמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אִם-רָאָה תִּרְאֶה בְּעֵינֵי אִמָּתִי וְיִכְרַתֵּנִי וְלֹא-תִשְׁכַּח
אֶת-אִמָּתִי, וְנִתְּתָה לְאִמָּתִי זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים--וְנִתְּתִיו לַיהוָה כָּל-יְמֵי חַיָּיו וּמִזֶּרֶה לֹא-יֵעָלָה עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ
(1 Sam 1:9-11)

The sorts of procreative drama that are seen in Genesis are rarely reproduced quite so intensely elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The major exception is the story of Hannah, who

¹⁸⁶ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 2.

similarly to Sarai is the more loved but barren wife in a polygamous marriage (1 Sam 1:2). Seemingly tired of her husband's assurances that he loves her regardless of the fact that she is unable to bear children¹⁸⁷ (and possibly blaming *him* for the procreative failure), Hannah takes matters into her own hands. She goes to the Temple, making a small spectacle of herself, and when rebuked by the ineffective high priest Eli, correctly insists that she, too, has the right to pray to God for intercession (1 Sam 1:15-16). Her prayer works and she is granted a child (1 Sam 1:20), whom she offers to the temple to be a Nazarite (1 Sam 1:28).

Hannah is the most complexly characterized of the Bible's barren women,¹⁸⁸ and her anxiety and despair over her disability are reflective of another major trope in literature featuring characters with disabilities. The insistence on healing is a major recurrent theme in infertility stories as God eventually opens the wombs of infertile women, reinforcing the concept that bodily difference and gender disability are the purview of God.

At the same time that God's control over procreation is reaffirmed over and over again through these stories of infertility, so is the necessity of healing. Cure is a challenging issue for disability activists, many of whom see the disproportionate focus (especially financial) on "finding the cure" as a way of freeing broader society from the responsibility of making itself more accessible and shifting the responsibility on disabled people to make themselves less disabled.¹⁸⁹ On the other hand, of course, many people who are disabled want bodies that tire less easily, experience less pain, and are able to navigate private and public spaces more readily. Cure is therefore a contentious topic, and it is not so simple as claiming that a text is problematic because it proposes cure for disability. But in a long history of expecting disabled people to suffer valiantly through their pain or to seek cure rather than insist that the world be made more

¹⁸⁷ Elkanah's insistence that he does not need to have children through Hannah to love her juxtaposed with Hannah's desire for her own children highlights well a point made by Chapman (151), who notes that women's reasons for wanting children in the Biblical world are often "distinct from yet supportive of" their husbands' reasons, citing a need for stability and status within the family structures to which they belong.

¹⁸⁸ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 22.

¹⁸⁹ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfections: Grappling with Cure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 14-15.

accessible,¹⁹⁰ the univocality with which cure is accepted as the correct way to “deal” with disability inevitably raises eyebrows among disability scholars.

Hannah is our case study in this discussion of procreative disabilities and cure. Her husband insists that she is not disabled through her apparent infertility. Cure is not forced upon her as it upon other barren women without their consent. In addition, unlike the matriarchs of Genesis, Hannah and her family have received no divine promise or prophecy ensuring them a child.¹⁹¹ Through her own autonomy, she chooses to pray for a child and defends herself against presumptions that she is cultically transgressive when confronted. Fully aware of the fact that God can modify her body to give her what she wants, she seeks this out of her own accord, ignoring the advice and even orders of more than one man to do so. What is more, Hannah is rewarded for exercising her autonomy with an important son whom she dedicates to God (1 Sam 1:28).

Through the character of Hannah, the subversive elements in barrenness narratives have become more obvious. The women in these stories are not merely there to be passively acted upon, but take matters into their own hands, sometimes without the intervention of men or even in spite of male attempts to intervene in an unhelpful way. In Hannah’s story, what starts to become obvious to the reader is that fears about procreation are really fears about women and the power their bodies hold in the patrilineal world of ancient Israel. In a series of stories in which it seems the divinity is going out of its way to choose mothers rather than fathers, this patriarchal world must control women’s bodies for many reasons, not least of which is to be absolutely certain that the lists of men who begat sons who begat more sons are correct.

God’s Fertility, Women’s Death and Punishment

God as the ultimate author of procreation is a recurring theme throughout these stories and others, such as Rebekah’s conception of Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:21). The divinity controls human procreation entirely, having the power to both grant and remove fertility at will. In a disability narrative in which the human body is entirely under the control of the divine, the

¹⁹⁰ Robert A Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 23-27.

¹⁹¹ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 124.

divine will naturally has the ability to alter that body as it sees fit. We have already seen how God has exercised the divine will with Sarah and the women in Abimelech's court. The converse point is that in a world where God controls human bodies, bodies cannot act on their own—all behaviours of the human body can only be because of God's will. The characters in the biblical stories clearly know this full well. When Hannah is despairing her lack of a child, she is aware that the only reasonable solution is to go and ask God for a pregnancy (1 Sam. 1:9). Despite her husband's insistence that she does not need to produce children for her to have value to him—i.e., that her infertility does not disable her in his eyes—Hannah takes matters into her own hands and aggressively prays for cure, defending herself against accusations of drunkenness (1 Sam. 1:14-16). God being the ultimate author of fertility is implicit here; if that were not true, Hannah's solution would be illogical. But it works and Hannah becomes pregnant.

In the tradition of Hannah, the nameless woman who gives birth to Samson does so not because her husband did anything, but because God decided she was to become the mother of a judge. The attempts of her husband Manoah to insert himself into the process are met with derision from the messenger (Judg. 13:13-18). Alice Bellis argues that Samson's mother is "the stronger human character" here and that "the story makes Manoah look foolish and his wife wise" because he doesn't know who actually controls fertility.¹⁹²

Although the story of Samson's birth parallels the later tale Samuel in its element of divine intercession on behalf of a barren mother, but the contexts are quite different. In the Samson story, a messenger of the Lord (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה) appears before the nameless woman and announces she will give birth to a son, giving her a series of instructions as to how the child is to be raised (Judg 13:3-5) (The relevance of these instructions will be discussed in the next chapter). Like Hannah's tale, this story breaks with the usual formula of the woman's husband interceding on her behalf and requesting pregnancy. Manoah, perhaps aware of this formula and clearly unhappy that his position as the middleman was cut out, attempts to intercede anyway, and is told the same information with no shortage of frustration from the messenger at the repetition (Judg 13:8-15). Completing Manoah's exclusion from the process, Samson's mother bears him without any indication that Manoah was present for the process (Judg. 13:24), driving home the point that *God* controls procreation, not humans, not even human men. An earlier

¹⁹² Ibid., 109

version of this formula in Genesis 25:21 similarly excludes Isaac from Jacob and Esau's conception; his only contribution seems to be prayer, and then Rebekah conceives immediately after. And even that represents a greater contribution to the procreative process than Manoah makes in the birth of Samson, where his role as the father seems to be that of a hindrance.

Returning to Sarah to conclude this point, hers is a story in which the text makes it very plain that God controls procreation. The first thing that happens after God promises Abram that he will be a great nation if he leaves his home and family in Gen 12:2-3 is that Abram passes off Sarai as his sister and allows the pharaoh of Egypt to take her (Gen 12:10-20). This type scene immediately introduces reproductive peril into the promise and, as Cheryl Exum has argued, creates considerable reproductive tension for the remainder of the patriarchal narrative.¹⁹³ Abram and the reader are explicitly told that the pharaoh took Sarai for his wife (Gen. 12:19), making it almost impossible to believe that sexual activity between them didn't occur. Scholars seem primarily interested in threats to Sarai's honour, which might endanger the patriarchal line if that line stems from a woman whose honour was impugned.¹⁹⁴ The question of whether the pharaoh touched Sarai sexually persists and scholars continue to closely analyse this story to determine an answer,¹⁹⁵ and even if one sets aside the question of honour, it is not hard to imagine why. Even the suggestion that Sarai might have become pregnant, even against her will, by someone other than her husband throws into question the validity of the entire genealogical narrative of Genesis.

The next iteration of this type scene will attempt to adjust and correct for this concern, as will be seen below. However, no scholar whom I am aware of has discussed what seems to me to be the more pressing and obvious threat to Sarai's lineage arising from this scene: Abram is given many "male and female slaves" (Gen 12:16) during their stay here in Egypt, making this moment the most likely point at which they acquired Hagar. Abram, of course, is not in any danger in this story, despite his claim that he is (Gen 12:12), and his use of his wife and her body as a commodity to barter for his own safety clearly signals to the reader what the value of a female body is. He must have known his wife could potentially be raped through his actions, and Sarai's consent is absent from the story. As a woman, her body is marked for such violence

¹⁹³ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 119.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹⁵ Yitzhak Peleg, "Was the Ancestress of Israel in Danger? Did Pharaoh Touch Sarai?" in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 118-2 (August 2006): 197-208.

already, and the text therefore takes not so much as a breath to worry about it. When the drama concludes, Sarai and Abram act as though nothing has happened, and continue on their journey to found a great nation.

After being renamed, Sarah is promised a son of her own, but before that, the second instance of the above type scene interrupts the narrative (Gen 20). The anxieties about procreative interference are amplified in Abraham's second con now that Sarah has been promised a child. The text explicitly tells the reader this time that King Abimelech did not "approach" Sarah (Gen 20:4), emphasized by God telling Abimelech that he didn't allow the king to touch Sarah (Gen 20:6), and by the narration later telling the audience that God had prevented *all* the women in Abimelech's house from conceiving while Sarah was there (Gen 20:18). Why insert another iteration of this story right before Sarah is about to conceive with Isaac? The patriarchal narrative of Genesis, comprised mostly of J texts with P interpellations, is obsessed with proper lineage and demonstrating that the heredity of Israel is unbroken, but the insertion of this E narrative into the story, no matter how firmly it insists that Sarah was not touched by Abimelech, cannot help but trouble that with the suggestion that Isaac may potentially *not* be Abraham's son as the J narrative of Isaac's conception insists.¹⁹⁶ It is immediately after this story that God allows Sarah to become pregnant with Isaac, leaving the redactor's placement of the type scene ambiguous and strange. Why interrupt an otherwise straightforward story with procreative peril? The answer is that this insertion is a proof-text for the later tradition's insistence that God, not humans, is the author of procreation. This version of the type scene is more detailed than the first, and includes some important additional information: for seemingly the entire time that Sarah was living with King Abimelech, none of the women in Abimelech's household could conceive children thanks to God's intervention (Gen. 20:18), and it is only when Abraham asks God to do so that God allows conception to be possible again (Gen. 20:17). The end of Sarah's barrenness coincides with the end of the barrenness in Abimelech's court when she is returned to her husband, and God's power over fertility is plainly displayed. Not only Israelite women but all women will *only* conceive when God says so and not before.

¹⁹⁶ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 122. Exum follows this with a psychoanalytic reading of this type scene, considering the axes of hidden desire in the story.

Gendered Powers

וַתֵּרָא רָחֵל כִּי לֹא יֵלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב וַתִּקְנֶה רָחֵל בְּאֶחָתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-יַעֲקֹב הִבֵּה-לִּי בָנִים וְאִם-אֵין מִתָּה אֲנֹכִי וַיַּחַר-אַף
יַעֲקֹב בְּרָחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר הִתַּחַת אֱלֹהִים אֲנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר-מָנַע מִמּוֹד פְּרִי-בֶטֶן

(Gen 30:1-2)

Despite the insistence in the barrenness narratives that men's lineages be prioritized, the women who understand what must actually be done are the agents who cause children to be born. Throughout these stories the reader is confronted with men who only do as their wives tell them, men who are passive, and men who seem to have no control over their situations. Rachel and Leah's drama is a prime example of this. Married against his will to Leah when he wanted to marry Rachel, Jacob starts out his marriage completely out of control, and though his story is oriented around his gaining control over his father-in-law Laban, at no point in the narrative does he ever seem to gain the same level of control over his wives.¹⁹⁷ Rachel parallels Sarah,¹⁹⁸ displaying the same anxiety but increasingly magnified as the story progresses and her sister has more and more children, apparently because God knows that Jacob doesn't love Leah and is compensating her for her trouble (Gen 29:31). While other barren women appeal to the divinity for help, Rachel's solutions, like Sarah's, are entirely earthly, but unlike Sarah's, are focused on her husband's failure.¹⁹⁹ Rachel's jealousy at her lack of children leads her to confront Jacob, who admits that he is, in the procreative process, useless without God (Gen 30:2). Clearly unwilling to accept his answer, Rachel again mirrors Sarah and thrusts her maid Bilhah upon Jacob, and plans to have children through Bilhah, which seems to work far better than it did for Sarah, producing two children and prompting Leah to use her maid to produce two children this way as well (Gen 30:3-13). Where Bilhah is following in Hagar's footsteps as the slave of a barren woman who is desperate to conceive, Zilpah's owner already has children and wants

¹⁹⁷ Or his children, but that is a different story.

¹⁹⁸ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 71, points out that we are never actually told if Sarah is emotionally distraught about her barren state, whereas we are told this about Rachel. Where we must surmise Sarah's feelings from her behaviour, the text tells us Rachel's feelings.

¹⁹⁹ Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 83.

more, making her objectification even more cruel. Bilhah and Zilpah do not speak, and we are not told whether they have any control over their situations or the parenting of their children, though we can assume neither of them do.

Bilhah and Zilpah are treated as objects by the women who own them, but what their story also indicates is that Jacob himself is nothing but a bit player in this whole drama. Like his grandfather, Jacob merely impregnates whatever woman he's instructed, as if his role is as nothing more than that of a stud to breed the twelve tribes of Israel and specifically to father his second youngest son, the patriarch Joseph. The primacy of female power over matters of procreation could not be clearer in the Rachel and Leah drama, in which two women compete using the body of a man, and the bodies of two other women, as playing pieces to affect their own agendas. From the entire period when Leah first conceives to the birth of Joseph, Jacob does not have a single line of dialogue and does not do anything except produce children. It is only after the birth of Joseph that the conflict between Jacob and various other men resumes, indicating the primacy of procreative concerns compared to other types of conflict. In much the same way that female characters in biblical narratives are often reduced to their bodies and specifically their genitals, Jacob throughout this story is nothing but a penis to be passed around between the competing women in order to give them what they want—and what the tradition wants. Despite the ways in which the narratives attempt to control women,²⁰⁰ and no matter how hard the textual redactors try to frame the stories as those of women behaving in an unruly manner, in the end it is *men's* power that is decentralized and deprioritized throughout the texts. Barrenness narratives put procreative power in the hands of men by analogy with the hands of the male deity, but in this reading, these narratives read more like a last-ditch effort by a Priestly redactor to prevent women from being central to the narrative in the way that they clearly are.

The failure of that de-centralization becomes apparent later on, when Rachel has to be killed, and in a fashion not normally permitted to women in the Hebrew Bible.²⁰¹ Finally, after Rachel makes a bargain with Leah that lets Leah have a fifth child (Gen. 30:17), God opens Rachel's womb (וַיִּפְתָּח אֶת-רַחֵמָהּ), allowing her to finally have a son (Gen. 30:22). Unsatisfied,

²⁰⁰ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 81-91.

²⁰¹ Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 87. Schneider notes that women's deaths are rarely recorded in the Bible, which is true. Exum (80-81) observes that Rachel's death is a secondary concern to the birth of Benjamin, in line with the narrative priority typically given to women's deaths when they are reported on.

Rachel later has a second child without ceremony, and dies in childbirth, also without ceremony (Gen. 35:16-18), a striking conclusion to a story about the desperate desire for children and which famously contains the line “הָבֵה-לִי בָנִים, וְאִם-אֵין מֵתָה אֲנֹכִי” (Give me children or I will die!, Gen. 30:1). This act fulfils the third major textual means of approaching disability—correcting it through death when it cannot be cured. Notably, Rachel’s pregnancy with Benjamin does *not* seem to be ordained by God, unlike the births of all the other children, and happens outside the portion of the narrative concerned with the births of the children; that is to say the portion of the narrative reserved for women. The text is ambiguous about then manner of Rachel’s death, but in a broader disability context, her death is a narrative fix for her bodily difference, and a fix also for her audacity in openly exercising control over her situation and her ability to procreate—even though other female characters do exactly the same thing. They do it differently, however: Sarah waits patiently for God to help her conceive, while Hannah prays vehemently until she conceives, but Rachel exchanges favours and material objects with her sister and all-around refuses to perform her femininity in her society, and thus is punished for it.

In this reading, Rachel’s death is scarcely remarkable and not surprising. Her unruly female body has rendered her easily available for further harm to be caused to her, and her death is just a continuation of the political structuring of gender through disability. Rachel’s disability defines her experience as a woman, wife, and sister, and her “overcoming” it finally kills her. While this rationale might sound surprising from those not versed in disability scholarship, it is very familiar to disability studies scholars, who often note how disability is “cured” through death in stories and myths.²⁰² God is empowered to grant life through fertility, but also to take it away through death. At key points in the biblical narratives leading up to Israel’s creation as a political body, women’s bodies threatened the ability of Israel to continue existing as an endogamous ethnic group, and women were shutting out men in control over how that group was perpetuated. In order to reaffirm the heteropatriarchal status quo of the text, they had to be killed, banished, or silenced.

If God has the power to bestow fertility, God also has the power to remove it. The repeated use of barrenness as a punishment is exemplified in the character of Michal, David’s first wife, who, after David successfully causes the deaths of her entire family, feels less warmly

²⁰² Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 8.

to him than she previously had. Feeling that David's behaviour on taking the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem is inappropriate, she rebukes him, seemingly in public (2 Sam 6:20). After David's defence of his behaviour, the confrontation ends. Michal is not textually permitted to speak again, and the reader is told by the narrator that she never bore a child "until the day of her death" (עַד יוֹם מוֹתָהּ, 2 Sam. 6:23).²⁰³ The use of barrenness as a punishment — "the literary near-equivalent of murder" according to Bellis²⁰⁴— is in line with other biblical disabilities as God's punishment for those who transgress the divine will (consider Miriam's affliction with a skin disease after criticizing Moses, which though temporary marks her departure from the narrative (Num 12:10), or the withering of King Jeroboam's hand when he tried to seize a man of the Lord for prophesying something he didn't like, only for it to be restored through prayer (1 Kings 13:4-6)), It is also in line with God's punishment of unruly *women*, usually non-Israelite women, once again returning the vector of racialization to the discussion of gender and disability, as Heng reminds us that in antiquity as in the modern period, racial and disability discourses were used to construct each other.²⁰⁵ This use of barrenness as a punishment seems to end a narrative trajectory that centres around disability, gender, and the use of disability to define gender—and to control gender, a woman's identity that must be kept in control lest it threaten male heteropatriarchy. The procreative act is a powerful one, and the fact that women are central to it is a clear source of discomfort. Michal closes the Hebrew Bible's narrative about fertility on a cautionary note about women, their behaviour and the danger of their attempts to exert power of their husbands. But the fact that this cautionary tale is necessary is itself a sign that something more potent than a simple procreative drama was underlining these stories.

Conclusion

The discussion of barrenness fits into the broader theme of this dissertation. The disabled female body is being used as a rhetorical device to shore up the supremacy—and indeed

²⁰³ Michal is seemingly referenced one further time in 2 Sam 21:8, when David allows several male descendants of Saul to be killed including "the five sons of Saul's daughter Michal," though many ancient sources contain the name of Michal's sister Merab here, suggesting a later redaction to truly reinforce the point that Michal died with no children.

²⁰⁴ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 128.

²⁰⁵ Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 43.

existence—of the normate, abled male body. Women (so the argument goes) are in possession of bodies that do not work, and they can earn bodies that do if they behave appropriately. Exum has argued in her discussion of sterile matriarchs that “if permitting conception is the prerogative of God, impregnating women is the work of males.”²⁰⁶ Based on my reading of the texts I have been detailing, I disagree with this assertion, as also I do with Nancy’s Jay’s argument that the dominant sacrificial system of Israel was a male power structure designed to appropriate and override women’s procreative power, which she famously refers to as “birth done better.”²⁰⁷ I assent to the portion of Jay’s argument that states this is an important thrust of sacrificial ritual, but I disagree that the textual effort to reify this through the barren women trope was effective, and this chapter has argued that the opposite is true. Rather than keeping a body that marginalizes them from male society or doing as the men in their lives want, many biblical women appear to choose a third option. Of the barren women who become pregnant across biblical stories, most of the women, including Leah and excepting the enslaved women, conceive seemingly without their husbands’ help after divine intervention has been assured (Gen 21:2, 25:21, 29:32, 30:22, Judg 13:24). Only Hannah and Elkanah are explicitly narrated to have sex (1 Sam 1:19), and even then, the one and only occasion in the Hebrew Bible in which it is implied that men are helpful, (not necessary), in producing children is Gen 30:1 when Rachel chastises Jacob for not “giving” her children. Two questions exist, then. First, whether the normate abled body is really a male body; given the primacy and power evidently held by women in this sphere, the perception of the ideal seen elsewhere in the Hebrew texts is challenged, the centrality of the male body shaken. Secondly, however, and perhaps at odds with the previous point, we must ask whether the ideal Israelite body is a *human* body.²⁰⁸

As discussed in the previous chapter, the body of God, even as it fades from view through redaction history of the Hebrew Bible, is presumed to be male. Female bodies and disabled male bodies are imperfect copies of the body that was created “in his image” (Gen 1:27). Even the

²⁰⁶ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 95.

²⁰⁷ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xxiv.

²⁰⁸ Jonathan K. Crane, “Who’s Your Mama Now? Rachel, Leah, and Rabbinic Views on Their Procreative Possibilities” in *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 3.1 (2017): 95.

abled male body, however, is not a perfect replica of God's presumed body.²⁰⁹ A primary component of the ancient Israelite normate body is the ability to beget sons. Men are supposed to impregnate women, but it appears throughout these texts that they do not and possibly can not do that without God's intervention. If all humans are created in the image of God, and God's body is the only one that can do the things a male body should do, then even able-bodied men are farther from the ideal than they would like to admit, and certainly farther from it than women are. Nobody possesses a ideal body, assuming a totally human ordering of the body. But maybe in an ordering that includes a divinity, God does have a—or the—ideal body. The ideal is just as unattainable.

If God is the only entity capable of causing pregnancy, and human women are necessary for pregnancies to be carried to term and children born, what role do human men play in human procreation? The answer can only be none besides their physical presence. In an attempt to reinforce male heteropatriarchy, the biblical writers have in fact removed men from the procreative equation almost entirely. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, Manoah's unnamed wife, Michal, and all the other women (and the men around them) are being deployed to the goal of bolstering the primacy of male bodies in ancient Israel by demonstrating why female bodies are unruly and in need of male control. Disabled bodies are implicated in this unruliness, because women's bodies are all disabled bodies.

But this is not the only way to read these stories. For if there is anxiety over controlling female procreative power, then surely that means the power inherent in that phrase is the critical element, and the subversive tendency of these stories is in fact to remove *male* procreative power from the discussion entirely. In Genesis, the barrenness narratives are primarily J texts, but in them God appears as a more transcendent entity who controls all of history, speaking of probable Priestly redaction. Samuel and Judges are part of the slightly later Deuteronomistic History. It appears, therefore, that these barrenness texts were first collected in the 10th to 8th centuries BCE. The stories now in Genesis at least likely had less emphasis on God's role as the ultimate controller of procreation when written. The Deuteronomist envisions a more potent divinity whose intercession is critical to Israel's political history. The post-exilic Priestly redactor is

²⁰⁹ By the time this P text was likely composed, the anthropomorphic idea of God's body had faded nearly entirely from the tradition.

concerned with the genealogy of Israel and with appropriate sexual behaviour, which as discussed in both the previous and following chapters includes appropriate gendered behaviour. Procreation was something in the hands of women and it was too important to the redactors to remain so, and so it was put in God's domain. In a theological reading, these stories are successful; they place God at the top of the procreative hierarchy and centralize childbirth as an intervention in history and a miracle that proves God's commitment to the Covenant. In a gender and disability critical reading, these stories fail utterly to centralize the power of real men and in fact evacuate them of all authority over matters of procreation, placing that firmly in the hands of women, which, though we do not know the Priestly redactor's thoughts, was likely exactly where they feared it was in the first place.

The received text's version of the barrenness narratives of the Hebrew Bible, when read in light of each other, make it clear that the post-exilic priests were trying to wrestle with the fact of women's procreative power being prominent in discussions of fertility and infertility. At the same time, the narratives under consideration showcase a series of related approaches to disability that centralize it as something God uses to control unruly bodies. Fertility is a central concern in the Hebrew Bible and especially the Book of Genesis, and it is poorly understood by the male authors and authorities of the time. The narrative of ancient Israel is one written by and for men, so the primacy of women in this field is a problem. The construction of women's bodies as dangerous, unpredictable, unruly and therefore in need of male control and supervision is a tactic to keep women at the bottom of a hierarchy under God in the procreative process. Disability once again becomes an axis around which normative hierarchies are enforced.

The narratives feature God's necessary impact on human fertility in a variety of ways. The divinity controls fertility and is asked to effect fertility, and when women effect their own fertility, God takes control of fertility as a punishment. The variety of different means of dealing with and controlling disabled female bodies is scattered throughout these stories, but is ultimately oriented towards one major goal: the delineation of proper femininity and subsequently control over female bodies. In order for men to control them, women's bodies become disabled through God's power over fertility, such that it becomes impossible to separate disability from gender in analysing them. Through these recurrent attempts to control female bodies and female identity, the fact becomes clearer that there is a great deal of room in the

process of procreation for women to control their own identities and lives, for if there weren't, the textual redactors would not have attempted to control them constantly.

In these stories, disabled women become the main actors, navigating their own disabilities in their own contexts in various ways that inevitably end with them taking nearly full control of their situations. Men are secondary in procreative narratives, there for breeding purposes and lineage and not much else. In the best of cases, they serve as intermediaries between the woman and God, as in Isaac and Abraham's cases. In other cases, such as those of Jacob, Manoah or Elkanah, the men are incidental to the entire drama, and the negotiation between women and the divinity is what really matters. In many barrenness stories, the narrator's relation of the eventual impregnation omits the man entirely and turns pregnancy into a contract between a woman and the (male) divinity. This also fits into the heteropatriarchal narrative, but in doing so, the redactor manages to entirely cut human men out of the equation, which counter to the purpose of making this move in the first place. In this way, the text appears to defeat itself, attempting to create a space in which procreation is entirely under the control of men through the structuring of infertility as a disability, but in rendering these women disabled, actually creating a space in which they are able to negotiate and work with their own power in their own context in a way that doesn't require much intervention of men. It is the men, in other words, who end up disabled by the widespread use of barrenness as a literary trope, pushed far outside the normate, literally *unable* to contribute meaningfully, permanently left out of the procreative equation in a world where even the male divinity only allows procreation once the woman in question has insisted upon being given what she is owed by right.

The stories of Sarah, Rachel, Leah, Samson's mother, Hannah, Michal and several other women are complex stories that are undercut with themes of racialization, class and especially gender, all of which are tied up in disability. Disability is the master category under which all these other forms of exclusion are rendered logical in the ancient logic, and is therefore the category that modern readers living in cultures that continue to enforce male control over female bodies and female reproductive futures can use to destabilize that logic. Using disability as a tool to reify gender norms, the text ends up giving us space to challenge those norms and to question its apparent perspective, which is a theme that will be picked up again in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Erectile (Dys)Functions: Disability and Sexuality in the Story of Samson

“Rather than assuming that a “good” future naturally and obviously depends on the eradication of disability, we must recognize this perspective as colored by histories of ableism and disability oppression.”²¹⁰

“Get her for me, because she pleases me.” (Judg 14:3)

Introduction

This chapter considers the ways in which disability, sexuality, and gender are implicated in the biblical figure of Samson. In the previous chapter I discussed disability and gender as interrelated identities through the narrative device of barrenness, with reproductive power being used to disable the bodies of all women at God’s discretion. However, gender is more complicated—and more queer—than just men oppressing women. Samson is one of the characters in the Hebrew Bible whose gender and sexuality are the most complicated, and also the most implicated in all his behaviours. That he also happens to become a disabled figure is not, this chapter will argue, a coincidence.

Samson is not like other men and he knows it. Before he is even born, he is set apart as a Nazarite, marking him as different from those who would otherwise be his peers. Besides that, or perhaps in addition to it, his gender performance is excessive—masculinity taken to an extreme. His sexuality is not oriented correctly according to the expectations of his culture, always lusting after dangerous, non-Israelite women. Late in his life, he acquires a traumatic disability that is directly linked to his inappropriate sexuality; in bed with Delilah, he reveals the secret to his strength and is captured and blinded. Blind, Samson is forced into gendered labour before dying to fulfill his Nazarite mission and God’s will. In Samson, anxieties about gender and queerness are explicitly played out across a disabled body—and corrected through death.

This chapter will analyse Samson as a disabled, queer figure, and interrogate the linkage between queerness and disability towards the dissertation’s main aim of considering disability as a form of identity that structures normative humanity in the biblical texts. In this chapter I will

²¹⁰ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 3.

argue that Samson's queerness and disability are necessarily co-constructed in order to police two different types of bodies within one character. The chapter will also argue that though the text appears to criticize and marginalize Samson through his queerness and disability, Samson ends up being a more powerful and effective character disabled than he ever was able-bodied, and that his self-destruction at the end represents Samson's intentional denial of the divinely ordered cycle of Judges. The text once again carries the counter to its own marginalization of disabled people, accidentally centralizing them in Israel's self-understanding. This chapter therefore builds on the previous two chapters to further demonstrate the complex ways in which disability is used to construct normative Israelite society, but in which disability also inherently must trouble and critique the concept of the normate.

The Figure of Samson

The Story

וַיֵּרָא מִלֵּאד־יְהוָה אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ הִנֵּה-נָא אֶת-עֲקָרָהּ וְלֹא יִלְדֶּתָ וְהָרִיתָ וְיִלְדָּתָ בֶּן וְעַתָּה הֵשְׁמָרִי נָא וְאַל-תִּשְׁתִּי יַיִן וְשֹׁכֶר וְאַל-תֹּאכְלִי כָל-טָמֵא כִּי הִנֵּךְ הָרָה וְיִלְדָּתָ בֶּן וּמוֹרָהּ לֹא-יִעֲלֶה עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ--כִּי-גִזִּיר אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה הַנֶּעַר מִן-הַבֶּטֶן וְהוּא יִחַל לְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל--מִיַּד פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַתֵּבֵא הָאִשָּׁה וַתֹּאמֶר לְאִישָׁהּ לֵאמֹר אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים בָּא אֵלַי, וּמֵרָאֵהוּ כִּמְרָאָה מִלֵּאד־הָאֱלֹהִים נֹרָא מְאֹד וְלֹא שְׂאֵלְתִּיהוּ אִי-מִזָּה הוּא וְאֵת-שְׁמוֹ לֹא-הִגִּיד לִי וַיֹּאמֶר לִי הִנֵּךְ הָרָה וְיִלְדָּתָ בֶּן וְעַתָּה אֶל-תִּשְׁתִּי יַיִן וְשֹׁכֶר וְאַל-תֹּאכְלִי כָל-טָמֵא--כִּי-גִזִּיר אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה הַנֶּעַר מִן-הַבֶּטֶן עַד-יוֹם מוֹתוֹ

(Judg 13:3-7)

Samson's story, like those of many important biblical figures, begins before he is born. His unnamed mother, a woman disabled by barrenness as discussed in the previous chapter, receives an annunciation from an otherworldly messenger that her disability is to be removed and that she is going to have a son (Judg 13:3). Unlike the other barren women discussed in the previous chapter, however, the woman we know only as Manoah's wife²¹¹ receives not only

²¹¹ The later Rabbinic tradition names her Tzelelponit, (Babylonian Talmud Vol. 27, *Bava Batra*, 91a, translated by William Davidson (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2016). Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," in *The Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press,

direct communication from God, but the most detailed instructions of any woman to have a divinely ordained birth in the entire Hebrew or Christian Bible.²¹² She is given a modified version of the instructions given to Nazarites (Num 6:1-21) and told that her son will be a Nazarite (Judg 13:5). She is ordered not to consume wine, grapes, or unclean food. The only instruction given about Samson is that his hair must not be cut. This encompasses only a small part of the Nazarite vows as laid out in Numbers 6, and also violates the apparent spirit of this institution, which focuses on the intent of the Nazarite.²¹³ Nazarites are meant to make their vows consensually and of their own volition (Num 6:2), but Samson is chosen before birth to belong to this class. The Nazarite vow, as far as Numbers 6 is concerned, is a temporary state into which someone enters for a set amount of time, after which they may choose to set aside the restrictions and return to ordinary living (Num 6:13-20).

Samson, who has not yet been born, is not given these options, and the decision to become a Nazarite is made for him, the period in which he is set aside for God ending only with his death.²¹⁴ In fact, Mieke Bal argues that Samson's mother's knowledge and her ensuing extension of Nazarite restrictions to Samson "predicts Samson's fate, and produces it, thus producing his death."²¹⁵ Furthermore, there is nothing in the rules binding Nazarites as laid out in Numbers 6 to suggest that any other person should be responsible for the maintenance of a Nazarite's purity, and yet Samson's mother is given this responsibility before he is even born. Alison Kafer notes that "the pervasiveness of prenatal testing, and especially its acceptance as part of the standard of care for pregnant women, casts women as responsible for their future

1993), 163, has argued that Samson's mother's anonymity draws a parallel between her and the angel, strengthening her role as the story's protagonist.

²¹² Even Mary in the Gospel of Luke only receives a detailed explanation of Jesus's name and lineage, and his nature as the messiah, rather than any specific instructions pertaining to her own behaviour (Luke 1:26-38). Mary's version of the annunciation type scene also mirrors the one starring Samson's mother in Judges 13.

²¹³ The Deuteronomist appears to be openly contradicting the Priestly Nazarite rules here, for reasons unclear.

²¹⁴ Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 198, is one of many scholars who point out that the angel does ordain Samson's period of Nazarite service as being lifelong, his mother does, as she later relates the information to her husband.

²¹⁵ Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 74.

child's able-bodiedness/able-mindedness.”²¹⁶ Samson's mother is given that responsibility here, though despite her best efforts, and despite best societal efforts in all time periods, disability will still exist in the future. I will return to Samson's status as a Nazarite in the following subsection, but what is immediately clear is that, from the moment his birth was foretold, Samson's fate was in the hands of a woman.

וַיֵּרֶד שָׁמְשׁוֹן תִּמְנָה וַיֵּרָא אִשָּׁה בְּתִמְנָה מִבְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיַּעַל וַיִּגְדַּל לְאָבִיו וּלְאִמּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אִשָּׁה רְאִיתִי בְּתִמְנָה
מִבְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים וְעַתָּה קָחוּ-אוֹתָהּ לִי לְאִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ הֲאִין בְּבָנוֹת אַחִידָה וּבְכָל-עַמִּי אִשָּׁה--כִּי-אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ
לְקַחַת אִשָּׁה מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים הָעֲרָלִים וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁמְשׁוֹן אֶל-אָבִיו אוֹתָהּ קָח-לִי כִּי-הִיא יִשְׁרָה בְּעֵינַי וְאָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי
מִיָּהוָה הִיא--כִּי-תֹאמְרָה הוּא-מִבְּקֶשׁ מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים; וּבָעֵת הַהִיא פְּלִשְׁתִּים מְשָׁלִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

(Judg 14:1-14)

Samson is born without incident. His birth and childhood are not interesting to the tradition and are ignored, and the next time the audience sees him is as an adult. He is going to Timnah, a place in Philistine territory where he has no business being, and insisting on his parents organizing a marriage between himself and a woman he saw there (Judg 14:1-3). The text is very clear here that Samson “saw” (וַיֵּרָא) this woman, not that he spoke to or even met her. His family's trepidation about his marrying this woman whom he appears not to even know is perhaps understandable even before one considers her status as a foreigner. Her name is not given. The text steps back slightly from direct description of events here and in a rare moment of informing the reader of the inner thoughts of a biblical character, states that this is all God's plan, “for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines.” (Judg 14:4), even if Samson's parents do not realize that. Samson's knowledge is not mentioned in this aside, leaving open the question of whether he himself knows what God is planning. Martin questions whether the aside that God had planned all of the following events was added by a later redactor,²¹⁷ which is a potential historical explanation for the lack of impact this fact appears to have on the characters'

²¹⁶ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 69.

²¹⁷ James D. Martin, *The Book of Judges* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 161.

decisions. Regardless, it is true that Samson and God do not discuss this fact, unsurprising considering they never directly interact in Samson's lifetime.²¹⁸

The narrative of Samson's marriage to the unnamed woman from Timnah is interrupted by the murder of a lion and the discovery of a hive of bees in its carcass (Judg 14:5-9), a divergence that returns after Samson has married the woman, when at his wedding feast he uses the lion's corpse as a riddle to make a bargain with his new family (Judg 14:12-14), which escalates into violence that kills thirty Philistines and costs Samson his new wife (Judg 14:19-20). This violence occurs because Samson is betrayed by his wife, who, after being threatened by her family, cajoles Samson into giving her the answer to the riddle so she can pass it on to them. This is not the last time Samson will be betrayed by a woman.

The cycle established in this story repeats in the rest of the Samson narrative. He sees a woman, wants to be with her sexually, and comes into conflict with men in her life, whom he kills but is also harmed by. The violence that follows Samson's failed marriage to the woman in Timnah sets the people of Israel against him (Judg 15:12-13) because, despite his being their leader and resisting the Philistines, Samson's behaviour places his people in danger of retributive violence from the ruling Philistines. Samson's leadership is untrustworthy because his violence is always personal (e.g. Judg 15:11), and thus Samson's own male community tries to marginalize him, which triggers another wave of escalating violence against the Philistines (Judg 15:14-15).

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי-כֵן וַיֵּאָהֶב אִשָּׁה בְּנַחַל שָׁרָק וַיִּשְׁמָה דָּלִילָה וַיַּעֲלֵי אֵלֶיהָ סַרְנֵי פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהּ פָּתִי אוֹתוֹ וְרָאִי
בַּמָּה כָּחוֹ גָּדוֹל וּבַמָּה נוֹכַח לּוֹ וַאֲסָרְנוּהוּ לַעֲנוֹתוֹ וַאֲנַחְנוּ נָתַן-לָהּ אִישׁ אֶלֶף וּמֵאָה כֶּסֶף

(Judg 16:4:5)

וַתִּשְׁגְּהוּ עַל-בְּרָכֶיהָ וַתִּקְרָא לְאִישׁ וַתַּגְלַח אֶת-שִׁבְעַת מַחְלָפוֹת רֹאשׁוֹ וַתַּחַל לַעֲנוֹתוֹ וַיָּסֶר כָּחוֹ מֵעָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר
פְּלִשְׁתִּים עָלֶיהָ שָׁמֹשׁ וַיִּקַּץ מִשְׁנֹתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲצֵא כָּפֶעַם בְּכַפִּי וְהוּא לֹא יָדַע כִּי יְהוָה סָר מֵעָלָיו וַיִּאֲחָזוּהוּ
פְּלִשְׁתִּים, וַיִּנְקְרוּ אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיּוֹרִידוּ אוֹתוֹ עֲזָתָה וַיֹּאסְרוּהוּ בְּנַחַשְׁתִּים וַיְהִי טוֹחֵן בְּבֵית הָאֲסִירִים הָאֲסוּרִים

(Judg 16:20-21)

²¹⁸ With the possible exception of Judg 15:18, when Samson complains to God of his thirst after murdering one thousand Philistines and God wordlessly opens a spring for him.

The next woman in Samson's story appears twenty years later. A sex worker in Gaza with whom Samson apparently only spends one night, this unnamed woman serves as a bridge between Samson's wife and the most famous of all Samson's women, Delilah. Samson's encounter with Delilah comes immediately after this scene, and just as immediately breaks the precedent set with the first two women. Unlike the unnamed woman in Timnah and the unnamed prostitute in Gaza, Samson does not "see" (פָּרָא) Delilah, but rather "loves" (יֵאָהֵב) her (Judg 16:4), the first time in his life the reader is told of Samson experiencing an emotion that is not anger. The reader, however, is told only that Samson loves Delilah, not whether she loves him or whether they actually have a relationship prior to the Philistine leaders coming to Delilah and ordering her to find Samson's weakness in exchange for money (Judg 16:5). Here, Wil Gafney reminds us that with the singular exception of Michal, women do not love men in the Hebrew scriptures, because "[t]he agency and subjectivity of love is gendered and unidirectional."²¹⁹ We are never told that Delilah loved Samson, only that he loved her. The text details the drawn-out drama that follows as Delilah seeks to cajole Samson into revealing his weakness to her, as his first wife did with the riddle of the lion, before Samson finally consents to tell her about the details of his follicular strength, saying "If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me" (Judg 16:6-17). When the Philistines come in and capture Samson, he is blinded (Judg 16:21), enslaved, and put to work grinding grain at a mill.

But this is all part of God's plan as well, or at least the text allows the reader to assume that. The Philistines drag out the enslaved Samson to perform for them, but are not meticulous in keeping him shaven, and Samson is able to entreat God to return his strength for one final act of extreme violence that kills almost three thousand men and women,²²⁰ including himself (Judg

²¹⁹ Wil Gafney, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game," in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed., Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2016), 63.

²²⁰ It is unusual for the Hebrew Bible to include women in a count of large people; consider the census data in Numbers 1, which counts only able-bodied adult men in the population of post-exodus Israel. The second census in Numbers 26 does not stipulate that it is only counting men, but the resulting population count is smaller. Why the author and redactor of Judges insist on including the women in the body count here is unknown, though perhaps it is because of the prevalence of women in Judges generally and Samson's story specifically.

16:30), more people than he slaughtered in his whole life. After his death, Samson's body is recovered by his family and buried alongside his father's, finally bringing Samson into the fold of the Israelite society that he lived on the margins of for his whole life.

Samson Interpreted

Samson is a well-studied figure in biblical studies. Trent C. Butler writes in his comprehensive review of recent literature on Judges that “[e]very scholar studying the Samson narratives today tries to outclass all his colleagues in describing the narrative artistry of these materials.”²²¹ The literary merits of the story are praised constantly, as is Samson as a character, but his disability is often overlooked. Robert Alter's *Ancient Israel*, for example, mentions Samson's blinding only to relate it to Freudian castration metaphors, and to point out the fact that blinding was a punishment for disobedient vassals.²²² Commentators tend to point out that Samson's blinding at the end of the story is ironic due to his propensity to “see” things and then want them, as well as to “do right in his own eyes,” with Dennis Olson for example saying that “Samson's figurative blindness to his real condition of weakness and divine abandonment is made literal and physical” when he is blinded.²²³ It is also not uncommon to make observations connecting sight to light and the sun, and blindness with the sun going down,²²⁴ as many scholars believe Samson is an echo of a pre-biblical sun-aligned folk hero, or possibly the Canaanite sun god Shemesh, whose name is etymologically similar to Samson's.²²⁵ Many commentators, however, choose not to even speak about Samson's blinding other than to note that it

²²¹ Trent C. Butler, *World Biblical Commentary: Judges* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 318.

²²² Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel, the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 192.

²²³ Dennis T. Olson, *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II: Judges*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 858; see also Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 352; Schneider, *Judges*, 204; Mark Greene, “Enigma Variations: Aspects of the Samson Story (Judg 13-16),” *Vox Evangelica* 21(1991): 73; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 462; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 407, as examples of authors who make these exact points.

²²⁴ Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 178, is just one example of this.

²²⁵ Butler, *Judges*, 330.

happened.²²⁶ One particularly notable instance is Robert G. Boling's commentary on Judges, in which he exegetes the Samson and Delilah story in admirable, verse-by-verse detail, with attention to the meanings of various words and narrative and grammatical structures, yet completely omits not only a discussion of Samson's blindness, but the entire verse in which it happens.²²⁷ It is the only verse of the story which does not receive even a mention in Boling's commentary. and the omission cannot possibly have been accidental.

Confessional sources, some far more recent than Boling's, continue the trend of not commenting on Samson's blindness, though allowing it to stand in the background as an ironic reminder of his lack of wisdom. Benjamin Crisp, for example, correctly comments that words to do with sight, visions and eyes pervade the Samson narrative,²²⁸ but in his article on Samson's ethical "blind spots" does not ever comment directly on Samson's blindness except to say that "Samson, without eyes, truly *saw*."²²⁹

To be sure, it is possible that these writers merely believed that Samson's blinding is so straightforward as to not require any explanation, which in itself would be a comment on how they consider blindness as a biblical trope, but there is a more intriguing possibility that I wish to consider. In his monograph on Samson, Gregory Mobley comments that Samson is often overlooked by biblical commentators, especially those concerned with source criticism of the Hebrew Bible, as he is difficult to categorize into any of the acknowledged authorial traditions, claiming that "finding a place for Samson has proven as difficult for scholars as it was for the

²²⁶ Charles Fox Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes* (London: Rivingtons, 1930); Laura A. Smit and Steven E. Fowl, *Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018); J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); and Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) are four such examples of otherwise thorough commentaries that cannot bring themselves to comment on Samson's disability.

²²⁷ Robert G. Boling, *The Anchor Bible: Judges* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 248-252. The Anchor Bible's translation of the story also incorrectly translates Judg 14:1 as saying Samson "noticed" a woman in Timnah (225), which may be a harmless translation choice, but serves to further remove the sight-blindness trajectory as a meaningful element of the Samson story.

²²⁸ Benjamin Crisp, "Samson's Blindness and Ethical Sight," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 9.1 (2019): 239.

²²⁹ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

peripatetic hero in the narrative.”²³⁰ As a result of the difficulty in categorizing him, Samson is therefore often omitted from many works, according to Mobley. As noted above, despite Mobley’s insistence that Samson is overlooked, he is widely studied in biblical studies on Judges, much of which now cites Mobley’s work. It is, however, easy to see this ambiguity in Samson’s characterization. He fits into a character type that is not often associated with main character status in the Hebrew Bible—the “wild man” archetype that is generally relegated to supporting character status as seen in the cases of Ishmael, Esau, or even John the Baptist in the New Testament.²³¹ This character, rather than being the primary actor in God’s plan, is generally a narrative foil for a more ‘civilized’ character who will ultimately triumph. But in this story that expectation is inverted, and the “wild man” is the primary character, with whom the audience is presumably meant to identify. It seems natural that biblical readers used to certain archetypes would find Samson somewhat challenging to sort, and would therefore be made uncomfortable by his presence.

And yet in the same work in which Mobley makes this argument about Samson being overlooked, he also does not comment on Samson’s blindness. Is the reader to believe that in an otherwise very thorough study of Samson, the fact that he is blinded near the end of his life is not relevant enough to warrant so much as a mention? No more so, I argue, than it is reasonable to suppose that his blindness is omitted for that reason from Boling’s otherwise thorough commentary on Judges. Taking Mobley’s argument that Samson is omitted because commentators are uncomfortable with his liminality, and with the inability to categorize him properly, I argue that Samson’s blindness (and by extension the blindness of other biblical characters; recall the commentarial silence on Isaac’s blindness in the second chapter) is overlooked because the prospect of discussing it makes biblical commentators uncomfortable. Until recently, disability was not a topic discussed in public with any frequency, because that which is different, and which is therefore stigmatized, is socially invisible and it is easier for people outside of that group to simply not talk about it.²³² That said, however, disability has

²³⁰ Gregory Mobley, *Samson the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 5.

²³¹ Ibid., 44-45.

²³² Bruce C. Birch, “Impairment as a Condition in Biblical Scholarship: A Response,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disability in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 185.

always been overrepresented in literature, unlike other marginalities. Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability “has experienced a plethora of representations in visual and discursive works”²³³ because it allows writers to get a narrative moving. The importance of Samson’s disability in the narrative does not equal an importance in interpretation, because scholars see it as a self-explanatory feature that exists to propel him to his climax and nothing else. But Samson’s disability *is* central to interpreting his character. His sight was part of what made him the wild man in the first place, and his blindness is what lets him fulfill his potential as a judge of Israel. Ignoring it because disability is an uncomfortable topic is to ignore a central element of the story.

Samson’s story is similar to Isaac’s in that it is marked by questions about what the main character does and does not know at various points. Does Samson know that everything that is happening to him is part of God’s plan to kill Philistines? Does he know about the rules of the Nazarite vow? Does he know that Delilah plans to betray him? Does he know that he’ll get his strength back if he asks God? The answers to none of these questions are given.²³⁴ All textual interpreters must therefore make assumptions. Does Samson’s mother accurately transmit the Nazarite rules to her son after he was born?²³⁵ Does Samson believe that Delilah is merely playing a game with him²³⁶ and that he knows what she is planning?²³⁷ Does Delilah know about Samson’s violent exploits and fear him before she ever meets him?²³⁸ Do the Philistines whom Delilah calls consistently remain hidden in another room, without Samson’s realizing they are actually there?²³⁹ Such assumptions are a part of interpretation, especially in a story that, despite its length and relative detail compared to others, is still quite short. Tammi J. Schneider discusses

²³³ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 7.

²³⁴ The Hebrew Bible is famously full of such gaps. Erich Auerbach noted in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 7, that the Hebrew Bible suggests “a glimpse of unplumbed depths” in contrast with Homeric epics which contain no such gaps. Other scholars such as Meir Sternberg (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 186-229) have also worked on gaps in the Hebrew Bible and considered the complex reading strategies that must emerge to fill them.

²³⁵ Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 352.

²³⁶ Schneider, *Judges*, 221.

²³⁷ Butler, *Judges*, 351.

²³⁸ Gafney, “A Womanist Midrash of Delilah,” 60-61.

²³⁹ Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 178.

several authors, including Soggin and Boling, whose interpretations are coloured by cultural misogyny that causes them to interpret the gender dynamics of Samson's relations with various female characters in particular ways,²⁴⁰ while herself assuming that Samson's inappropriate behaviour means he should be read as Israel's worst judge, acting only selfishly, and the one whose behaviour is ultimately responsible for the anarchy and civil war that followed him—a claim she argues is not only her own, but one that the text itself is making.²⁴¹ Samson *is* easily read as an inattentive and disinterested judge, but texts make no claims. Schneider's interpretation relies on the assumption that Samson was unaware of what God's plan for the Philistines and for himself. It is very possible that he was unaware; the text is silent on what Samson knew, making Schneider's interpretation possible, but simultaneously making the opposite possible. Perhaps Samson *did* know all or some of what was going to happen. The reader has no way of knowing, and must make a decision as to what they believe while engaging with the text. This is made complicated by a text where the evidence is confusing. Samson never interacts with God or receives instructions from him, but does act according to God's will consistently. Did he know what God wanted?

Some interpreters, including David Gunn, interpret Samson as wanting to escape his Nazarite vow, and as doing everything he can to be an ordinary man.²⁴² Unlike other Nazarites, Samson was consecrated in utero without his consent or knowledge, and presumably grew up expected to obey a series of strictures in which he was not interested and did not appreciate—evident from the fact that he constantly breaks them. Interpreters who follow Gunn and take this approach argue, as Barry Webb does, that Samson spent his life in rebellion against God,²⁴³ constantly trying to break God's hold over him. Webb argues that in this, Samson is not a character in the story but a metaphor for Israel, separated from other men/nations but not wanting to be, kept from foreign women but not wanting to be, rebellious and living through the

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 193-195.

²⁴¹ Ibid., xiv

²⁴² David Gunn, "Samson of Sorrows: An Isianic Gloss on Judges," in *Reading between the Text: Intertextuality in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 225-256.

²⁴³ Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 405.

consequences. But only for a short time, the Deuteronomistic Historian seems to warn.²⁴⁴

Perhaps, if one believes that Samson was trying to distance himself from God, then his telling Delilah about his hair was in fact a final way of doing this. Samson tells her that as a Nazarite, he must not cut his hair lest he become like other men, and some such as Laura A. Smit and Steven Fowl argue that is what he wants.²⁴⁵ Considering the scene with Delilah is the first and only time Samson refers to himself as a Nazarite, and also the only time he is referred to as a Nazarite after the annunciation to his mother, there would seem to be weight to this interpretation—but the text remains silent on Samson’s motivations.

In 2001, Lori Rowlett’s article “Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah”²⁴⁶ explored an interpretation of Samson and Delilah’s dynamic through the lens of a BDSM relationship. Arguing that Samson willingly gave up control of himself and reading specifically Samson’s shaving as part of this dominant/submissive dynamic, Rowlett contends that Samson’s gender performance is highly queer, and indeed that Delilah’s is as well. Rowlett specifically describes Delilah as having “either indeterminate gender or gender so overdetermined as to verge on the camp sensibility of gender impersonation,”²⁴⁷ which I argue is true of Samson as well. At this point, queer scholars generally pause to lament that Rowlett’s work is underappreciated and goes unnoticed in mainstream studies of Samson and the book of Judges,²⁴⁸ which is true, but not surprising, given the status of marginalized scholarship in the

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 416. Most scholars accept a compositional history of Judges that places much of its redaction, if nothing else, in the period of the Deuteronomistic History. Some argue that the original text of Judges itself may have belonged to the J corpus.

²⁴⁵ Smit and Fowl, *Judges and Ruth*, 163.

²⁴⁶ Lori Rowlett, “Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah,” in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 106-115.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 109.

²⁴⁸ Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man: The Story of Samson (Judg 13-16)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006); Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); E.T.A. Davidson, *Intricacy, Design, & Cunning in the Book of Judges* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2008) and Butler, *Judges* are some major English examples of recent works that choose not to engage with Rowlett’s seminal queer reading.

dominant stream of biblical studies.²⁴⁹ Instead of lingering on this, I move instead to scholars who have drawn on Rowlett's work to further elaborate Samson's queer gender performance. Marco Derks extends Rowlett's reading to consider Samson's story in terms of the many dualities that Samson himself sets up along racial, ethnic, and gendered lines.²⁵⁰ Ela Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska cites Rowlett's work as "noteworthy" and, though she does not draw on it in the rest of her articulation of Samson's gendered interplay with Israelite honour and shame, is clearly influenced by Rowlett's reading.²⁵¹

Samson's gender performance is very complex. Derks observes that per Judges 16:13 and other texts, Samson believes himself to be 'not like other men,' and surmises from this that he was likely 'not like other boys' as a child, his gender performance always fraught from birth.²⁵² He is an overly masculine man who behaves with excessive sexual aggression towards women and overt violent aggression towards other men, but he also spends most of his life being subservient to various women. He is unable to relate properly to other men and, most importantly for the healthy sexuality of an Israelite man, his sexual and romantic attractions are all oriented towards foreign women. All of Samson's love interests are Philistines, a clear violation of numerous biblical ordinances aimed at Israelite men, and a curious—queer, even—departure for a man who is supposed to be a leader of his community.

Though not the subject of this chapter, Delilah's gender performance is also complex. Wil Gafney interprets Delilah from a womanist standpoint and through the lens of modern hip-hop, in which female performers are "almost all by default occupying and transforming a male role."²⁵³ Delilah is a financially independent woman who seeks to protect herself from a violent man and succeeds at playing him and protecting herself by finding his weakness and selling him to the Philistines. Womanist readings are generally adjacent to African American readings, and

²⁴⁹ Steven D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 117-118, describe the depth to which any scholar doing non-normative scholarship is marginalized in biblical studies, even if they work in a large subfield.

²⁵⁰ Marco Derks, "'If I Be Shaven, Then My Strength Will Go from Me:' A Queer Reading of the Samson Narrative," *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015): 569.

²⁵¹ Ela Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska, "Samson's Masculinity in Terms of Male Honour," in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 171-188.

²⁵² Derks, "'If I Be Shaven,'" 558.

²⁵³ Gafney, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah," 49.

that is a standpoint in which Samson has often been read as a sort of folk hero. As Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper note in *Black Samson: The Untold Story of an American Icon*, Samson was used by American anti-slavery activists in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as an identifiable figure who was fighting unfair bondage by an oppressor, applying “parts of Samson’s story to racially charged issues in the United States”²⁵⁴ The monograph focuses on the ways in which Samson, despite his physical appearance not being biblically described, is used by Black people in America, first slaves and then those living in the shadow of slavery’s memory. The valences in his story of Samson overcoming oppressors clearly resonate with Black readers, not surprising given that Samson’s conflict with the Philistines is fraught with racial complexities.

Whether or not one wants to map modern sexual or racial dynamics onto Samson and Delilah, these readings are compelling because they comment directly on the complexity of Samson’s character. Bringing that into conversation with the *disabled* complexity of Samson’s character reveals him as a man whose early gender performance marks him as a flawed Israelite, unable to properly exist in a society not adapted to his needs. His queer gender is his disability long before his blindness is, just one more way in which he doesn’t fit.

The Samson story, and especially the Samson and Delilah narrative, has captivated the imaginations of scholars for centuries. It is a complicated story with complicated interpretive issues involved in it, and many scholars have tried to interpret it, each with their own assumptions about the text. My assumptions about the text are that Samson’s disability is linked to his gender, sexuality and status as a member of a community of Israelites, and that all of these identity markers intersect and overlap in his characterization to create a complicated character and a complicated cautionary tale. Samson *is* Israel in many important ways. Like Isaac and the barren women, Samson is a representation of what a community should not be, while at the same time exemplifying, mostly through negation, what it *should* be. And as with the other stories in which disability plays a part, the seeds are present in Samson’s narrative to interpret him and his narrative differently, to read Samson not as a cautionary tale but as an exemplar, if not in the

²⁵⁴ Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, *Black Samson: The Untold Story of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

specifics of his sexual and violent behaviour, then in his refusal to conform to societal expectations of normative ability, gender, sexuality and ethnicity.

Samson's Blindness

Seeing Is Believing?

As noted, Samson's life is characterized by three instances in which he fell in love with foreign women and violence ensued. In all three cases the sense of sight is implicated. This happens first in Judges 14, when he "saw a Philistine woman" in Timnah (Judg 14:1). Having seen her, Samson desires her for his wife (Judg 14:2), and has his parents arrange a marriage to her against their own wishes. He immediately comes into conflict with his unnamed wife's family, resulting in violence between them (Judg 14:12-20). Twenty years on, Samson sees another woman, a prostitute in Gaza, with whom he has sex, leading the Philistines to attack him again, with deadly consequences. (Judg 16:1-3). For much of his life, Samson sees women, treats them as objects, and comes into violent conflict with the men who surround those women. The formula changes however, when he "falls in love" with Delilah (Judg. 16:4), an ambiguously racialized woman in the valley of Sorek. This begins the path to Samson's eventual doom as he tells her the truth about the source of his power, eventually allowing her and her Philistine benefactors to bind, shear, and blind him, before taking him away into slavery. If Samson is aware of his community's restrictions against exogamy, he does not show it, but the text shows it for him by punishing him for every relationship. At the end, as he is blinded after Delilah's betrayal, it feels inevitable, because Samson was already a man who did not know how to use his body in a way deemed appropriate by his society.

Samson's relationship with his Israelite identity is intimately tied to his disability and his queer gender performance. First and foremost, he cannot bring himself to be sexually interested in Israelite women, only foreign women. His failed masculinity (by the standards of both his own fictional contemporaries and the Israelite culture producing his text) causes him to behave in ways that his community finds excessive and wants to stop (Judg 15:11-12). Samson's retaliation against the Philistines for re-marrying his wife to someone else is so excessively violent that the Philistines ask the Israelites to rein Samson in, which they do, demanding that he stop and intending to betray him to the Philistines. This is the only scene in which Samson speaks with

other Israelites in his entire story, and the only time before his death that he is seen in the company of other Israelites.

The Philistines blind Samson as part of the larger effort to remove a large threat to their people. He falls in love with Delilah, who may or may not have been Philistine herself,²⁵⁵ and this is used against him as the Philistines seemingly bribe Delilah into seeking out Samson's weakness so that they can bind, capture, blind, imprison, and torture him. From the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historian, the Philistines are the antagonists of this story, capturing one of God's judges and torturing him. However, from the Philistines' standpoint, Samson must clearly be the villain here, one who kills their people indiscriminately at the slightest provocation with both horrific violence and alarmingly clever tactics (Judg 14:19, 15:4-5, 15:15). The only real wonder is that the Philistines did not kill Samson after they had him in their grasp. Samson's blindness is both a punishment from God and from the Philistines, who apparently (and rightfully) recognize that Samson's eyesight has been the originating factor in all his violence towards them.

Samson's blindness, however, is not only caused by the Philistines. In the Bible, God is the power who gives and takes away sight (Exod 4:11). God using blindness to punish those who have committed misdeeds or violated his covenant, or threatening to do so, is not an unusual occurrence (Deut 28:28, 2 Kings 6:18, for example, but see also Gen 19:11, in which the messengers of God blind the people of Sodom). It is not outside the realm of the possible that Samson has done something to anger God, which resulted in the situation where he was blinded. For example, Samson may have been being punished for breaking a vow. To be a Nazarite, one must make a vow to God that includes certain stipulations. As noted, however, Samson never makes such a vow. The instructions associated with the Nazarite vow are given to his mother. Perhaps this is why Samson feels comfortable violating his Nazarite prohibitions on several occasions, most obviously through his regular interactions with corpses (Judg 14:6-8, is one example, though he also consistently kills people and touches their corpses), but is only punished for breaking the prohibition against cutting his hair.

It is not clear why this is the case, but it is likely tied to Samson's insistence on being intimate with foreign women, which is ethnically problematic. The cutting of his hair comes as a

²⁵⁵ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 177.

direct result of that predilection. A second possible explanation is that, as far as the reader knows, the only prohibition that was meant to bind Samson was the prohibition about cutting his hair, whereas the other prohibitions were aimed at Samson's mother. There is considerable interpretive debate about the validity of reading Samson as a "real" Nazarite, which Butler covers in detail.²⁵⁶ I do not intend to weigh in on this debate; Samson is called a Nazarite in-text and the prohibition about cutting his hair is central to the climax of his narrative, so I read him as one regardless of the historical validity of this claim.

Breaking his vow to God as a Nazarite might well have caused God's anger—Samson was not to allow any razor to come upon his head, after all (Judg 13:5), and in telling Delilah his weakness (Judg 16:17), he has implicitly allowed this to happen. If that were not enough, previously Samson had also eaten unclean food (Judg 14:9), a violation of the vow that cannot be passed off as someone else's doing,²⁵⁷ though it is worth noting that the vow specifically stipulated that "no razor is to come on his head" (Judg 14:5), not that Samson himself may not cut his hair. If the wording is taken as literally true, then, the very fact of his hair being cut is a violation of the vow. I will comment below on the fact that Samson is shaved immediately before being blinded as well, but for the time being it bears noting that Samson's vow has been broken, and that God had "turned away from him" (Judg 16:20).²⁵⁸ It is not inevitable that the reader should conclude that Samson's blindness is resultant from God's displeasure, but there is more than enough information in the text for the reader to make this inference if he or she wished, which as discussed above, many scholars and interpreters do.

Neutering a Wild Man

It is noteworthy that the Philistines should have chosen to blind Samson rather than committing any other insult upon him, and indeed, it does not seem that he is disabled in any other way after his capture. Why not cut off his hands, or his feet or remove his tongue or any number of other punishments that must have been available to them? Because no reason is given in the text for why this particular punishment may have been chosen, it is incumbent on the

²⁵⁶ Butler, *Judges*, 324-325.

²⁵⁷ Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 180.

²⁵⁸ Incidentally, the reader will note that Samson "did not know" that God had abandoned him, and in the very next sentence he is blinded.

reader to make interpretive decisions. I argue that the reason why this punishment is chosen is threefold. First, blindness is understood as a punishment because to be blind is considered an inferior way of living one's life, and therefore is an adequately terrible thing to inflict upon one's enemy. This requires little explanation for the assumed audience of the text, who would have existed in this same milieu and had the same ideas about disability.

Second, all of Samson's issues with the Philistines began when "at Timnah he *saw* a Philistine woman" and wanted her for his wife (Judg 14:1-2, emphasis added). Although this was orchestrated by God, who was seeking a pretext to attack the Philistines (Judg 14:4), nonetheless the ensuing conflict between Samson and the Philistines was resultant from his wanting to possess that which he had seen. Therefore, the taking out of his eyes at what the Philistines thought was the culmination of the conflict can be read as a sort of poetic justice, the symbolic (and actual) destruction of that which initiated this very costly battle. For Samson's character, blinding as a punishment makes sense (some scholars such as Butler speculate that it may also have been a punishment for prisoners of war in this time period),²⁵⁹ and on the narrative level as well the reader will understand the removal of Samson's eyes as the nadir of Samson's character arc, leading on to his triumphant destruction of the Philistine's temple and his killing of three thousand Philistines (Judg 16:30). As one final comment on this matter, Alter indicates that the gouging out one's eyes was also sometimes "a punishment for a rebellious vassal."²⁶⁰ It has already been established both that God is, at least in the beginning, the author of this conflict, and also that Samson has broken his vow as a Nazarite. Perhaps, ultimately, it is God who has blinded Samson after all.

Thirdly, however, and I would argue most critically, is that the removal of the eyes is often a metaphor for castration.²⁶¹ It is interesting to note, in light of this information, that blindness is a universally male disability in the Bible—as noted in the previous chapter most disabled women are barren rather than experiencing any other disabilities, and it is never women who are blinded.²⁶² If one wishes to read blindness as a sign of forced feminization, it may very

²⁵⁹ Butler, *Judges*, 352.

²⁶⁰ Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 192.

²⁶¹ Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 24.

²⁶² With the possible exception of Leah's 'weak eyes' (Gen 29:17), but the meaning of this phrase is never made clear to the reader and were Leah blind, one might expect the biblical narrator to have been clearer on this fact.

well be easy to understand why. Given that Samson's hair is removed, which is also a symbolic castration,²⁶³ the power of this cannot be overlooked, especially as these two events occur one right after the other. Feminist scholars of the Bible have long read the Samson story from a position of gender criticism and noted that there are elements of the story that focus on distinctions between masculinity and femininity, self and other,²⁶⁴ and the danger posed by women, as well as a caution on the necessity of men controlling women.²⁶⁵ Blindness is not a neutral physiological condition in biblical parlance, but rather a socially and morally complicated metaphor that seeks to locate a person at a particular place in their culture. Blinding Samson was not simply a physical retribution for his actions against the Philistine people, but in this context a social violence enacted against him to ensure that he would never again hold any sort of status in Israelite society. Or at least that is the way in which the story is often read, when commentators allow societal ideas about disability and status to influence their readings, and therefore the broader culture understanding of what disability 'means.'

My reading of the Samson story pivots around the biblically supported idea that God is the author of sight and blindness (Exod 4:11), and upon Mobley's argument that Samson is an unlikely character to be a hero in a biblical story. He is a wild man, a violent and seemingly unstable individual who should, by the Hebrew Bible's own internal logic, have been relegated to the position of a supporting character or even a villain. Characters such as Samson are often meant to embody one half of a wilderness/civilization duality, or perhaps more accurately, a binary between a hunter/gatherer society and a pastoral one,²⁶⁶ in which it is generally made clear that the pastoral culture is preferred. In the Samson story, Samson has no pastoral foil, and nor is the story geared towards providing a message that Samson's way of life is undesirable when compared to the alternative. The only alternative given, after all, is that represented by the

²⁶³ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 57. Cf Derks, "If I Be Shaven," 569, who describes in detail how Samson's hair becomes a critical part of his masculine gender performance.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

²⁶⁵ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 62.

²⁶⁶ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 417.

Philistines. A clear reading of the Samson story must therefore be done with the understanding that it is a different type of story, with a different type of protagonist and a different message.

Any reader of the Bible will not be surprised to hear that God has a tendency to choose unlikely heroes. Moses, considered the greatest leader of the people of Israel, worried that he would not be an adequate leader because of an undefined speech impediment (Exod 4:10). Ruth was a non-Israelite widow (Ruth 1:4-5), and she, Deborah (Judg 4:4) and Esther (Esther 2:7) were women in a time when women did not lead. Jonah actively resisted God's call to prophecy and ran away to avoid the responsibility (Jonah 1:3), and Amos tended sheep and sycamore trees before being called by God (Amos 7:14). Consider the patriarchal narrative in Genesis discussed in the previous two chapters—God repeatedly chose women who were barren to play major roles in a story that was entirely about procreation (Gen 11:30; 25:21; 30:1) and favoured younger sons over older sons in a story that was concerned with lineage and inheritance (Gen 21:12, 25:23, 37:3, 49:14). Nor is the reversal of male primogeniture unique to Genesis: The two greatest kings in Israel's history, David and Solomon, were younger sons (1 Sam 16:12; 2 Sam 12:24).²⁶⁷ Many of the 'heroes' of Bible are people who would, in the culture in which the stories were transmitted, have been considered unusual choices. Yet God seems to clearly prefer such individuals when selecting those through whom his intentions will be carried out. There is, therefore, a strong message running throughout the biblical texts²⁶⁸ that regardless of human expectations for certain individuals, the potential of a person should never be measured based on superficial characteristics.

In many ways, then, it is Samson's very unsuitability as a hero that makes him appealing to God. Here is another opportunity for the text to show that all individuals have potential to live full lives and contribute to society.²⁶⁹ But it is not merely this trope, which as I have shown, is very common in the Hebrew Bible, which is at play in the Samson story. From the standpoint of disability theory, there is something far more subversive working in the narrative as well, for it is

²⁶⁷ Of course, the reversal of primogeniture in the J narratives is likely the creation of a retroactive precedent for Davidic and Solomonic rulership.

²⁶⁸ I have given examples only from the Hebrew Bible, but this theme of unlikely heroes is carried over into the New Testament as well.

²⁶⁹ The text, of course, is concerned only with Israelite individuals, and not with the thousands of Philistines who were killed in the effort of making this point.

not only the case that Samson proves a blind individual need not be powerless. In blindness, Samson is a far more efficacious judge than he ever was as a sighted person. Symbolically castrated, Samson is a far more effective man than he ever was before. Sighted, he was prone to mistakes and rash judgements that may have assuaged his current ill feelings but always turned out worse for him in the long run. Blind, he is able to affect a defeat of all of his enemies at once in a most calculated manner. I will discuss this shortly, but what must be considered is that Samson is not just *as* powerful blind as he was sighted, but he is *more* powerful. And not only does Samson subvert the tropes about disability and weakness, he also overthrows the very notion that blindness should be thought of as a punishment. In destroying the Philistine temple, he is also shattering any claim to comprehensibility that this idea may have held.

Samson's De(con)struction

וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמִשׁוֹן אֶל-יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה זָכְרֵנִי נָא וְחַזְקֵנִי נָא אֶךְ הַפַּעַם הִנֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים וְאַנְקָמָה נָקָם-אֶחָת מִשְׁתִּי
עֵינַי מִפִּלְשְׁתִּים

(Judg 16:28)

This destruction requires the Philistines to make three mistakes. The first is the assumption that they as human beings have the power and authority to cause blindness in an individual. Readers of the biblical text know that God is the one with the authority to give and take away sight. Though it is very possible that God authored Samson's blindness as a punishment for Samson's breaking of his Nazarite vows, as I discuss above, I do in fact argue that Samson's blindness, while perhaps authored by God and perhaps related to the breaking of his vows, was not meant to be a punishment, at least not from God, and nor did it ultimately function as one. The Philistines, long victims of Samson's gendered violence, certainly seem to believe that the blindness they inflict upon him is a punishment, and that is the second mistake that they make, for narratively Samson's blindness does not function that way. Blinding the sighted in ancient literature is meant as a punishment for misdeed, something through which the newly blinded individual can ruminate on their mistakes, find their humanity and through

suffering, grow as a human being.²⁷⁰ If Samson experiences any catharsis or growth as a person while he is grinding the millstone in the dark, the reader is not told of this. Samson is no less violent for his blinding, no less vengeful (Judg 16:26-30).²⁷¹ Though his plan seems clever as many of Samson's plans have in the past, it is no less impulsive than the others. Narratively speaking, Samson's blindness does not work in the way blinding as a punishment should, because no matter what the Philistines wish to be true, Samson is not being punished by his blindness.

The third and final mistake that the Philistines make in regard to Samson's blindness is tying to it the assumption that Samson is now tamed. It is not hard to understand why they might have thought this; I mentioned above that Samson's sight seems to be the cause of much of his conflict with the Philistines—an important point to which I will return below—but they are making a typical mistake that sighted people make when considering the blind. In the words of John Hull, "As is so often the case, [the Philistines] exaggerate the impact of his blindness."²⁷² The castration metaphor becomes apt in this circumstance; the Philistines believe they have neutered Samson, removed his masculine power through his connection with his masculine God, and brought his excessive sexuality into line. They know his strength came from his hair and yet they allow it to regrow, because surely a man with no eyes is no threat to them and indeed no man at all. They call for Samson to be brought up from his prison to entertain them in their temple, and gather in great numbers to watch the captured blind man who had terrorized them perform for them, their fear gone with his eyes (Judg 16:25).

²⁷⁰ Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 190-191.

²⁷¹ Note that my reading does not imply that Samson himself necessarily understood blindness as a positive, trapped as he was in a cultural environment when such an assessment of physical ability would have been unheard of. He does state that he wants revenge for having been blinded, and as much as it would be nice for Samson to come to terms with his new life as a blind individual, I have already shown that Samson is not an ideal hero for anyone, so why should the disabled community to which he now belongs be any different? Rosalyn Benjamin Darling comments that theoretical exercises in disability theory do not necessarily lead to a measurable increase in positive self-identities among disabled individuals (Rosalyn Benjamin Darling, *Disability and Identity: Negotiating Self in a Changing Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2013, 4). Samson still understood that, being blind, he now belonged to a stigmatized group and it would not be surprising for him to have felt negatively about that.

²⁷² John M. Hull, *In the Beginning, There was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 17.

The depth of the mistake that they are making here is made plain in just one verse, Judges 16:26: “and Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, ‘Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them.’” Samson knows that there are likely to be pillars supporting to the bulk of the building. “Given the opportunity,” writes disability scholar Julia Miele Rodas, “always get directions from a blind person.”²⁷³ Unlike sighted people, blind people use concrete ways of knowing where they are, measuring steps, counting streets or buildings, rather than reading signs or visual landmarks. Perhaps Samson had seen the temple as a sighted person, or perhaps he knew some details of Philistine architecture, or perhaps his long-dormant common sense told him that any structure would have load-bearing columns somewhere. It does not matter how, but clearly Samson knew, without needing to see them, that there were pillars that, if they were to fall, would destroy the temple. He is assumed to be weak and ignorant, because he is blind. The Philistines and the boy²⁷⁴ holding his hand think Samson is now harmless, and the boy therefore thinks nothing of guiding Samson towards the pillars as requested. And like Isaac did, Samson uses his blindness to his own advantage, not to avoid conflict but to end one. He allows everyone to believe until the last minute that they are correct in their assumptions about what a blind man is capable of. And the Philistines die at Samson’s hand in numbers exceeding any before, their assumptions and their hubris crumbling with their temple, watching as the blind man destroys them.

On the surface, this seems like quite the gamble for Samson. He does not yet have his strength back; the mere regrowing of his hair was not enough to rectify his vow having been broken insofar as the text describes. Only as he moves to put his hands on the pillars does Samson ask God for his strength back, “only this once” (Judg 16:28), so he can have his revenge. There is a brief moment of suspense here—if God does not answer or refuses Samson’s request, or if Samson should be seized by the Philistine guards or if anything else should go wrong, he will not be given another opportunity to cause wide-scale damage to his enemies. But God does

²⁷³ Julia Miele Rodas, “On Blindness,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 3.2 (2009): 121.

²⁷⁴ The NRSV translates the term as ‘attendant,’ but the Hebrew term is הָנֶעֱר, which can also be translated ‘the boy,’ and most interpreters seem to accept that it was a young person who helped Samson in this case. The contemporary reader, versed in classical writings, cannot help but recall Tiresias the seer and the young attendant who helped him mobilize, especially when considering that Samson is holding on to an insight that the Philistines do not suspect him of having made.

accept the disabled Nazarite, Samson does have his strength returned for one last moment,²⁷⁵ and he is able to destroy the temple while God proves that he is not as adverse to disabled individuals serving him as he may have once seemed. Perhaps the reader will not be surprised by this—perhaps they will remember that God was the original author of all these events (Judg 14:4) and that the strike against the Philistines was the intention all along. The narrator is very clear, too, to tell the reader that “[h]is father and mother did not know that this was from the Lord” (Judg 14:4), but notably omitted is the report that Samson was unaware, raising at least the possibility that Samson knew all along what was going to happen, or at least had an idea. There is no evidence to prove that either way, but if it were the case that Samson knew what was going to happen, the possibility arises, too appalling to even consider for most able-bodied people, that Samson may well have known he would be blinded and consented to that fact in advance.

Samson’s potential consent to his own blinding presents an interesting interpretive perspective, though I find the text too ambiguous in this case to categorically argue that it is true. If he was aware at any point, I do not believe it could have been any earlier than just before he met Delilah. After all, Samson’s biggest liability in life was always his ability to see. He saw the woman at Timnah whom he desired for a wife (Judg 14:1), which set off the string of violence. He saw a prostitute in Gaza (Judg 16:1), which led to his relocating to the valley of Sorek, where he met Delilah and was eventually captured. Hull points out that, in his early conflicts with the Philistines, Samson exhibits traits typical of a sighted person, including his ability to act as an individual and his intimate knowledge of the countryside.²⁷⁶ These traits bring on successes that only serve to further incense the Philistines against him. However, they are also his weakness. K. Lawson Younger notes, “Samson is a man dominated by his senses, not logic,” and goes on to say that “these carnal proclivities overwhelm his perception of matters that any thinking man would know better.”²⁷⁷ That Samson can see is the single most dangerous thing about him, both to himself and to everyone around him. But in chapter 16 as mentioned above, Samson notably does not ‘see’ Delilah, but ‘loves’ her (Judg 16:4). Has he already become aware at this point

²⁷⁵ Interestingly, the text does not actually state that God answered Samson’s call or returned Samson’s strength to him. The reader is left to infer this information based on Samson’s sudden ability to destroy a building with his bare hands.

²⁷⁶ Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness*, 11.

²⁷⁷ K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges, Ruth*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 300.

that it is his eyes that are causing him so many problems? Presumably he did see Delilah, regardless of what the narrator reports, but the omission of the word so tied to Samson's experience is important when the story ends with his eyes being gouged out. Sight was Samson's biggest weakness, and in blindness, his potency was increased exponentially. I have already claimed that there was a more subversive reading than just one saying that Samson shows blindness is not a punishment. For Samson, being blind is not equal in measure to being sighted. It is *better* than being sighted. Samson is more effective as a blind person than as a sighted person, not only because he is underestimated, but because the visual world was Samson's biggest obstacle, or put another way, his biggest disability, and it has been removed.

I urge caution, however, against two assumptions that are common to able-bodied interpretation of disabled narratives. The first is what is known as an "overcoming" narrative, in which a disabled person overcomes or gets over their disability, either through cure, hard work, or through the simple completion of a task that allows them to pass as "normal."²⁷⁸ Samson is not passing as able-bodied in his story, and nor is he defeating his blindness. He is unambiguously a blind man who needs assistance mobilizing and finding landmarks. Samson does not overcome his disability, but rather figures out how to live—if briefly—with it. The second, related narrative one must avoid is the "supercrip" narrative, in which a disabled person, through or because of their disability, is considered superhuman, either because their disability gives them a remarkable ability that non-disabled people do not have, or because the sheer act of a disabled person accomplishing something that is normal for an able-bodied person is seen as extraordinary, or, as Eli Clare points out, some disabled people "lead entirely ordinary lives and still become supercrips."²⁷⁹ Samson *does* have extraordinary abilities, most obviously his superhuman strength, but this ability is not narratively related to his disability in any measurable way. He is not a supercrip and he does not overcome his disability. Samson figures out how to navigate the world he lives in, an exercise that takes his whole life. In attempting to create a narrative link between inappropriate sexual and gendered behaviour on the one hand and disabling correctives on the other, the text of Judges has instead created a narrative in which disability merely maximizes the value of Samson's queerly gendered behaviour. No longer able

²⁷⁸ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 8-10.

²⁷⁹ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 8.

to pass as normal, Samson is free to embrace his queer impulses and use them to maximum effect, arguably just as God intended, and arguably just as Samson himself wanted.

After Samson's death, the Israelites who have spurned, avoided, and marginalized him for his whole life claim his body, take him and bury him with his father (Judg 16:31). Because of his queer gender performance and disability, Samson does not meet the standard of an appropriate male Israelite, and therefore people in the centre of his culture spend his life working to keep him on the outskirts in order to force him to conform. It is not Samson's intersectional marginalities however, that force him out of society, nor does he change to accommodate the culture around him. Rather, Samson continually forces the culture to accommodate him, and on his death, forces it to accept him as a full member without regard for the various things that made him unable to fit the mould that had been constructed for him.

Samson has to die before he manages to force Israelite society to accept him, an unfortunate end to his journey to be accepted, if indeed that was what he was doing. Samson lived his life the way he wanted to, among people he wanted to be around, having relationships he wanted to have, rather than staying with his biological family and tribe and insisting that they accept him when they never would. He refused easy categorization, sliding between different identities and remaining a liminal figure for most of his life, a possible source of his power²⁸⁰ and a very queer impulse. He went into a world and found a way to make it accept him, rather than bowing to pressure to change. In the end, it appears that Samson would rather have died than give up on his queerness or try to pass as able-bodied.

Samson is a different, queer kind of hero and his story has a different, queer kind of ending. Cheryl Exum is one scholar to have noted that Samson's story refuses to deliver on the promise made in Samson's miraculous birth. Gary E. Yates and Jillian L. Ross have argued that he is a "parody" of Moses, their narratives being paralleled in ways as to "denounce" Samson as a figure of deliverance.²⁸¹ He is a promised saviour who never saves Israel, but is not explicitly

²⁸⁰ Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, "Samson and Our Reactions to the Strongman," *World & World* 37.7 (Summer 2017): 221.

²⁸¹ Gary E. Yates and Jillian L. Ross, "Samson: An Anti-Moses Deliverer," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 178 (Fall 2021): 418. One of the parallels Yates and Ross note is that Samson is blinded whereas Moses's eyesight "had not dimmed" at his death (432), a comparison Samson shares with Isaac. In a separate article, Ross has also argued that Samson's entire family parodies Genesis family structures as a way of finding all of them wanting compared to those

condemned for this failure. Exum argues that the text supports Samson only “beginning” Israel’s deliverance and that is the reason for the lack of condemnation.²⁸² Regardless of the reason, the fact that the promise of Samson’s birth and an adulthood that does not deliver on what his family and community wanted from him has powerful echoes for both queer and disabled readers, many of whom will be familiar with familial disappointment over an inability to meet societal norms. Before Samson was born, his father was asking “what is to be the boy’s rule of life; what is he to do?” (Judg 13:12) and though we do not know what Manoah’s assumptions were, Samson’s obsession with foreign women and his bouts of extreme violence that had him banished from the community were almost certainly not living up to his father’s expectations, even before his capture, blinding and death. Samson did not know how to be like other men and did not know how to be like other judges, but in death that no longer mattered, because of how many Philistines he killed, because when he destroyed the Philistine temple and his own body, and finally, following Olson, he also destroyed the Judges cycle itself.²⁸³

The Book of Judges contains no judges after Samson’s death. The two central figures who fill out the remainder of the text, Micah and the unnamed Levite, are not judges. Samuel, who appears later, is called a judge but is the last one, and he exists outside the canonical book. Samson’s death is the end of the rulership of judges in Israel. In trying to punish an unruly, disabled, and queer body, the present version of Judges appears to support not Samson’s behaviour, but his right to live his life—and die his death—as he pleases. Samson’s refusal of the scripted future of a judge—judging Israel for years until relatively unremarkable death, after which another judge will become necessary—has echoes of Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Futurity and the Death Drive*, in which he famously argues that in a society that consistently casts queer people as selfish narcissists whose lack of reproductive activity threatens the heteronormative agenda of the state, queer people should embrace that construct and create futures that have no need for heterosexual reproductivity.²⁸⁴ It is a stretch to say that Samson is destroying the concept of heteronormativity with his death, but his destruction of the future

inhabiting the patriarchal world. Jillian L. Ross, “Typecasting the Samson Family: Genesis Parodies in Judges 13-14,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62.2 (2021): 237-252.

²⁸² J. Cheryl Exum, “The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga,” *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983): 35.

²⁸³ Olson, *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. II: Judges* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 840.

²⁸⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

expected of him is very much a queer impulse. Samson is a cautionary tale about how excessive, queer sexuality can lead to disability and the destruction of the divinely given male body, but ends up being a warning. Samson chooses his queerness and he chooses his disability, and in that doing that, he chooses the future as well, and not one that his heterosexual and able-bodied birth family wanted.

Conclusion

Disability and queerness are co-constructed marginalities, and that marriage is on clear display in the story of Samson, the queerly masculine, hypersexual, hyper-heterosexual hero who uses his queerness and his disability to become extremely successful in a world that never fit him. The reader is set to assume that Samson's strength comes from the Nazarite vow he never took, but superhuman strength is not a promised part of that vow. His strength is part and parcel of his hypermasculine gender performance, as part of which Samson feels the need not only to project Israelite masculinity, but to project *more* of it than anyone around him, resulting in his never actually fitting into the heteropatriarchal Israelite community. Samson lives his life in ethnic conflict with the Philistines, and indeed was raised for the purpose of fighting the Philistines per God's will, but also carries on regular sexual relationships with them. His first attempt, under the veil of culturally appropriate exogamous heterosexual marriage to a culturally inappropriate woman, fails dramatically. After that, he attempts a purely transactional sexual relationship, which also ends in violence. His final relationship with Delilah appears to sour based on her betrayal of him, but arguably ends with his ultimate success in his primary goal of destroying the Philistines. In order to accomplish this, Samson ends up entering an unconventional relationship full of queer gender and sexual dynamics that ends with his being disabled both through the removal of his eyes and through the symbolic castration of his hair being cut.

Samson's disability and his shearing are linked; someone puts a stop to his attempts to emulate traditional masculinity and takes his eyes out at the same time. Samson was never going to be a proper member of heteropatriarchal society and his disabling is therefore a foregone conclusion. It cuts him off from his people, and preserves the normate body of Israel. But in this disabling, Samson ends up being able to join that community, which finally accepts him, but in so doing, fundamentally alters its future. The cycle of judges falls apart, forcing the nation of

Israel to give up on a system that is not working and change to something that will hopefully be better. It remains true, however, that Samson makes all of this happen only with his death, and that only after he has died and can no longer pose a threat to Israelite self-identity. Is it really only through death that a disabled, queer man can find a place in the Israelite community?

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Samson proves that disability and queerness are a *good* combination and that the idealized normate Israelite body is not always the body that is needed to get the job done. Nobody else could have done what Samson did, and he did it because his body was unusual, because his gender performance was flawed, and because his disability allowed him other avenues of attack. One must be careful here not to stray into the ‘supercrip’ or ‘overcoming’ narratives that are so common about disabled people in the real world. Samson did not overcome his disability. His disability did not give him special powers. Rather, through being disabled, he was able to actualize himself, embrace the version of himself that his culture was trying to prevent him from being. The critique of normate Israelite heteropatriarchy is a clear throughline in Samson’s story. It has no room for anyone who doesn’t conform to it, but it is a person who cannot conform that God chooses to be his champion. Through his choice of Samson as a judge, God himself appears to be challenging the normate Israelite body. And if even the divinity upon which human normativity is based feels that normativity is not good enough, then the question must be asked: What is the point of continuing to maintain those boundaries at all?

Conclusion

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness...” (Gen. 1:26)

Disability is a societal restriction placed on a non-normative body. That body moves differently, acts differently, belongs to the wrong person, is too similar to something else, is uncomfortable to look at. It is a master category of exclusion that co-creates many others. Sexuality, gender, race and animality are all so heavily run through with disability that they cannot be easily or reasonably separated. The role of disability in the biblical texts is nearly always to construct a character whose body is unruly and therefore in need of discipline, but rarely is disability the only vector along which that unruliness manifests. This dissertation has examined the role of disability as a fence for normative bodies in Hebrew Bible narratives. Disabled characters in these stories function as inciting incidents, as plot-relevant stumbles for the otherwise clean progression of God’s intentions for the people of Israel, and as foils for the best laid plans of the human characters. However, for all that disabled characters are consistently framed negatively, as being in possession of bodies the audience does not and should not want, their status as the determiners of appropriate embodiment empowers them and causes them to become the central, irreplaceable characters in the narratives they occupy. An interpretive history of ignoring such characters or interpreting them as weak, stupid or in need of divine intervention exists because of stereotypes about disability that are so societally ingrained that they read as neutrality when employed. In this dissertation I have argued that disabled characters such as Isaac, Sarah and Samson need not be read as weak and passive characters in the stories in which their bodies malfunctioning is the focus.

When one reads these stories without negative presuppositions about disability in place, it is possible to eschew traditional negative interpretations of disabled characters and read them positively or at least neutrally. In many cases, it is also possible to interpret disabled characters as not only powerful but as the most powerful characters in their stories. For example, the deception of Isaac in Genesis 27 revolves entirely around Isaac and what he does and does not know; the entire narrative hinges on whether or not he understands what his wife and son are doing. Isaac has complete control over every other character in the narrative, all of whose actions are circumscribed by his own decisions. Negative readings of Isaac’s story and all the others in this

dissertation are interpretations and they come from interpreters. That negativity is very rarely present in the text and must be read into it. My interpretations refuse to read negativity into the text and refuse to reduce it to a proof-text for ableism. The biblical text is far too complicated for that, and my interpretations allow it to be that way without attempting to tame it to support my own agenda.

The value of interpretations like mine is in their refusal to bow to traditional ableist readings that insert preconceived negative understandings of disabled people into the text. They work to reduce the stigma disabled people in the real-world face due, in part, to a long literary history of disabled characters who are weak, passive, stupid, evil, exist only to be pitied, or who overcome their disability in a heartwarming tale of the human spirit. The Bible is not the only source of such stereotypes, but as a foundational text of Western literature, of course its texts and the interpretations of those texts have widespread influence over how people should understand the world.

Using techniques from literary biblical studies and interpretive frameworks from disability studies, in this dissertation I have re-examined several key disability-focused biblical texts, considering how disability works in the narrative, how it is tied up with other marginal identities, and how these are being used to construct the normative body of biblical Israel. First, I reconsidered Isaac and his supposed deception in Genesis 27. In this chapter, Isaac's disability, age and rhetorical similarity to nonhuman animals all conspire to put him apparently on the outskirts of his society despite occupying the patriarch's tent. Rebecca's attempt to deceive him apparently succeeds, but I contend this was not because Isaac was stupid, but because the deception was actually of Jacob, in order to encourage endogamous marriage. Isaac's animality informs his disability and vice versa, and he demonstrates considerably more agency than one might expect for someone who doesn't get out of bed for the entire story. I interpret this story as a critique of both typical assumptions of blind people and of typical treatment of nonhuman animals, who are regularly killed to further the goals of the human characters.

In the next chapter, I considered the female disability of barrenness with regard to traditional narratives about the lineage and founding of Israel throughout Genesis and later Deuteronomistic Historical texts. Women are always disabled relative to their gender in the Hebrew Bible, because their gender seems to be considered the only important thing about them most of the time. Gender and disability collide in these stories to create female characters whose

bodies cannot do the one thing they are meant for—producing male children. Created as a way to wrest reproductive power from the wombs of women and put it into the hands of men, these stories attempt to cast women as the problem in reproductive failure, but invariably demonstrate that Sarah, Rachel, Leah, Hannah and Samson’s unnamed mother are the figures in their stories with the most power, for without them and their agency, no children would ever be born. Indeed, I argue that by disabling all the female characters, the Priestly editors ultimately neuter all the male characters, evacuating them of power in reproductive matters. This argument has relevance into our modern period in which the bodies of women are politicized and policed, reproductive health being decided by men rather than women. Critiquing the role of biblical interpretation in creating rhetoric that women should not be trusted with procreation undermines modern-day arguments making the same claim, and demonstrating women’s power in matters of childbirth creates a space in which the politics of male authority figures legislating women’s health is laid bare for the desperate power grab it is.

Finally, I analysed Samson in Judges 13-16, and primarily in the last chapter of his life, during which his lover Delilah had him bound, shaven and blinded, ultimately leading to his death. In this chapter I argued that Samson is a queer figure whose excessive masculine gender performance is non-normative sexual activity. Everything from Samson’s behaviour with his family to his relationship with Delilah is queer, and that he is disabled at the end of his life is not a coincidence. Disability and sexuality are co-constructed in Samson, who embodies everything an Israelite should not be, but is also a central figure in the tradition’s history. Samson is a cautionary tale who destroys not only the Philistine temple, but also the cycle of judges, but is also the man who God chose to lead Israel during a very tumultuous period. My interpretation of Samson is he became *more* effective after his blinding, not less, and that in his case, being disabled was in fact better than being able-bodied had been for him. Samson bringing an end to the Judges cycle reflects a queer desire to alter society to fit him, rather than allowing himself to conform to what his family and culture want him to do. His disability is a key part of that refusal to conform, as his body only grows less normative over time. Only after his death is Samson welcomed into the body of Israel, because he would never consent to joining it in life.

Taken together, the chapters of this dissertation surface readings of disabled characters who are complex, agentive and very aware of their own cultures and their positions within them. Disability and other marginalities intersect with these figures to construct the boundaries of

ancient Israel, but my readings show how those boundaries are on shaky foundations indeed, because the liminality and ambiguity of the bodies that constructed them makes them inherently porous and malleable. Why, then, if our own societal boundaries are partially based on biblical suppositions about disabled people, should our own boundaries be as they are? I argue that our constructions of normativity are just as porous as those in the texts upon which they are partially based, and that any claim we make to their inevitability, rigidity or unchangeability are only excuses not to re-imagine our own presuppositions.

This dissertation operates in the intersection between biblical and disability studies. These are two fields that have been in conversation for several decades, but the contributions of each to the other have not been explored to their full potential. Disability scholars have tended to overlook religions generally in their analyses, and biblical studies scholars rarely engage meaningfully with disability as an interpretive standpoint. Both of these things are slowly changing, and this dissertation is positioned to urge further collaboration between the two fields, arguing for the centrality of disability in the understanding of humanity constructed in various Hebrew Bible texts, and therefore in biblical understandings of human experience. I have put forward novel interpretations of various stories across several Hebrew texts, not to position myself or my interpretation as authoritative, but to demonstrate that the stories of disability in the Bible can be read counter to the dominant cultural interpretations of disability as an inherently undesirable and negative trait for a person to have, and to highlight that the text nearly always contains the tools to undo even the presumed intent of the original authors. When disability is foregrounded in interpretation, this dissertation has argued, tensions in the text that are not otherwise obvious surface, and understandings about what a “normal” human body is become far more porous than traditional readings would typically admit.

This dissertation focuses almost entirely on the biblical text itself and scholarly interpretations of that corpus. The full reception history of the text, the way it has been used by people in different time periods as both marginalizing and liberatory outside of the academy, is something I gesture to but do not engage with in considerable depth directly in this dissertation. I am also concerned mostly with the Hebrew Bible texts of what is often called the Christian Bible; I have engaged mostly with Christian or secular biblical interpretations, and only superficially with Jewish interpretive traditions, which is an entire field of study in its own right. I have also entirely omitted the New Testament from my consideration for this dissertation. All

of these are avenues for potential future research, as are several Hebrew Bible stories I neglected or touched on only very briefly. For example, Moses's speech impairment (Exod 4:10) combined with his complex ethnic and cultural background, or King Saul's disabling mental illness (e.g. 1 Sam 16:14-17) in conjunction with his failure to obey ritual requirements, are both fruitful grounds for interpretation in this vein. The Bible is full of disabled characters, many of them very prominent, and foregrounding those disabilities without the prejudices that are attached to them will allow interpreters to read the text in a way that doesn't marginalize people but instead suggests ways in which the Bible can be used to challenge cultural ableism.

The Bible is a foundational document for western culture, and the way in which it is read matters. The text cannot speak for itself and every person who reads it can say what they think it means and why. Historically, most people have said it means a sequence of very negative things about disabled people. In this dissertation I have shown that it does not have to mean that, and that when a reader does not assume prejudicial things about certain groups of people when approaching the text, it can even mean positive things about those same people. The multiplicity of possible meanings that can arise from the biblical text seems endless. It is the responsibility of everyone who reads this important text to consider why they are reading as they are—what presuppositions they are bringing to the text, what has informed their reactions to different types of characters, and why they think the things they do even in absence of textual evidence. The real people who our readings of this text touch deserve that care, especially when they have been denied it for so long.

Bibliography

- Ackerman, Susan. "The Blind, the Lame, and the Barren Shall Not Come into the House." In *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, edited by Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. 29-46.
- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 2011 [1981].
- . "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene." *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 115-30.
- . *Ancient Israel, the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings: A Translation with Commentary*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.
- ben Asher, Bachya, Rb. *Torah Commentary*. Translated by Eliyahu Munk. New York: KTAV Publishing, 1998. Sefaria.org. Accessed 14 August 2022.
- Amos, Clare. *The Book of Genesis*. Werrington: Epworth Press, 2004.
- Avalos, Hector, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.
- Babylonian Talmud. Translated by William Davidson. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2016.
- Bacon, Benjamin Wisner. *The Genesis of Genesis: A Study of the Documentary Sources of the First Book of Moses in Accordance with the Results of Critical Science Illustrating the Presence of Bibles within the Bible*. Hartford: The Student Publishing Company, 1893.
- Baden, Joel S. "The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible." In *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, edited by Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. 13-27.
- Bal, Mieke. *Lethal Love: Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- . *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Baynton, Douglas C. *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Bellis, Alice Ogden. *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

- Belser, Julia Watts. "Reading Talmudic Bodies: Disability, Narrative and the Gaze in Rabbinic Judaism." In *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis*, edited by Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. 5-27.
- , *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2024.
- Bennet, Jana. "Women, Disabled." In *Disability in the Christian Tradition, A Reader*, edited by Brian Brock and John Swinton. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. 427-466.
- Bereshit Rabbah*. Translated by Joshua Shreier. Sefaria.org. Accessed 11 November 2023.
- Berlinerblau, Jacques. *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Bernidaki-Aldous, Eleftheria A. *Blindness in a Culture of Light: Especially in the Case of Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990.
- Birch, Bruce C. "Impairment as a Condition in Biblical Scholarship: A Response." In *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disability in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007. 185-195.
- Block, Daniel I. *Judges, Ruth: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999.
- Boer, Roland. *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity and Carnality*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Breier, Idan. "Animals in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Law: Tort and Ethical Laws." *Journal of Animal Ethics* 8 (2): Fall 2018. 166-181.
- Bulka, Reuven P. "Isaac's Blessing: Who Was Deceived?" *Dor le Dor* 17.3 (Spring 1989): 185-189.
- Burkert, Walter. "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual." *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 7 (1966): 87-121.
- Burney, Charles Fox. *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes*. London: Rivingtons, 1930.
- Burrus, Virginia, "Mapping as Metamorphosis." In *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, edited by Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele. Leiden: Brill, 2007. 1-10.

- Butler, Trent C. *World Biblical Commentary, Volume 8: Judges*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009.
- Boling, Robert G. *The Anchor Bible: Judges*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975.
- Bolt, David. *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- Byron, Gay L. and Vanessa Lovelace, editors. *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2016.
- Chapman, Cynthia R. *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016.
- Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Clare, Eli. *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*. Brooklyn: South End Press, 2009 [1999].
- , *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Crane, Jonathan K. "Who's Your Mama Now? Rachel, Leah, and Rabbinic Views on Their Procreative Possibilities." *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 3.1 (2017): 92-117.
- Crisp, Benjamin. "Samson's Blindness and Ethical Sight." *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 9.1 (2019): 233-245.
- Cyril of Alexandria. *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch, vol. 1*. Translated by Nicholas P. Lunn. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018.
- Darling, Rosalyn Benjamin. *Disability and Identity: Negotiating Self in a Changing Society*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013.
- Davidson, E.T.A. *Intricacy, Design, & Cunning in the Book of Judges*. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2008.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*. New York: Verso Publishing, 1995.
- , *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- Delitzsch, Franz. *A New Commentary on Genesis*. Translated by Sophia Taylor. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1894.

- Del Toro, Guillermo, director. *The Shape of Water*. Searchlight Pictures, 2017. 2 hr, 3 min.
<https://www.disneyplus.com/en-ca/movies/the-shape-of-water/4aYOJTYJPNoo>.
- Derks, Marco. “‘If I Be Shaven, Then My Strength Will Go from Me:’ A Queer Reading of the Samson Narrative.” *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015): 553-573.
- De-Whyte, Janice Pearl Ewurama. *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- Dillmann, August, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded, Vol. II*. Translated by William Barron Stevenson. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897.
- Dolmage, Jay Timothy. *Disability Rhetoric*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014.
- , *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017.
- , *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018.
- Durant, Elizabeth. “It’s Complicated: Power and Complicity in the Stories of Hagar and Sarah.” *Conversations with the Biblical World* 35 (2015): 78-93.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Eilberg-Schwarz, Howard. *God’s Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Exum, J. Cheryl and J. William Whedbee. “Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions.” *Semeia* 32 (1984): 5-40.
- , “The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga.” *Vetus Testamentum* 33 (1983): 30-45.
- , *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives, Second Edition*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016.
- Fisher, Loren R. *Genesis: A Royal Epic, Second Edition*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011.
- Fontaine, Carole R. “Be Men, O Philistines! (1 Samuel 4:9) Iconographic Representations and Reflections on Female Gender as Disability in the Ancient World.” In *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007. 61-72.
- Friedman, David B. *Bereshit: The Book of the Beginning, A New Translation with Commentary*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010.

- Frymer-Kensky, Tivka. *Rereading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. New York: Schocken Books, 2004.
- Gafney, Wil. "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game." In *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, edited by Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2016. 49-70.
- Gaiser, Frederick J. "Sarah, Hagar, Abraham—Hannah, Peninnah, Elkanah: Case Studies in Conflict." *Word and World*, 34.3 (Summer 2014): 273-284.
- Galpaz-Feller, Pnina. *Samson: The Hero and the Man: The Story of Samson (Judg 13-16)*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006.
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Hoboken: Prentice Hall, 1963.
- Graybill, Rhiannon. "Masculinity, Materiality, and the Body of Moses." *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015): 518-540.
- Greene, Mark. "Enigma Variations: Aspects of the Samson Story (Judges 13-16)." *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 53-80.
- Guest, Deren, Robert Shore-Goss and Mona West, editors. *The Queer Bible Commentary*. London: SCM Press, 2006.
- Gunkel, Hermann. *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted by Hermann Gunkel*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997.
- Gunn, David. "Samson of Sorrows: An Isianic Gloss on Judges." In *Reading between the Text: Intertextuality in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Danna Nolan Fewell. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992. 225-256.
- Hall, Kim Q., editor. *Feminist Disability Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Havea, Jione, David J. Neville and Elaine M. Wainwright, editors. *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2014.
- Heng, Geraldine. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

- Hentrich, Thomas. "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible." In *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007. 73-87.
- Hornsby, Teresa J. and Ken Stone, editors. *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2011.
- Hull, John. *In the Beginning There was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible*. London: SCM Press, 2001.
- Isaac, Benjamin. *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996.
- Jacob, Benno. *Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis*. New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974.
- Jacobs. Mignon R. *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Jay, Nancy. *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Judd, Andrew. "Hagar, Uncle Tom's Cabin and Why We Can't Agree on What the Bible Says about Slavery." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 31.1 (2021): 1-15.
- Junior, Nyasha, and Jeremy Schipper. *Black Samson: The Untold Story of an American Icon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Kessler, Edward. *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Kessler, Martin and Karel Deurloo. *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings*. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.
- Kimhi, David, Rb. *On Genesis*. Translated by Eliyahu Munk. New York: KTAV Publishing, 2003. Sefaria.org. Accessed 15 August 2022.
- Kleege, Georgina. *Sight Unseen*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Koosed, Jennifer L., editor. *The Bible and Posthumanism*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2014.

- Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska, Ela. "Samson's Masculinity in Terms of Male Honour." In *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, edited by Ovidiu Creanga. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010. 171-188.
- Leonard-Fleckman, Mahri. "Samson and Our Reactions to the Strongman." *World & World* 37.7 (Summer 2017): 217-225.
- Levenson, Jon D. *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Lozada Jr., Francisco and Fernando F. Segovia, editors. *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2014.
- Martin, James D. *The Book of Judges*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Matthews, Victor H. *Judges and Ruth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- McKeown, James. *Genesis* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.
- McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- , *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.
- Melcher, Sarah J. "Genesis and Exodus." In *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, edited by Sarah. J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Yong. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017, 29-56.
- , Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Yong, editors. *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017.
- Midrash Tanchuma*. Translated by Samuel A. Berman in *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*. New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1996.
- Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Mobley, Gregory. *Samson the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*. New York: T & T Clark, 2006.
- Moore, Stephen D, editor. *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology. First edition*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

- , *Gospel Jesuses and Other Nonhumans: Biblical Criticism Post-Poststructuralism*. Atlanta, Society for Biblical Literature, 2017.
- and Yvonne Sherwood. *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.
- Morgenstern, Julian. *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation*. New York: Schocken Books, 1965.
- Moss, Candida R. and Jeremy Schipper. *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- , and Joel S. Baden. *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation & Childlessness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Naiden, F. S. "The Fallacy of the Willing Victim." *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 127 (2007): 61-73.
- Niditch, Susan. *Judges: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.
- Nocella, Anthony J., Amber E. George, and John Lupinacci, editors. *Animals, Disability and the End of Capitalism: Voices from the Eco-Ability Movement*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2019.
- Okoye, James C. "Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 16 and 21." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32.2 (2007): 163-175.
- Olson, Dennis T. *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II: Judges*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Olyan, Saul M. *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Peleg, Yitzhak. "Was the Ancestress of Israel in Danger? Did Pharaoh Touch Sarai?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 118.2 (August 2006): 197-208.
- Puar, Jasbir. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Rackman, Joseph. "Was Isaac Deceived?" *Judaism* 43.1 (Winter 1994): 37-45.
- von Rad, Gerhard. *Genesis*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972.
- Rankine, Patrice. "Racializing Antiquity, Post-Diversity." *TAPA* 154:1 (Spring 2024): 1-15.

- Raphael, Rebecca. *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in the Hebrew Bible Literature*. New York: T&T Clark, 2008.
- Reinhardt-Simpson, Autumn. "My Sister, My Enemy: Using Intersectional Readings of Hagar, Sarah, Leah, and Rachel to Heal Distorted Relationships in Contemporary Reproductive Justice Activism." *Feminist Theology* 28.3 (2020): 251-263.
- Reinhartz, Adele. "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist." In *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, edited by Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993. 157-170.
- Reis, Pamela Tamarkin. "Hagar Requited." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 87 (2000): 75-109.
- Reynolds, Joel Michael. "The Normate." In *50 Terms for Critical Phenomenology*, edited by Ann Murphy, Gayle Salamon, and Gail Weiss. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2019. 243-248.
- Rodas, Julia Miele. "On Blindness." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 3.2 (2009): 115-130.
- Ross, Jillian L. "Typecasting the Samson Family: Genesis Parodies in Judges 13-14." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62.2 (2021): 237-252.
- Rowlett, Lori. "Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah." In *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Ken Stone. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001. 106-115.
- Samuels, Ellen. *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary*. New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Sawyer, Deborah. *God, Gender and the Bible*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Scheub, Harold. *Trickster and Hero: Two Figures in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012.
- Schipper, Jeremy. *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story*. New York: T&T Clark, 2006.
- , "Disabling Israelite Leadership: 2 Samuel 6:23 and Other Images of Disability in the Deuteronomistic History." In *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007. 103-114.

- , *Disability & Isaiah's Suffering Servant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Schneider, Tammi J. *Judges*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000.
- , *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Scholz, Suzanne. *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Seibers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Shakespeare, Tom, Katherine Gillespie-Sells and Dominic Davies. *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996.
- Smit, Laura A. and Steven E. Fowl. *Judges and Ruth*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018.
- Smith, Craig A. "Reinstating Isaac: The Centrality of Abraham's Son in the "Jacob-Esau" Narrative of Genesis 27." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31.4 (Winter 2001): 130-134.
- Soggin, J. Alberto. *Judges: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981.
- Speiser, E. A. *Genesis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007 [1964].
- Strømmen, Hannah M. *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2018.
- Sylva, Dennis. "The Blessing of a Wounded Patriarch: Genesis 27.1-40." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32.3 (March 2008): 267-286.
- Taylor, Sunaura. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. New York: The New Press, 2017.
- Trible, Phyllis. "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing." In *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, edited by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. 33-69.
- Turner, Laurence A. *Genesis*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.
- Wade, Georg Woosung. *The Book of Genesis: Edited with Introduction, Critical Analysis and Notes*. London and New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1896.
- Walker-Jones, Arthur and Suzanna R. Millar, editors. *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2024.
- Walls, Neal H. "The Origins of the Disabled Body: Disability in Ancient Mesopotamia." In *This Aabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007. 13-30.

- Watson, Nick, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas, editors. *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
- Watts, James W. "The Rhetoric of Sacrifice." *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Christian A. Eberhart. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2011, 3-16.
- Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.
- Weems, Renita J. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*. Translated by John. J. Scullion. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985.
- Wendell, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1996.
- Wheatley, Edward. *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Wilkerson, Abby L. "Normate Sex and Its Discontents." *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 183-207.
- Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk*. New York: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Wimbush, Vincent L. *The Bible and African-Americans: A Brief History*. Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Wynn, Kerry H. "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives." In *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007. 91-101.
- Yamamoto, Mutsumi. *Animacy and Reference: A Cognitive Approach to Corpus Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1999.
- Yates, Gary E. and Jillian L. Ross. "Samson: An Anti-Moses Deliverer." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 178 (Fall 2021): 415-435.
- Yee, Gale A. *Towards an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics: An Intersectional Anthology*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021.

Young, Iris. *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*.

Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Younger Jr., K. Lawson. *Judges, Ruth*. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

Zucker, David J. "The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39.1 (Spring 2011): 46-58.