

“The Eyes of the Blind Shall Be Opened:” Blindness in Biblical Discourse

MA Thesis

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As Partial Requirement for Completion of the Master of Arts in Religious Studies

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September 12th, 2016

Abstract

This thesis is an examination of key texts in the Bible that feature blindness as a theme, and of the interpretation history of these texts. The aim of the thesis is to expose the manner in which the biblical texts have influenced contemporary thinking on blindness and disability more broadly, and how traditional methods of biblical interpretation have lent themselves to an oppressive and marginalizing reading of the blind characters in the biblical text that continues to be harmful for individuals who are blind into the present day. By re-reading the stories of Isaac, Samson and Saul, this thesis then argues for an alternative reading of the text that does not stigmatize the lack of sight and allows for blind characters to be active and powerful agents in their own right, rather than being reduced to the status of metaphor.

Acknowledgements

Scholars often consider themselves isolated with their work, locked in our libraries and offices, reading and researching and annotating and writing, the world safely on the other side of the door where it can't bother us. But even if research is a solitary pursuit, it is never done in isolation and upon the completion of any project, we all find ourselves with a list of people to whom we are indebted.

First I must thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Kim Parker, for his invaluable help and support in completing this project. I have never known a professor to read and return written work so quickly and the value of that alone was immeasurable to me. But between suggesting resources, helping me strengthen both my arguments and my writing and most importantly accepting my project for what it was, I could not have asked for a better supervisor.

I must also thank the Department of Religious Studies for funding my project, and for their help and support throughout my MA. Specifically I want to thank Drs. DeRoche, Stephenson and Rollmann for not only putting up with my bad attitude but encouraging it. And to Colleen Banfield and Annette Sullivan, who I ran to in a panic whenever something wasn't working. I wish to also thank Dr. DeRoche and Dr. Hawkin for their helpful comments and feedback as my thesis examiners.

To my fellow grad students, Matt, David, Scott and Jonah, for support and companionship even when none of us were pleased with where we were. We got through it, and thank you for that.

To my friend and partner Eli I extend particular thanks. When I say I did not write in isolation, you are the main person to whom I'm referring. I never imagined I would want to be in constant contact with another person, but you've proven me wrong on that front and I'm grateful for it. The amount of motivation and enthusiasm you've given me over the last year can't be measured, and you brought fun and laughter to a process that is otherwise lacking in those things, and an understanding ear to my constant complaining. Thank you.

And finally to my family, my parents Kate and Steve, who have always supported me in everything I've done, and have always encouraged me to do what I thought was best, and constantly challenge me to be better. And to my siblings Chelsea, Joshua, Quinn, Zoe, Tuesday, Gaelen, Tully, Tucker and Kipling, who every day remind me that there are more important things, and that there is always another way to think about something. Thank you to all of you.

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Introduction: Seeing is Believing?

“You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind.” (Lev. 19:14)¹

This project is a critical examination of the biblical conception of blindness and seeks to address the ways in which the legacy of biblical stories informs cultural ideas surrounding blindness. In this project, I will utilize aspects of literary criticism and disability theory to critique biblical stories of blindness and to read autonomy onto characters who historically have not been allowed such an interpretation. Blindness and sight impairment are understood to have been widespread in the ancient world, and this is possibly why they are so frequently mentioned in so many ancient texts,² including the Bible. Blindness, perhaps unsurprisingly, is a common motif in the Bible, and is traditionally understood to be a condition that is associated with ignorance, incompetence, punishment or a need for salvation.³

The ramifications of this ideology in contemporary society cannot be fully known, but the devaluing of disabled people is a multivalent social problem in the contemporary period, and one of the ways in which disability is constructed and rendered ‘disability’ is through the omission of the experiences of people with disabilities in a culture’s products such as literature and art.⁴ People with disabilities, particularly blindness, are noted frequently in the Bible, but “[d]ifferences are never merely noted,” writes disability

¹ All English biblical citations in this thesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Edition (NRSV) of the Bible unless otherwise stated.

² Martha Lynn Edwards, “Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World,” PhD. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1995. 124.

³ Louise J. Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 42.

theorist Tanya Titchkosky, “since we always notice from a particular context and we are always guided by interests.”⁵ Difference, in this case disability, is constructed by contrasting and comparing the disabled person (unfavourably) with the able-bodied person, and that difference creates marginalization and the omission of the experience of disabled people from public discourse. Therefore it is important to challenge this omission, to bring to light the experiences of disabled people by focusing on the texts about them. By reading the biblical texts through use of literary criticism and disability theory, I seek to draw attention to these narratives and to destabilize the association between blindness and ignorance, with its implied moral failing and spiritual deficiency.⁶ By querying one of the foundational texts of Western society, I intend to create space for further discussion about the capacity and competency of disabled people, which will have positive ramifications on future societal conceptions of disability.

The project involves a deep literary-critical reading of the biblical texts that utilize blindness as a theme, primarily Genesis 27, Judges 16 and Acts 9. Using the tools of narrative literary analysis, such as character portrayal and plot construction,⁷ I will examine various blind characters to determine how they are portrayed by the narrators and seen by other characters in the text. Subsequently, I will examine the implicit literary purpose of blindness in the biblical context, for example to emphasize ignorance or distance from God, and read the text in such a way that these assumptions must no longer

⁵ Tanya Titchkosky, *Reading & Writing Disability Differently: The Textual Life of Embodiment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 6.

⁶ Joseph B. Tyson. “Blindness of the Disciples in Mark,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80-3: 1961, 261-268.

⁷ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2004).

be taken as given but, rather, understood as reflective of a certain predetermined understanding of disability that is problematic at best. Therefore, this second stage of reading will be done with an explicit recuperative intent—I seek to problematize the definition of blind people as incompetent or unaware, while also attempting to situate them in such a way that they can be read as competent agents in the biblical text.

Disability theory concerns itself in large measure with the language surrounding disability, the construction of disability as a social phenomenon, and disabled people's negotiation of agency and identity in this construct.⁸ Disability studies attempts to focus on people as much as possible, but too much theory tends towards abstraction, and abstractions are not about people. Biblical stories pertain to people who are attempting to navigate their immediate worlds,⁹ and to remove the person from the discussion is to leave that person as mere metaphor. This lack of active dimension carries a lack of agency and, arguably, the most important part of engaging with disability studies is to allow for the agency of disabled people, and the space for such people to speak to their own experiences rather than having them spoken to by outsiders.¹⁰ This is precisely the focus of my reading of the biblical stories for this project. In this project a textual space will be created in which I will use stories of people as a reference point for the application of disability theory, which will allow blind characters to negotiate their own identities in their own contexts. The focus on individuals is the location at which disability theory and

⁸ For examples of this study, I direct the reader towards any of the various articles in *The Disability Studies Reader: Fourth Edition*, Ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁹ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁰ Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 6.

the Bible naturally meet;¹¹ bringing the two together will open a space for dialogue that would not be possible otherwise. It is within this space that my project will operate.

As such, my reading will be contextual but also deliberately ‘countertextual;’ I will be reading against the biblical text in order to create a space for the blind in biblical discourse to allow such characters to fully engage with their textual worlds through use of disability theory on agency. It is important to create this space because there is a clear need for a similar space in contemporary society that is at least partially informed by the biblical text. This will allow blind and visually-impaired people to renegotiate cultural narratives surrounding disability by reinterpreting the roots of these narratives.

The primary reading and interpretive strategy in this project will be focused around narrative theory of the Bible, and grounded in biblical scholarship surrounding characters, narrator, and theme. Because this is a literary study and not a historical examination, I am concerned with how the characters are presented to the reader as characters, and not necessarily with the historical social circumstances that would have led to those characterizations. Of course, the social setting of the text’s authorship is important and will be taken into consideration at times, but it is the world of the text that interests me in the present study, and the world of the reader. The world of the author is of less immediate interest to the present study. The vast majority of biblical scholarship is historical-critical, but I choose to engage with this manner of scholarship only minimally, simply because one of the main issues that I address throughout this thesis is the benevolent complicity with which historical-critical scholars have studied—or under-

¹¹ See for example Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

studied—disability in the Bible. As I will show, it is difficult to find much commentary on disabled characters beyond passive affirmations of stereotypical traits that are harmful and inaccurate. Disability studies is a relatively new field, so it should not surprise that the number of biblical scholars using its principles in their own work is comparatively small, but even what should be considered a realistic expectation of engagement with disability in scholarship is absent when surveying biblical literature. This is a very serious issue which will be discussed in detail throughout the thesis.

The structure of this thesis will therefore be as follows. The first chapter will comprise a literature review of disability. I will engage with historical understandings of disability that would have impacted the writing of the biblical text. As previously stated, I am not specifically concerned with the historical aspect of this research, but it is important to have some background in how the ideas in the text came to be. In this chapter I will also discuss contemporary thought on disability, focusing on modern metaphors and rhetoric surrounding disability and then contemporary disability theory. The second chapter will contain the methodological underpinnings of the thesis, with a survey of biblical scholarship that deals with disability, as well as a discussion of the narrative criticism that I intend to do throughout the body of the thesis. The reader may note that I have primarily discussed ‘disability’ thus far rather than ‘blindness,’ and that is because there is only a very small amount of published work specifically focused on blindness in the Bible, and most disability theory focuses on broader themes rather than specific disabilities. That said, I will include work that specifically pertains to blindness wherever possible.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters will be a sustained analysis of the ideology, metaphor and narrative of blindness in the Bible. As I have indicated above, the primary metaphor that is used to interpret blindness in the Bible, in scholarship, and in common contemporary parlance is that of ignorance or stupidity. Sight is understood as the primary form of knowledge-gathering and those without sight are therefore understood to be deficient in that area. The third chapter focuses entirely on this problem, and I read Genesis 27, in which Isaac, blind in his old age, is supposedly deceived by his wife and son to pass his family blessing onto the wrong child, as emblematic of this trope. In that chapter I will show that a reading that supposes Isaac's ignorance is not supported by the text and propose an alternate reading, which subverts traditional expectations about blindness and ignorance. Blindness being coded as ignorance in biblical literature is the primary metaphor through which this condition is understood, but there are two other points about blindness, both of which I feel follow from the ignorance metaphor, which give blindness in the Bible an interpretive arc that starts with ignorance and ends with salvation. The second point on that arc, following logically from the ignorance trope, is blindness as a punishment. This comes from the supposition that blindness was among the worst possible things that could happen to a person, and is therefore an effective punishment if intentionally inflicted upon an individual. The fourth chapter will focus on Judges 16 and the blinding of Samson at the hands of the Philistines. This is meant to be read as a form of punishment in the text, but my reading will show that in fact, it was the exact opposite. The final point on the interpretive arc I will be tracing is blindness figured as a part of the path to salvation in the New Testament. The fifth chapter will deal with the blinding of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. This is one of many

New Testament stories of blind individuals being converted to the Way and healed, a trope that extends from the previous two points and includes aspects of the ‘blind seer’ archetype, a seemingly positive portrayal of a blind individual who knows more than his or her sighted counterparts. I will, however, argue that this archetype is not as positive as it seems and is still based on the principle that blind people by and large are intellectually inferior to sighted people. In the fifth chapter, I will argue that not only does the narrative structure of a healing/conversion narrative not work in the way it is supposed to, but also that the story of Acts 9 does not function as a proper healing narrative or as a proper conversion narrative, and that a close reading of the actions of Saul and the order of events shows that it is a subversion of the very narrative that it is traditionally understood to be.

By the conclusion of this thesis, I will have offered a subversive reading of all of the dominant tropes of blindness both in the Bible and in biblical scholarship. I will have traced a three-point interpretive arc from ignorance to punishment to salvation and shown that most thinking on blindness occurs at some point in this arc. I will do this by focusing on the characters in the stories who are blind, rather than on an ableist interpretive history that has historically disenfranchised and marginalized blind and other disabled individuals by reducing them to one defining quality. Such abelist interpretations give voice to the blind only as a metaphor, and ignore the voice possessed by the people behind it. I have indicated that I will trace what I see as an ‘interpretive’ arc, a term purposely chosen, as interpretation is indeed what is happening here, as scholars and readers of the Bible interpret blindness to mean what they need it to mean. But the notion that a physical (or mental) condition needs to *mean* anything is inherently discriminatory against people

experiencing that condition. Sighted scholars do not consider the ‘meaning’ behind sight or provide explanations for why various characters in the Bible might have the ability to see, and nor, I argue, should they attempt to do so for blindness. Of course, as I will show throughout this thesis, the suggestion that biblical scholarship writ large is participating in this endeavour is somewhat difficult to support, because the vast majority of scholars simply ignore disability when it appears in the biblical text, a silence which speaks just as loudly to prevailing opinion on disability its presence in the text. My goal in writing this thesis is to encourage a dialogue that breaks that silence, that focuses on disabled people rather than the idea of disability, and that does not assume that a disability is something that needs to be ‘interpreted.’

Chapter 1: Ideological Nearsightedness: Disability in History, Culture and Theory

“Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.” (Matt. 15:14)

Introduction

The way in which disability is understood, historically and in the contemporary period, is perhaps the most important facet of the context of this thesis. This chapter is an overview of ideologies and representations surrounding disability in general and blindness in particular in the time period surrounding the writing of the Bible, tracing briefly how those ideologies were carried forth throughout European history. The chapter will finish with a discussion of contemporary academic disability theory, which seeks to situate disability as a social construction that is actualized not through the impairments that individuals experience, but through the attitudes that people have towards those impairments and the manner in which society is constructed to disadvantage people who are so impaired.

Alongside the discussion of the role disability has played in history, I will discuss one of the ways in which disability has been conceptualized as a (negative) metaphor, with blindness specifically being associated with ignorance in a culture where knowledge-gathering is clearly and firmly linked with sight. This historical and cultural linkage between knowledge and sight constitutes the primary problem encountered when reading the Bible from the perspective of the blind,¹² and the theoretical aspects of disability studies that I will discuss in the second half of the chapter will provide the main theoretical background and approach for my own study. This will include an effort to read

¹² Specific biblical conceptions of disability will be discussed in the next chapter, which will focus on theories of narrative within biblical studies and ways of reading text.

the biblical text in a manner counter to the traditionally-held understandings of blindness that have been carried by Western culture since the time of the Bible.

Disability and the Senses in Historical Thought

Though the purpose of this project is not specifically to analyse the historical understanding of disability,¹³ it is helpful to briefly consider some of the connotations that disability, and blindness in particular, held in the ancient world that provided the context for the writing of the Bible. Followed by a similarly brief history of the senses, this section will provide context for the consistently marginalized status that disabled people have endured in Western society, and specifically the persistent focus on vision as the central component of knowledge production that has consistently left blind people, as it were, in the dark.

An important discussion of the concept of ‘disability’ in certain historical contexts is held by Neal H. Walls, who points out that in ancient Mesopotamian texts, afflictions such as blindness, ‘lameness’ or paralysis, deafness, or even certain types of cognitive disabilities may not have been considered disabilities because people so afflicted could still be productive members of society so long as they were placed in positions where their impairments did not prohibit them from working.¹⁴ This reflects, for Walls, a culture

¹³ In the following chapter I will make specific comments about the uses and limits of the dominant historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible in order to explain why I do not feel this approach is appropriate for my project.

¹⁴ 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, et al. (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 17-18. It is important to note as well that the story Walls cites as evidence for this also indicates that people who are disabled are that way due to a drunken boast of a goddess, (upon which he does not comment). This is not a particularly positive portrayal of the concept of disability and clearly betrays a cultural understanding that humans should not exist in certain ways. Given that Walls does

in which people with such afflictions were not ‘disabled’ because they were still able to work and participate in their community—only an impairment serious enough to prevent that would be considered a ‘disability’ as understood today.¹⁵ Using a model credited to Martha Lynn Edwards,¹⁶ identifying disability as something which prevents an individual from carrying out their socially prescribed tasks or functions,¹⁷ Walls does an impressive job of showcasing the positions that people with what would today be termed ‘disabilities’ were able to hold in ancient societies, focusing on what they could do rather than what they could not do, that is, focusing on the ‘ability’ rather than the ‘dis-ability.’

Ancient Greek culture, the foregoer to much of Western culture and philosophy, is one of the most important places to look in order to understand much of our history with disability. Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous argues that in Greek culture, light was such an important concept that it was associated with life itself, and darkness with death by association.¹⁸ As such, being able to see was a very important condition and blindness was considered a terrible form of suffering.¹⁹ Bernidaki-Aldous, a classicist and philosopher who helped write the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*, sees a contradiction in Greek conceptions of blindness, because while on the one hand blindness appears to have been a form of suffering and negativity as mentioned above, there are

comment on the apparently undesirable nature of such afflictions despite them not necessarily being constructed as ‘disabilities,’ his study may have been enriched had he looked more deeply into the reasoning how people became impaired in the first place.

¹⁵ Ibid, 19.

¹⁶ Martha Lynn Edwards, “Constructions of Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World: The Community Concept,” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 35-50.

¹⁷ Walls, “The Origins of the Disabled Body,” 15.

¹⁸ 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), 11-26.

¹⁹ Ibid, 4.

also a number of blind poets and seers in Greek writings which positions blindness as a source of great power in certain circumstances.²⁰ However, even among those whose blindness is associated with a blessing such as foresight, dis-ability is still coded into the construction of character. Bernidaki-Aldous points out that even the blind seer Teiresias, much valued for his abilities, is still depicted as dependant on the help of others to mobilize and negotiate the world.²¹ Further, blindness in Greek literature is never a natural condition—there was great concern at the time with discovering the ‘reason’ behind such impairments, and blindness is always *caused* by something, be it divine punishment or human folly.²² Blindness, interestingly, seems to be coded differently for the actual blind than for the sighted: when a sighted person is *called* blind (or becomes blind abruptly), the metaphor applied to him or her (though generally blindness is male in this context)²³ is one of ignorance; however, actual or long-blind people are often understood to be insightful and possessing spiritual wisdom and knowledge.²⁴ When a character in Greek literature is blinded, it is done as a form of suffering, so as to achieve the necessary catharsis for the dramatic end of the story—for them to realize something important about humanity and themselves.²⁵

The metaphor in this case very much serves to reduce the blind to the status of mere metaphor, a moralizing tale for the sighted—to be blind is to suffer, to be ignorant.

²⁰ Ibid, 4.

²¹ Ibid, 37.

²² Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.

²³ There is an interesting discussion to be had about the gendered nature of various narrative disabilities, which I will touch on in later chapters. For the time being it shall suffice to say that typically in ancient literature, it is men who are blinded, and less so women.

²⁴ Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 50.

²⁵ Ibid, 190-191.

Being blind is, in some cases, to be wise, but this is what Erving Goffman refers to as a “desirable but undesired attribute”²⁶ that stigmatized people are said to possess; that is, an ability which ‘makes up,’ after a fashion, for that which stigmatizes them. Certainly the ability to see into the future or to possess extensive wisdom is valued, but it is the abilities that are valued and not the person who has the ability—if they did not possess the power to see the future, they would simply be a wretched blind person with no social value. Further, since the discussion at this point focuses on literature and characters, giving a blind character extreme wisdom or a prescient ability can and, I argue, should be seen as narrative irony in a culture where blindness is understood to be suffering in darkness or ignorance; the audience understands that the idea of a blind person having this type of ability is absurd, because of course a poor, ignorant blind person could never have this level of ability in the real world. It is in this manner that narratives of disability that present disabled people as having near-superhuman powers that are attributed to their disability continue to contribute to the overall othering and stigmatization of disabilities broadly.

One can see this trope, for example, in the blinding of Samson (Judges 16:21), who manages to kill more Philistines while blind than in the rest of his life; indeed, it can seem to the reader as if being made blind may have been at least partially the cause of Samson’s final victory. However, as I will show in my analysis of this scene in the fourth chapter, ‘positive’ images of blindness are imposed on Samson in such a way that blindness is still a punishment, or at least is meant to be read as one, something that

²⁶ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 5.

would have been better avoided, and related to the eventual death of Samson; and as well, Samson's blindness/spiritual sight is juxtaposed with the Philistines' sight/ignorance in what must be understood as a dramatic reversal of expectations. The reader must be careful not to be fooled by what appears to be a positive representation of disability; in many cases the positivity is in fact, if I may be permitted a pun, a 'blind' for the continued support of an oppressive understanding of disabled experience held by non-disabled people.

To further illustrate the prevailing cultural associations of blindness with ignorance, I now turn briefly to a relatively new branch of history that studies the history of the senses. Sensory history seeks to document the influence the senses have had, primarily in Western history. Certainly I am not qualified to survey the entire history of the senses in Western culture even if that were the topic of this thesis, so instead I will focus on a few brief points that I see as relevant to my work.

David Michael Levin writes in the introduction to *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* that "our Western culture has been dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centered interpretation of knowledge, truth and reality."²⁷ Many sensory historians (and perhaps social commentators more generally) would likely agree that vision has long held a place of prominence among the senses in Western culture. In support of this claim is the dominant theory in sensory history, that of the 'great divide,' which is postulated as a shift that occurred in the importance of the senses relative to one another when text and reading became central in the seventeenth century. Those who

²⁷ David Michael Levin (ed), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

support this argument claim that prior to the invention of the printing press and the Enlightenment era, hearing was the most important of the senses for knowledge production, because most people could not read and did not have access to texts in any case, and so most information was transmitted orally and taken in aurally. This then changed when literacy began to grow more widespread and texts became more easily available, and Western culture shifted from primarily aural to primarily visual in its knowledge-generating mechanisms.²⁸ This alters not only *how* people know things, but also *what* they know, because, according to Marshall McLuhan, when a culture experiences a shift in its sensory repertoire, that which previously had been unclear may become clear, but the de-emphasis of other senses may render difficult to understand that which may once have been clear.²⁹

Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the power that sight has had in the creation of Western knowledge structures, especially in fields of science, which value observation, empirical study, and a disciplinary eye that sees what others cannot see.³⁰ However, Mark Smith argues in his monograph *Sensing the Past* that the ‘great divide’ theory that has dominant sensory history is problematic for its suggestion that the importance of other

²⁸ For perhaps the most well-known argument advocating this position, see Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographical Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962). McLuhan is cited frequently in sensory history as perhaps the most influential scholar in the field, and one of those credited with formulating the idea of a ‘great divide.’

²⁹ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 41.

³⁰ Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2007), 23. As an interesting sidenote, the association of sight with scientific inquiry and Enlightenment rationality is coupled with sight being associated with masculinity and other, ‘less rational’ senses as being associated with the feminine. Though this does not have specific impact on my thesis at this time, it is worth noting as well that sight is a primarily male disability in the biblical canon as well, whereas disabilities attributed to women are often related to reproductive or other purely physical issues. This, perhaps, further underscores the biblical associations of sight and knowledge as well. Because the disabilities I am discussing are narrative constructions, it is worth thinking about how the way the characters are disabled interacts with their perceived social roles as well.

senses in knowledge production has not diminished as much as other scholars might claim (though Smith does not go so far as to make the claim that vision is not crucial to contemporary knowledge-building),³¹ but also that making a claim that sight was a sense of lesser importance in the pre-Enlightenment period is somewhat misleading. Sight, claims Smith, has always been an important sense for knowledge production in the Western intellectual canon, examples of which can be seen in the biblical canon,³² as well as early Christian Rome.³³ If in these times sight was an important and valued sense in knowledge production, any argument that blindness may not have been as debilitating as, say, hearing loss in the time of the Bible³⁴ cannot be said to hold water. If vision was a primary sense utilized in knowledge gathering in the ancient world, it can be assumed that those who were blind were considered to be less able to gather knowledge than their sighted counterparts, and therefore that blindness as a condition was laced with negative connotations which can be found in metaphor-laden texts that betray the attitudes of the times.

The Metaphor of Disability and the Power of Interpretation

The metaphors that cultures use to understand certain people go far beyond a shorthand description in their power. Metaphor is a powerful tool that exists not only in the realm of language, but influences the non-linguistic as well. “[M]etaphor,” write

³¹ Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 27.

³² Ibid, 22-23.

³³ Ibid, 27-28.

³⁴ Theologically speaking, deafness would likely have been considered a profound disability in particular in the Hebrew Bible, but that is an entirely separate discussion which I do not have space for in this thesis.

George Lackhoff and Mark Johnson, “is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conception system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”³⁵ That is to say that metaphor is not merely a linguistic exercise for the sake of description, but rather a foundational act of existence. Humans use metaphors at every level of comprehension and interpretation of information around them; we quite literally, to use the title of Lackhoff and Johnson’s work, *live by* them. Therefore, metaphors influence how people carry out their lives, including their interactions with other people.³⁶ Obviously, then, if metaphors surrounding certain groups of people associate them with negative traits, those people are going to be seen negatively.

The prevailing cultural metaphor for people who are blind is that of ignorance. To quote disability theorist Georgina Kleege:

The word *blind* has always meant more than merely the inability to see. The Anglo-Saxon translators of the Gospels made the metaphoric leap from literal sightlessness to spiritual or cognitive incapacity. Of course they were only following an ancient lead. Throughout the history of the language and in common usage today, the word connotes a lack of understanding of discernment, a willful disregard or obliviousness, a thing meant to conceal or deceive. *In fact, when you stop to listen, the word is far more commonly used in its figurative than its literal sense* (Emphasis added).³⁷

Kleege then goes on to list nearly a full page of common metaphors that employ blindness as their signifier, all of which relate to the idea of ignorance. The connection between blindness and ignorance is so very strong that the word is more commonly used

³⁵ George Lackhoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

³⁶ Ibid, 3.

³⁷ Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 21.

in that sense than in the medical sense as pertains to actual people who are physically incapable of a so-called ‘normal’ level of visual acuity. Metaphors of vision, of course, carry positive connotations and Kleege states that “[o]riginally *vision* was used to mean spiritual or metaphysical perception,” which later became synonymous with sight, the actual act of seeing.³⁸ The metaphor of blindness is what Naomi Schor calls a ‘catachresis,’³⁹ which, interestingly, generally refers to the misuse of a word, but in studies of metaphor is used to mean an ‘obligatory metaphor,’ a metaphor for which there is no alternative, such as referring to the *legs* of a table.⁴⁰ Blindness, for Schor, is one such metaphor, a claim she bolsters with several citations from French rhetoricians.⁴¹ The equation of blindness and ignorance may very well have always existed and it may have been seen as natural, as obligatory if one is to be understood. Kleege agrees, saying that if one were to remove from language all metaphors which associated blindness and ignorance, people would find themselves stymied, unable to express certain ideas.⁴²

On the other hand, positive metaphors for people with disabilities are few and far between. Even in more recent literature a character having a disability is often shorthand for some negative thing about that character.⁴³ Disability is hardly ever interpreted as being anything other than negative in literature and other media, and therefore it is hardly possible for people to ever interpret it as being anything other than negative in relation to

³⁸ Ibid, 22.

³⁹ Naomi Schor, “Blindness as Metaphor,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11.2 (Summer 1999): 77.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 77. I will return to the idea of catachresis as the misuse of a word at a later point in the thesis.

⁴¹ Ibid, 77-80.

⁴² Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 22.

⁴³ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 17-18.

real people, ignoring the wide variety of experiences that might be lived by persons with disabilities. In the words of Erving Goffman in his famous work on stigma, “We use specific stigma terms such as cripple, bastard, moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, typically without giving thought to the original meaning. We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one.”⁴⁴ A negative trait associated with a disability (or other stigmatized existence) is not a singular phenomenon; it comes attached with a number of other metaphors, and the negative force carried therein is a powerful force for marginalization and oppression. When a dominant cultural understanding of blindness is and nearly always has been that blindness is a form of ignorance or sin, there is little that actual blind people can do to divest themselves of the image with which they have been saddled, because correcting the problem is not a simple matter of blind people simply coming out and saying it is not true. The power behind the metaphor of ignorance, and behind the larger disability metaphor of deficiency, both physical and intellectual but also moral or ethical, is such that it cannot be simply reversed.

Marginalized groups simply do not have the social capital to effect positive change in attitudes towards them without drastic action, because they are not the people who get to control what metaphors mean. To quote Lackhoff and Johnson again, “In a culture where the myth of objectivism is very much alive and truth is always absolute truth, the people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true—absolutely and objectively true.”⁴⁵ Whether we currently live in a

⁴⁴ Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.

⁴⁵ Lackhoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we Live by*, 160.

culture where ‘truth’ is an objective fact is a topic for one more qualified than I, but the fact remains that metaphor is, after a fashion, a trap from which marginalized groups have difficulty escaping. That is why understanding the concept of metaphor is important to a study such as this—it is not simply words or ideas, but powerful concepts that shape the very nature of what people perceive to be truth that are being discussed here.

Because characters with disabilities are left to the realm of metaphor and attributed nothing beyond “formulaic and flat character traits,”⁴⁶ what happens to these characters, both thanks to the narrator and the interpreter, is that they are silenced. This happens not just narratively but in the lived world of humans as well—in the words of G. Thomas Couser, “Western society has tended to *deface* some bodies, that is to say, it has marked, marginalized and muted whole sets of people on the basis of bodily difference—along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, of course, but more generally along the lines of those somatic conditions we call illness and disability.”⁴⁷ That this happens in interpretation of biblical characters is both symptom and partial cause of the same phenomenon in relation to real human beings, who are marginalized as a result of their bodies, which do not conform to an arbitrary norm set out by those who view them as frightening, broken and potentially dangerous.

Aside from the use of the trope of blindness in the Bible, disability has retained its place as a powerful narrative metaphor in Western literature, used to showcase negative qualities about characters and as shorthand to have the reader understand that something

⁴⁶ Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 1.

⁴⁷ G. Thomas Couser, *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Life Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 9.

is wrong with or about the character in question. To quote Georgina Kleege, stories about the blind in particular “start from the assumption that blindness is both an outward sign of hidden sin and a punishment worse than death.”⁴⁸ Disability is always a negative aspect of characterization. This may be among the reasons why, unlike other stigmatized identities, disability has never suffered the specific invisibility that comes with not being represented in mainstream literature or other forms of media. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder make this point very clearly in their work, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, when they say

While other identities such as race, sexuality, and ethnicity have pointed to the dearth of images produced about them in the dominant literature, disability has experienced a plethora of representations in visual and discursive works. Consequently, disabled people’s marginalization has occurred in the midst of a perpetual circulation of their images. Curiously, a social erasure has been performed even as a representational repertoire has evolved.⁴⁹

It cannot necessarily be said that disability has been *under*represented in literature as have other marginalized identities, so much that one must say that it has been consistently *mis*represented across media, which, perhaps surprisingly, has occasioned a similar result—real people with disabilities remain stigmatized and invisible in the social worlds of the readers of these texts. Disability never appearing in a text in a positive context is a narrative strategy that serves to further stigmatize and delegitimize the experience of real disabled people by furthering negative assumptions about what it means to be disabled made by able-bodied people.

⁴⁸ Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 73.

⁴⁹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 6.

Perhaps this is not so surprising, given that the disabled literary characters Mitchell and Snyder are talking about are uniformly interpreted negatively. I say ‘interpreted’ rather than ‘written’ because, according to Mitchell and Snyder, though the writers of texts are of course influenced by their social milieux, it is in the reading of a text that the reader comes to understand disability as an inherently negative identity.⁵⁰ Their book itself as an effort to challenge the idea that anyone can ‘interpret’ disability, be it a reader or a (typically non-disabled) writer who seeks to give a specific message in their text by including a character with a disability.⁵¹ For Mitchell and Snyder, what comes of this is the erasure of actual people with disabilities when the metaphor of disability is prominent in literature to the exclusion of actual people who are disabled.⁵²

Disability, they claim, is “the master trope of human disqualification,”⁵³ because it is so consistently used as a way to describe other non-normative groups. It has been consistently narrated as ‘alien’ to the ‘normal’ human state of affairs, allowing it to be connected far past the physical ability of the human body in question and used as a commentary on larger social issues (which change depending on the time in which the text is being interpreted).⁵⁴ Disabilities are a useful way for a writer to begin a narrative because a story must be about something that is a deviation from the norm to be compelling,⁵⁵ but the interest in disability often does not go any farther than its ability to inaugurate a conflict, or to stand in for society in some metaphor of social ill.⁵⁶ Perhaps

⁵⁰ Ibid, 58.

⁵¹ Ibid, 58.

⁵² Ibid, 58-59.

⁵³ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 47, 163.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 54.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 56-58.

most tellingly is that most narrative seems to want to either fix or punish disability by the conclusion, both cementing disability as a metaphor for society and allowing the audience to not have to consider the ramifications of disability beyond the conclusion of the narrative.⁵⁷ Finally, it must also be noted that literature which uses disability as a trope or metaphor for something often represents the characters who are disabled from the perspective of the nondisabled person; that is, the experience of being disabled is mediated to the non-disabled reader by a non-disabled author through a non-disabled narrator, making it almost a foregone conclusion that the disability will be interpreted using a non-disabled and ableist lens.⁵⁸ It should come as no surprise, then, that disability is objectified in most literature in which it features as a trope, relegated to the status of object, a canvas onto which authors and societies can “project particular emotions,” or “represent specific values or evils.”⁵⁹ The result being, of course, that the person is taken out of the equation as the disability is ‘interpreted’ to be relevant to the readers. This tradition, however, can be used “to capture the way in which disability is a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society,”⁶⁰ that is to say, the way disability is represented in fiction can be (but often is not by most writers and readers) used to understand the ways in which disability is socially constructed and the effect that construction has on people. Analysing and commenting on this relationship in an effort to

⁵⁷ Ibid, 8, 57.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 18-21. Mitchell and Snyder comment somewhat humourously, for example, that one never sees a character in a wheelchair complaining about the sheer number of stairs in the world, when in reality the lack of ramps and the assumption on behalf of architects that nobody will mind just one step to get to a front door is a pervasive problem for the physically impaired that severely limits access to many places.

⁵⁹ Tom Shakespeare, “Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?,” *Disability & Society* 9.3 (1994): 287

⁶⁰ Ibid, 287.

reduce stigma and marginalization of disabled people is a primary component of disability theory, to which I now turn as the main theoretical basis of this thesis.

Disability in Theory

Disability theorists generally argue that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon, similar to race, gender or sexuality.⁶¹ Walls's assertion that in some circumstances people who were blind or paralysed may not have been considered 'disabled' in ancient Mesopotamia noted above implies that the notion of 'disability' is socially constructed rather than a biological fact. In *The Rejected Body*, Susan Wendell discusses the idea that societies tend to build themselves on the assumption that the people who will be in the public sphere are young, physically strong, males,⁶² and that 'disability' is created when, for example, a building is designed in such a way that a person who requires a wheelchair cannot access it.⁶³ In other words, if a building were not designed only for an ideal body, the 'disability' would not exist.

In reaction to a society that by its very construction marginalizes the experiences of the disabled, disability theory seeks to "examine the constructed nature of concepts like "normalcy" and to defamiliarize them,"⁶⁴ as well as to "destabilize our dominant ways of knowing disability."⁶⁵ Even though race, gender, and sexual orientation (and numerous other axes of identity) have been successfully brought into the academic sphere as

⁶¹ Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 35.

⁶² Ibid, 39-40.

⁶³ Ibid, 40.

⁶⁴ Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 38.

⁶⁵ Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4.

positions of inquiry, people who have a stake in these ‘identity politics’ still have difficulty accepting the input of disabled persons as necessary.⁶⁶ Disability theorist Robert McRuer equates being able-bodied with heterosexuality as imagined in queer theory, calling it ‘invisible’⁶⁷ in the sense that able-bodiedness is assumed to be the default, universal status of human bodies. Anything that does not meet that status is considered abnormal and, in so doing, reinforces the accepted norms of able-bodiedness.⁶⁸

I quoted Tanya Titchkosky earlier in saying that difference is produced through attention to it: attention is not neutral.⁶⁹ Indeed, the production of difference through the noting of difference is part and parcel of the process of supporting the able-bodied hegemony. Because ‘able-bodiedness’ is a meaningless term unless there exist people who are not able-bodied, disability is a necessary category. There must be people whose bodies do not match the able-bodied ideal so that they can be marginalized in order for able-bodiedness to be defined against them.⁷⁰ This renders disability threatening to the hegemony of ability, forcing what McRuer calls ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ to constantly affirm and defend itself against encroachment from the margins, to fight to keep disability identity marginalized and oppressed.⁷¹ In the context of the biblical narrative I will also show how the blind are defined against the sighted, a status which is seen as the norm and which is seen as needing defence. However, I will also read the texts for moments when this hegemony is subverted, when the power of definition shifts,

⁶⁶ Davis, *Bending over Backwards*, 139.

⁶⁷ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

⁶⁹ Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing Disability Differently*, 6.

⁷⁰ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 7-8.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 31.

however briefly, to the blind, and disability is able to take on meanings aside from those which were ascribed to it in the quest for able-bodied hegemony.

Therefore, for disability theorists, disability is said to be a socially constructed phenomenon based not upon biological differences between people but on the valuation of certain types of bodies as part of a hegemonic power system which, in turn, causes those differences to be disabling.⁷² Certainly, Wendell acknowledges that there are people with severe disabilities that cannot be mitigated by simple societal factors such as wheelchair ramps or other accommodations, but does make the argument that

many of the struggles of people with disabilities and much of what is disabling, are consequences of having those physical conditions under social arrangements that could, but do not, either compensate for their physical conditions, or accommodate them so that they can participate fully, or support their struggles and integrate those struggles into the cultural concept of life as it is ordinarily lived.⁷³

The fact that society tends to be built in a way that disallows for the inclusion of people with physical or sensory abilities that differ from the culturally constructed norm is commented upon with regards to blindness by Georgina Kleege, a disability theorist discussed above. In one article, Kleege comments that attempts made by sighted people to accommodate blind people often display a fundamental misunderstanding of what blindness is. For instance, the use of Braille, which is often too large or small to be comfortably read by the blind, assumes that, like sighted people, blind people read by interpreting shapes.⁷⁴ Even the use of Braille in elevators can be problematic; it would seem to be helpful but is less so than an auditory message informing passengers which

⁷² Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 41.

⁷³ Ibid, 42.

⁷⁴ Georgina Kleege, "Visible Braille/Invisible Blindness," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5.2 (2006): 214.

floor the elevator is on, an accommodation which is deemed too annoying for sighted passengers to tolerate.⁷⁵ Kleege argues that the simple adoption of Braille in certain areas is part of the assumption that blind people understand the world in inherently the same way as sighted people, albeit deficiently.⁷⁶ Given this, it is likely no surprise that sensory impairments such as blindness are assumed societally to have a corresponding mental deficit of some sort,⁷⁷ the implication being that because knowledge-gathering is done primarily through sight, those who are presumed deficient in sight are also deficient in knowledge, when in reality the issue only exists because society has not yet imagined a way to accommodate sensory impairment in any way that does not see it as a deficit.⁷⁸ This attitude towards the blind, I will show, is present in much of the Bible as well. It is a version of this understanding of disability that will be used in this thesis: the blind characters of the Bible are disabled not by their blindness, but by the society surrounding them which is either not able or not willing to accommodate that blindness.

Disability theory, though important to my analysis, contains elements that, if not addressed, could be drawbacks for many projects. People who label themselves theorists have an unfortunate tendency towards abstraction and the desire for some level of universality. While this may be useful at times, it tends to lose sight of people in the practice of doing so. Lennard Davis's attempt to make 'disability' the foundation of 'the novel'⁷⁹ in a similar manner to that of Mitchell and Snyder discussed above, is an

⁷⁵ Ibid, 211.

⁷⁶ Georgina Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account," in *The Disability Studies Reader: Fourth Edition*, ed. Lennard J. Davis. (New York: Routledge, 2013) 448.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Keating and R. Neill Hadder, "Sensory Impairment," *The Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 122.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 122.

⁷⁹ Davis, *Bending over Backwards*, 100-101.

interesting academic exercise and certainly casts light on the prevalence of certain tropes in English literature pertaining to disability, but does little to further the cause of disability rights for actual people with disabilities.⁸⁰ Rosalyn Darling, sociologist and author of the recently published *Disability and Identity: Negotiating Self in a Changing Society*, argues that disability writers “have assumed that positive self-identities among individuals with disabilities have been increasing along with the increasing popularity of the social model.”⁸¹ Darling points out that this assumption may not reflect reality; in other words, simply because the understanding of disability as societally constructed has become well-known amongst scholars does not mean that non-academic individuals with disabilities are aware of this or agree with the argument. While the social model of disability is academically useful, whether it is actually helping anyone remains in question.⁸²

Darling advocates a discussion of disability through a sociological model known as symbolic interactionism which, at its core, claims that conceptions of identity in an individual are societally-formed through language and reinforcement from other people. For example, a stigmatized person will understand that others, especially authority

⁸⁰ Davis acknowledges that his schema is likely to be rejected by other theorists partially for their hesitancy to give up the position of their own identities as primary, but mostly because the inherent ableism in academia and elsewhere will not allow people to consider seriously the possibility of disability as a primary category (p.101). I personally do not adopt the schema because his attempt to broaden the category of disability into incoherency as part of his project to dissolve identity politics (p.10) does not have clear practical application outside of theory.

⁸¹ Rosalyn Benjamin Darling, *Disability and Identity: Negotiating Self in a Changing Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2013), 4.

⁸² Darling also claims that disability scholarship in the humanities has been too focused on individual stories rather than larger demographic issues (p.2). It seems somewhat odd to accuse the field of being both too theoretical and too individual, but this is necessary if Darling is to proceed with the demographic analysis that she wishes to employ in her book. The assumption that a demographic or statistical survey can say anything tangible about the reality of people’s experience is unfortunately not a topic I have the resources to address. I read Darling’s text not for this material but for her methodological approach.

figures, reject aspects of their identity as normative and feel negatively towards that identity.⁸³ This model is not part of my own research, but does provide a way of understanding the impact of authority on the self-understanding of people with disabilities in society. It should not be controversial to state that both in the history of Christianity and of Western culture the Bible has been a source of considerable authority, and the attitudes drawn from it can therefore be said to have been integral in shaping both the identities of people with disabilities in the contemporary age and ideas about those identities, both positively or negatively. Such ideas are not easily dismissed, and to quote Naomi Schor, “the catachresis of blindness cannot be dissolved by ideological fiat,”⁸⁴ or rather the foundational metaphors associated with blindness since the very beginning of Western intellectual history are not going to be undermined simply by deciding that we disagree with them—too much rests on their functioning properly to be easily done away with.

That is why, drawing on work from the field of disability studies, I wish to read biblical texts in a way counter to the typical understanding of blindness as ignorance or stupidity, but done from a subversive point of view that not only problematizes understandings of what blindness is, but at the same time runs counter to conventional knowledge-gathering and provides a framework for alternate ways of building understanding of the world, de-powering the obligatory metaphor by allowing the referents to challenge the social structures which have defined them. The text carries such authority to define identity that it is crucial to do this work if the way that society is to

⁸³ Ibid, 6.

⁸⁴ Schor, *Blindness as Metaphor*, 83.

define certain identities is ever to be changed. I plan to undertake this study from the point of view that sight and knowledge need not be equated and that by limiting the definition of knowledge to sight, we limit what we can know. Dwight Conquergood also believes that sight-based knowledge production is ‘epistemologically violent’⁸⁵ for its devaluation of other ways of knowing that include the non-literate and non-textual, and claims that “Dominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing are not attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context.”⁸⁶ In other words, sight-centered epistemologies know only one way of knowing, and that which they do not see is often of equal or greater value than that which they do. Writing in the same vein, Julia Miele Rodas puts the intention behind my reading strategy most succinctly:

Given the opportunity, always get directions from a blind person. For the mobile blind know their space in a way that is literally alien to the sighted. By comparison, sighted persons are tourists in their own communities, unsure of landmarks, stopping to check street signs, never knowing exactly how many blocks from here to there, how many steps up or down, how many buildings to the corner, how many yards to the subway entrance. Sighted people are disabled by their eyes, by their seeing, relying always on that crutch that is (almost) always available. And like tourists, the sighted meander unsure of their route, scattered, stopping constantly to check their progress against that map that is the visible world.⁸⁷

Rodas understands blindness not in terms of ignorance ⁸⁸ but as an intelligence that is equal to or perhaps even superior to sightedness. Rodas explains how it is that sighted people have, over time, simply assumed that their ability to experience the world is

⁸⁵ Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *The Drama Review* 46.2 (Summer 2002): 146.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 146.

⁸⁷ Julia Miele Rodas, "On Blindness," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 3.2 (2009): 121.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 115.

superior to that of blind people⁸⁹ and, analogically, that being blind is an inferior state to being sighted. Rodas shows that the reason why sighted people cannot comprehend blindness as anything other than an inferior state of knowledge to sightedness is because the concept of “blindness” is more linguistically, rather than biologically, constructed as noted in such phrases as ‘the blind leading the blind,’ ‘blind rage,’ ‘blind faith’ and many others.⁹⁰ I will make use of Rodas’s work to offer an alternative reading of blind characters in the biblical text as being competent, intelligent actors in their worlds, who at times may even possess an understanding that eludes their sighted counterparts.

Conclusion

Disability has never been considered positively by able-bodied people. From the ancient world to today, people with disabilities have been deemed deficient and inferior to a certain body ideal that anticipates a certain level of physical and mental ability. Blindness in particular has been subjected to a powerful metaphor of ignorance and lack of intellect, and of moral and ethical failing; as sensory history shows, sight has been historically privileged as a form of knowledge-gathering and continues to be so, to the point where to be blind is logically to be deficient at knowing things. Modern disability theory has attempted to lay bare some of the underlying structures that disadvantage the disabled, showing that it is not an objective deficiency on the part of the disabled but a failure to accommodate from society at large that creates the problem. Because a body ideal is dependent on people who fall outside of it for coherency, people coded as

⁸⁹ Ibid, 122.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 123.

disabled are consistently marginalized and cast in the role of 'other.' My thesis will use aspects of modern disability theory to challenge hegemonic assumptions about disability that by nature cannot be escaped by those trapped in them. Rather than dictating what the experience of the blind must necessarily be, I will allow the blind characters of the Bible their agency, to speak for themselves on the topic of their own experience. Before that, however, I must contextualize my work and reading strategy in the larger field of biblical studies by commenting upon the ways that my field has dealt with disability and blindness thus far. It is to this effort that I turn in the second chapter.

Chapter 2: Narrative Tunnel Vision: Biblical Studies, Disability and ‘Reading As’

“Therefore it is said, ‘the blind and the lame shall not come into the house.’” (2 Sam. 5:8b)

Introduction

In this chapter I focus on the intersection between the theoretical discussions of disability outlined in the previous chapter and biblical studies, as well as my own reading strategy. The chapter begins with a discussion of biblical characters and how they are understood, as well as comments on the Bible’s narrator, a figure often overlooked but whom I will argue is a limited source of information when it comes to disabled characters, and perhaps all characters to some extent. I will then survey the limited number of works in biblical studies that have concerned themselves with disability as a central topic. This will reveal a larger concern; the general tendency in biblical studies is to overlook disability when it is present in the text or to see it as merely a metaphor, which further serves to stigmatize disability and marginalize the experience of disabled individuals, both inside and outside of the text. Some potential reasons behind this tendency in biblical studies make up the final section of this chapter, which is a consideration of the history of biblical studies and how it has, as a discipline, been formed in a certain way that tends to overlook and marginalize non-normative figures and, as such, non-normative readings of the text. Finally, I will argue for the necessity of these non-normative readings in order to bring greater depth to the field of biblical studies, but also to create space for marginalized voices to tell their stories with the same authority and legitimacy that normative voices have always enjoyed.

Understanding Characters and Narrators

Characters in the Bible, like characters in any work of literature, may vary in their level of complexity. Some may be relatively flat where others may be fuller, more robustly characterized. In 1983 Adele Berlin proposed three classes of biblical characters: ‘agents,’ ‘types’ and full ‘characters,’⁹¹ who exist on a spectrum of complexity. For Berlin, ‘agents’ are merely functions of the plot, often having little characterization aside from a name if they are even granted that. Characters who are ‘types’ tend to be possessed of one (perhaps stereotypical) trait only and may stand in for a group of people. ‘Characters’ are the fullest of biblical people, given a full range of personality traits and personal information, often beyond that which is specifically required for the narrative to function. There is merit to Berlin’s schema, though certain aspects of it have been called into question, namely the suggestion that characters may move back and forth between these categorizations, so that a character who was a ‘type’ may become a full ‘character’ later on or vice versa, as the barriers between such categories may be permeable.⁹² It has also been argued that characters who may be perceived as flat ‘types’ due to their lack of apparent characterization may not necessarily mean there is nothing to those characters, and that “reticence does not necessarily mean emptiness”⁹³ when it comes to detail about characters. The simplicity of a character may not be because there is nothing to that character, but more because the reader is expected to infer details rather than having them

⁹¹ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 32.

⁹² Fred W. Burnett, “Characterization and the Reader Construction,” in *Semeia 63: Characterization in Biblical Literature* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 1993), 18.

⁹³ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 49.

all told upfront.⁹⁴ Indeed, it may very well be the intention of the storyteller to allow for multivalent interpretations of characters by omitting certain information in the first place.⁹⁵

All of this is to say that characterization is a complex matter in the Hebrew Bible. There are many times when it will seem that certain information is missing from the narrative that might be helpful in understanding the characters, but the very nature of the way that characters are constructed in the biblical narrative allows for multifaceted interpretations of the characters in question. The text has gaps in it, possibly intentionally, and characters are constructed not only through what is written on the page, but also through the interpretive gaze of the reader.⁹⁶ ‘Gaps’ in this case are to be understood as places in the text where information is missing; the motivation behind certain actions are not explained, significant time passes without comment, characters disappear and reappear as the plot requires, leaving the untold parts of the story to speculation and inference from the readers. Marginalized characters are particularly prone to having gaps in their characterization, making gap-filling all the more necessary in understanding them. There will be times during my reading of the text where not enough information is given to properly interpret blindness with what is on the page, and in those instances the gaps will need to be filled with as much contextual information as possible, as well as with understandings culled from contemporary theory on the subject.

⁹⁴ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 322.

⁹⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011 (1981)), 149.

⁹⁶ Burnett, “Characterization,” 5.

On the topic of gap-filling, I feel it necessary to comment on the limits of such an exercise. Specifically I must respond to Meir Sternberg, who claims that gap-filling is a necessary exercise without which text cannot be properly understood.⁹⁷ I agree with this comment, especially as regards the Bible, where motivations are often left vague, large spans of time pass without remark, and characters often apparently disappear for long periods of time when they are not specifically acting to progress the narrative. However, Sternberg goes on to claim that there is also illegitimate gap-filling, which is when the process is “launched or sustained by the reader’s subjective concerns rather than dictated by the text’s own norms and directives.”⁹⁸ Sternberg specifically directs his comments at rabbinic midrash, a textual exercise which he sees as being so concerned with its own context that it loses sight of the meaning of the text. This may be fine if one is trying to analyse the Bible as an historical document, but in the context of a recuperative reading such as mine, the limitation that gap-filling must be dictated by the norms of the text completely prevents a thesis such as this from existing.⁹⁹ The norms of the text are not kind to disabled people any more than they are to any other marginalized group (and perhaps less so), and to read the text and fill gaps only with the norms proscribed by the author and narrator leaves the reader with no choice but to agree with the historical stereotypes of blind people as ignorant or stupid. There is no room for agency or an alternative type of intelligence such as I will propose and, therefore, I must reject the

⁹⁷ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 188.

⁹⁹ There is a larger argument to be made here as well on the basis that midrash is inherently concerned with interpreting text and that all interpretation is done in light of the interpreter’s context, but this is not the place for such an argument and I will leave it to scholars more versed in the field than I. It shall suffice at this point to say that it is perhaps easier to dismiss redemptive gap-filling as illegitimate when one is not a position to need such a reading in order for the text to be relevant to them in a positive way.

notion that gap-filling can be ‘illegitimate.’ If the manner in which the gap is filled can be sustained and helps to explain some facet of the narrative, or allows the narrative to become relevant to a new group of readers, I contend that any gap-filling must be considered legitimate. Of course, this raises the possibility that different people may interpret the text differently, but the biblical text is interpreted in many different ways already, and so I do not believe this reading strategy to be too radical.

In terms of method there is another biblical figure upon whom I must comment in order to fill out the remainder of my reading strategy. The biblical narrator¹⁰⁰ is a consistent figure in the text. It is the narrator who conveys all information to the reader about character, setting, plot and the way they interact with one another to create the narrative. The narrator is the mediator through which reader interacts with the characters and text,¹⁰¹ for without him¹⁰² the story cannot be told. The biblical narrator has been called “omniscient and reliable” and compared to his “essentially fallible agents” (the biblical characters) by Meir Sternberg;¹⁰³ Robert Alter has claimed that “[e]very biblical narrator is of course omniscient,” but their omniscience is displayed with “drastic selectivity.”¹⁰⁴ I question the notion that the narrator is reliable and take issue with the assumption of his omniscience as well. Gunn and Fewell have argued that in order for the biblical narrator to be understood as reliable, the text must be broken up and read only in

¹⁰⁰ I acknowledge the possibility and even likelihood of multiple narrators in the Bible, but unfortunately that is not a subject upon which I will have the opportunity to comment in this thesis.

¹⁰¹ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 130.

¹⁰² The narrator is a literary construct and not person, but it is safe to suppose that in a text coming from an androcentric world such as this one, both the implied author and the implied reader are male, and therefore a male narrator can also be inferred.

¹⁰³ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 130.

¹⁰⁴ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 158.

small units so that various contradictions can be ignored and the assumption that the narrator will use literary irony against the reader must be precluded.¹⁰⁵ If one is to read the text holistically and with the assumption that the narrator is competent in rhetorical storytelling, reliability cannot be assumed.

I wish to go a step further and argue that not only can reliability not be assumed, but that unreliability must be. Narratively speaking, reliability is not about the absolute truth of the text but the accuracy of the narrator's description of the world of the text, including the characters and their thoughts and motivations. The main point about narrative unreliability is that information that might otherwise serve the reader in understanding the text is being omitted or otherwise misrepresented, therefore making it difficult to arrive at a clear interpretation of a text. William Riggan claims that any narrator who narrates events which did not occur to him or herself is subject to "human fallibility" and is therefore always at least slightly unreliable.¹⁰⁶ This is especially the case with added social distance between the narrator and the characters in the story; as the story becomes less personal for the narrator, the more he or she must extrapolate from his or her own understandings of what it means to be the narrated character.¹⁰⁷ There are numerous occasions in which the narrator of the Bible does not provide the reader with adequate information about events—these are the gaps that are left which were mentioned above. There are places where gaps left in the text have likely created more problems than

¹⁰⁵ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ William Riggan, *Pícaros, Madmen, Nāifs and Clowns: The Unreliable First-Person Narrator*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981) 22. Riggan is discussing first-person narrators in his work, but his conclusions can be extrapolated to apply to third-person narrators such as those in the Bible as well.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

the text itself—what was going through the minds of Abraham, God and Isaac as the events of Genesis 22 unfolded? Any information at all in this regard would have curtailed centuries of vastly different interpretations of this text. There are places where points of view (generally of marginalized figures) are omitted that might have been useful in understanding a story—what did Dinah think about the events of her rape and everything that followed in Genesis 34? The point of view of the victim is one that might be expected to at least be considered, but Dinah is silenced by the text.

There are multiple places where the biblical narrator either does not know, does not care or chooses not to impart important information upon the reader. Either way, there is no way that such a narrator can be considered reliable. This is doubly so when doing a reading with an eye towards marginalized figures such as the blind, who are not only considered unimportant in the grand narrative but are also vastly misunderstood by the narrator whose job it is to represent them. I believe it is safe to say that the Bible assumes an able-bodied narrator, whom the reader must therefore conclude has limited experience with disability. The reader must, subsequently, also question the narrator's reliability when commenting on an experience which is alien to him or her. Of course, narrators leave out information all the time, otherwise all stories would be bloated with unnecessary detail and impossible to read as a result. This does not always imply unreliability, but in cases where the information that is deemed unnecessary is in fact important, such as the point of view of a certain character in a given reading, at the very least the objective, permanent reliability of the narrator should be called into question. The unreliability I argue for is perhaps best stated as a subjective unreliability in which, for certain readers from certain perspectives, the narrator's information is incomplete and

therefore unreliable. In this thesis, I will read characters as literary constructs with polyvalent meanings who are interpreted by readers, but I will also read the biblical narrator as unreliable when it comes to reporting information about certain characters in the story, necessitating at times a strategy of reading around the narrator to try to ascertain information in those gaps that have been left empty. I will question further the narrator's omniscience on the matter of blindness on the supposition that he is sighted.¹⁰⁸ I will discuss different intelligences that blind and sighted people possess, and my strategy for inverting the usual stereotype that positions blind people as stupid or ignorant in a world made for the sighted. First, however, it is necessary to survey what biblical scholars have had to say about this subject.

Many commentaries, even contemporary commentaries on the Bible, offer little in the way of discussion about the theme of blindness (or themes related to other disabilities) as presented in the Bible. In the following chapters I will outline the results of my research in detail, but for the time being I shall say that over the course of this project, I consulted dozens of biblical commentaries, and the vast majority of them have little or nothing to say about blindness when it appeared in the text. When it comes time to comment on a biblical story which contains blindness as a theme, those commentators who do at least mention it generally do not go much farther than to point out the metaphorical facet of the story, such as Samson's blindness reflecting his poor choices earlier in life,¹⁰⁹ or the rhetorical usefulness of the theme, as with Isaac's blindness

¹⁰⁸ It is, however, important to note that even if the biblical narrator is understood to be omniscient, omniscience does not imply reliability; an all-knowing narrator may still misreport or omit information. However, I believe it is more useful to question the narrator's omniscience rather than his truthfulness.

¹⁰⁹ David M. Gunn, *Blackwell Bible Commentaries: Judges* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 172.

allowing for Rebecca and Jacob to trick him into blessing the wrong son.¹¹⁰ Aside from such general comments, very little tends to be said about the subject, and when the topic is addressed, it is by writers for whom disability is a main focus—something to be singled out and analysed.

Disability and the Bible

One scholar who has done such work on disability is Saul Olyan, whose volume *Disability in the Hebrew Bible* tackles the subject of disability as a social effect within the world of the text.¹¹¹ Olyan's work focuses on disability as a socially constructed thing, one which is tied to conceptions of purity and impurity in the biblical world. One of his primary concerns is with the native term 'defect' (קוֹמָ),¹¹² which is used to describe many biblical disabilities but not all. Many conditions considered disabilities today, such as deafness, muteness or any intellectual disability, were not considered 'defects'¹¹³ but various disabilities such as 'lameness,' broken or damaged limbs, certain illnesses and, of course, blindness, were 'defects' in the Hebrew tradition.¹¹⁴

Olyan attempts to comprehend the reasoning behind some disabilities being considered 'defects' and other not, but does not quite succeed in explaining why.

¹¹⁰ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 146.

¹¹¹ Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 2.

¹¹² Olyan uses the term 'defect' in quotes only to refer to places in the text where the native term קוֹמָ is used, rather than using it to make any commentary on the value or wholeness of a body that may have such a characteristic. I will follow him in this regard.

¹¹³ Ibid, 19.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 18.

Blindness is, however, classified as a ‘defect,’¹¹⁵ creating a contrast (at least in animals) between those who have ‘defects,’ and those who are ‘perfect’ or ‘whole’ (תָּמִים).¹¹⁶ Blindness specifically is also discussed as a curse or punishment,¹¹⁷ and as something associated with ignorance.¹¹⁸ The rest of Olyan’s book deals with other issues related to disability, the most important of which for the present study are the consistent stigmatization of disabled persons,¹¹⁹ the assumption that in a utopian future disability will disappear,¹²⁰ and the belief that disability is a sign of rejection by God.¹²¹ These ‘defects’ precluded one from being considered ‘beautiful’ in Hebrew understanding, a value that is not of specific interest here; it is however worth noting that among the terms used for ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ are טוֹב and רָע respectively, which can also be translated with moral connotations as ‘good’ and ‘evil.’¹²² In the very language pertaining to disability the reader sees the assumption that being disabled is not only bad socially, but is in fact a morally inferior state to being able-bodied.¹²³

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 27-31. Olyan discusses several theories posited by others, including that ‘defects’ are that which is visible to the eye, or that which render the body asymmetrical, but ultimately there is no one theory that can cover all the afflictions which are listed as ‘defects’ in the Holiness Code.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 30. Olyan is forced here to use analogies to animals to make his point, and does admit in his own notes (p.139) that humans are generally not referred to in terms of ‘defective’ and ‘whole’ but, rather, ‘defective’ and ‘non-defective.’ He defends his point with the support of Mary Douglas’s widely-accepted defective/whole duality, and reads animals, specifically, and disability, more generally, into the Levitical code. I am unconvinced as to the usefulness of this analogy, but further reading is required.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 34.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 35. The negative connotations surrounding blindness continue in Qumran. Olyan notices that the Qumran scrolls contain a similar negativity (pp. 102-103) and, by associating the blind as well with ‘wrongness’ and opposition to the Deity, and with pollution (pp. 103-105), the scrolls compound the problem. It is clear to see that the stigma against blind people in particular seems to have increased in severity over time.

¹¹⁹ Ibid 31-35; 71-75.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 81-87.

¹²¹ Ibid, 89-91.

¹²² Ibid, 22.

¹²³ Ibid, 21-22.

In the later Qumran community, biblical conceptions of ‘defect’ and the social stigmatization that came along with it were perpetuated and even intensified, as now the blind were associated not just with ignorance but also with ‘wrongness’ and evil, opposition to the Deity and destruction.¹²⁴ The blind also came to be seen as pollutants—to be excluded because their very presence would endanger the holiness of the temple or even a city.¹²⁵ This was a novel concept—those with ‘defects’ were not seen as pollutants in the biblical context; merely as people who lacked something which others had.¹²⁶ Olyan argues that blindness may have been used synecdochically for all ‘defects,’ but it is worth noting that it is specifically mentioned time and again in the Qumran texts.¹²⁷

Perhaps it could be argued that the Qumran community was only one community and of course their texts are not part of the biblical canon; however, I argue that what is important in this example is not the specifics of what one community did with their text, but the ease with which the biblical text allowed for such an extreme progression of the stigmatization of blind people and disabled people more generally. Though perhaps stigma against a given group may naturally decrease over time, it is possible and likely that the stigma will instead grow, supported by canonical texts and religious officials. When taught to a community in an authoritative way, it seems only logical that discrimination will be continued at the very least but also intensified, until disabled people are not only different but dangerous, an ‘other’ that is to be not just avoided but perhaps even destroyed for the safety of all.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 103.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 104.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 105.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 106-107.

“Clearly disability has never been religiously neutral,” writes Nancy Eiseland in *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, “but shot through with theological significance.”¹²⁸ This can certainly be said to be the case after having read Olyan’s text, but scholars support that argument, if not in so many words. Julia Watts Belser argues that “[w]ithin literature and religious texts, disability often functions both as metaphor and mirror—allowing readers to examine critically how cultures view bodies, the limits of normalcy and the spectacle of difference.”¹²⁹ Recall that in the previous chapter I discussed Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis*, in which a primary point was that disability is used as a metaphor in literature with regard to society and its perceived dysfunctions, and that it is always narrated as ‘alien’ and ‘other’ from the normative human body.¹³⁰ In religious texts the metaphor of disability frequently does do both of these things, serving as both a commentary on what the ‘normal’ form of the human body should be and more pertinently on what normal social *behaviour* should be, as well as commenting on social dynamics on a larger scale. I will discuss all three of these subjects at length in the coming chapters. For the time being it shall suffice to comment that disability in biblical literature is never “simply an expression of the various possibilities inherent in the human body. Never is it an accident. And never is the condition seen as a positive gift of God. Rather, disability is always present for some

¹²⁸ Nancy L. Eiseland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abigdon Press, 1994), 69.

¹²⁹ Julia Watts Belser “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*, ed. Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 5.

¹³⁰ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 47, 56-58, 163.

reason or purpose.”¹³¹ This quotation from Jennifer Koosed and Darla Schumm is in specific reference to blindness in the Gospel of John, but can easily be extended to the other books of the bible as well—disability is not a neutral thing, and therefore the rhetoric behind it is in need of analysis.

Another important work that treats both disability studies and biblical studies together is *This Abled Body*, a compilation of essays published in 2007.¹³² Many of the essays in the book are methodologically useful and worth consideration, but for the sake of brevity I will not reiterate all of them in exhaustive detail. However, a few of the articles do merit brief discussion at this point. Hector Avalos, the volume’s editor, makes the argument for ‘sensory criticism’ in his contribution to the book,¹³³ because criticism, as Avalos explains, is always inherently value-laden in its focus.¹³⁴ That is to say that any type of criticism, be it historical, literary, rhetorical or any other method, places value on a specific facet of the text and uses that as the primary means of interpretation. Therefore, those interested in disabilities (especially of the sensory variety) should consider the employment of sensory criticism, that is, reading the text with attention to when one sense is valued over others.¹³⁵ One of the goals of this type of criticism is to “examine how the valuation of the senses is intimately related to the differential valuation of persons that

¹³¹ Jennifer L. Koosed and Darla Schumm, “Out of Darkness: Examining the Rhetoric of Blindness in the Gospel of John,” 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), 80.

¹³² Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper, *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature: 2007).

¹³³ Hector Avalos, “Introducing Sensory Criticism in Biblical Studies: Audiocentricity and Visiocentricity,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disability in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 47-59.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 47.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 50.

lies at the core of defining disabilities.”¹³⁶ According to Avalos’s schema, the very nature of what constitutes disability is defined first by the differences in value placed on different senses. Importantly, however, different texts in the Bible also value different senses,¹³⁷ so one cannot simply say that ‘the Bible’ has an opinion on the value of a given sense and a corresponding opinion on disabilities related to such. That is why it is so important to study numerous texts, utilizing sensory criticism, from different locations in the Bible, in order to get as wide a range of opinions as possible.

This Abled Body also contains an essay by Thomas Hentrich discussing disability and its relationship with the normative ideal (masculine) body,¹³⁸ which is an important connection to make as, in the following chapters, it will become clear that in many if not most cases, disability is seen as a ‘feminization’ of a male character, tied as it is with discourses of social power and agency, which relates in the contemporary period to Kerry Wynn’s argument that modern biblical scholarship is dominated by a ‘normate hermeneutic.’¹³⁹ This concept is attributed to Rosemary Garland Thomson, who argues that a ‘norm’ being ‘normalized’ makes it seem neutral, and that anything which does not match up to the norm is labelled as bizarre or extravagant.¹⁴⁰ There is understood to be an ideal body, against which all other bodies are measured and subsequently marginalized as

¹³⁶ Ibid, 47.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 50; 55.

¹³⁸ Thomas Hentrich, “Masculinity and Disability in the Bible,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, et al. (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 73-87.

¹³⁹ 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, et al. (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2007), 91-101.

¹⁴⁰ Rosemary Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbus University Press, 1997), 24.

a result of their failure to compare favourably.¹⁴¹ This issue exists not just in the text but also in relation to the interpreters of the text, who at times will go to lengths to avoid any interpretation that might disrupt traditionally held narratives about disability as a weaker or inferior way of experiencing the world.¹⁴² Wynn closes his chapter by arguing that disability “will need to be viewed on its own merits devoid of the modern normate hermeneutic”¹⁴³ in order for it to be properly understood in its biblical context.

Wynn’s commentary that modern biblical scholars have often overlooked disability is not one made in isolation. Bruce Birch, in response to several of the volume’s chapters, claims that the ‘invisibility’ of texts pertaining to disability to most biblical scholars is similar to the invisibility lived by people with actual disabilities in the real world and points out that “It is socially easier not to notice such persons, and I suppose it has been easier for biblical scholars to give texts referencing impairment/disability only the general descriptive treatment accorded to a disabled character that enters the story or the minimal explanation given to a reference to impairment that crops up in a text.”¹⁴⁴ Birch includes himself in that group of scholars, having previously written works that treated disability in exactly that dismissive manner despite the fact that he himself has a child who is disabled, and therefore should, in theory, have noticed such marginalization.¹⁴⁵ If for no other reason that the attention it draws to the consistent

¹⁴¹ Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic,” 92.

¹⁴² Ibid, 94-5; 98. For example, Wynn mentions scholars who argue that Genesis 32:22-32, in which Jacob wrestles with God, must be subject to editorial tampering, unwilling to accept that a disabled individual might win a physical contest.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 101.

¹⁴⁴ 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.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 186.

overlooking of disability on behalf of biblical scholars, *This Abled Body* is a valuable and important contribution to the field of disability studies in the Bible.

Another work that skillfully examines and refigures the uses of disability in the Bible is Louise J. Lawrence's recent monograph *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels*.¹⁴⁶ Of course, this is a work solely about the Gospel texts, but the method used in this book is sound and can be applied to other texts. Most important in this book, perhaps, is not the work Lawrence does with biblical characters (though this is very thought-provoking) but rather her characterization of biblical studies itself as a field. Academia, contends Lawrence, has tended as an institution to privilege sight over other senses.¹⁴⁷ Sounds are muted, scents are controlled and other sensory experiences are relegated to realms considered not useful for generating knowledge. Biblical studies follows this trend, placing sight on top of a sense-hierarchy as it positions itself as a 'textocentric' discipline.¹⁴⁸ The fact that knowledge is understood to come from sight both stems from and contributes to the continued association of the blind with ignorance in a cycle that is difficult to break. Interpreters read stories in the Bible which indicate blind people are ignorant, which reinforces cultural stereotypes saying the same, which in turn leads readers to read the Bible expecting the blind to be lacking knowledge or intelligence. It is this cycle that I hope to interrupt with this thesis.

Lawrence devotes an entire chapter of *Sense and Stigma* to blindness as metaphor, commenting immediately that one need only open any Gospel to see a clear link between

¹⁴⁶ Louise J. Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 10-11.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 16.

blindness and misunderstanding.¹⁴⁹ In many cases, Gospel characters who are blind serve only to characterize other characters—the ramifications of the disability on their own lives does not matter nearly as much as the comparison that can be made between a blind person and a disciple or a blind person and a Pharisee.¹⁵⁰ And although it could be argued that stories of the blind with positive associations abound in the healing narratives in the gospels, it bears mentioning that these are *healing* narratives, indicating that blindness is a disease that needs healing. Further, the healing narratives in the Gospels are not about helping the blind inasmuch as they are metaphors for salvation and conversion.¹⁵¹ Making blindness into a metaphor means that the actual people who are blind are lost in the rhetoric that those who are not saved through Christ are ‘blind.’¹⁵² In all the healing stories of the New Testament, no actual blind people are helped but a powerful message is given to readers about the associations of blindness with ignorance and sin, and to blind people that theirs is an experience that is valuable only in that it can be juxtaposed with the sighed experience in an allegorical binary that defines them by a lack rather than an alternative way of knowing. In Lawrence’s words

In short, defining individuals solely by a dominant trait such as blindness is akin to defining individuals exclusively on the basis of skin colour, sexuality, or gender. Such categories act not as descriptive definitions but rather as essentialist labels. Moreover this tends to reduce ‘blindness’ to nothing more than a binary opposite of ‘sight’ rather than acknowledge the embodied intricacies of sensory differences.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 31.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 34-35.

¹⁵¹ Barasch, *Blindness*, 55.

¹⁵² Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 36.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 39.

Disability studies of the Bible, contends Lawrence, has largely been underutilized as a method, being restrained primarily to serving the interests of historical criticism, which remains the dominant mode of reading and interpreting the Bible even in light of newer modes of interpretation.¹⁵⁴ What ends up happening when historical lenses are the most important in interpretation is that most studies of disability in the Bible do little more than conclude that, yes, to be disabled in biblical times was to be marginalized and stigmatized.¹⁵⁵ But, as Lawrence argues, the drive behind disability studies is not merely to comment on marginalization from a distant standpoint but rather, like feminism, the goal of disability studies is and should be to actively criticize those social structures which serve to marginalize and silence certain people and therefore perpetuate a hegemonic system in which disability is devalued in binary opposition to a constructed norm of ‘ability.’¹⁵⁶ One of the systems which must be criticized is biblical studies itself, or at least a large percentage of that field, which has historically trained its students to overlook disability in the text—to turn a ‘blind eye,’ as it were, to issues that might be facing disabled characters who appear in the Bible by simply casting their disabilities as metaphorical or symbolic, rather than issues that face real people.¹⁵⁷ Characters who are blind, therefore, are not only marginalized in the world of the text, they also become marginalized in scholarship as nothing more than a metaphor, removing any possible agency the character might have had in interpretation.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 23.

¹⁵⁵ Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma* 24.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 24-25.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 26.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 31.

The Limitations of Biblical Studies in Disability Scholarship

Early in his theological monograph on blindness on the Bible, John Hull makes the following statement: “Generally speaking, sighted people do not realize that they have a specific interpretation of the world. They just accept the world as a sighted world, because that is their experience.”¹⁵⁹ This comment, I believe, outlines one of the largest contributing issues to the near-absence of disability theory in biblical studies until very recently. Mitchell and Snyder have argued in their work on disability in literature that “what we “see” in these texts is often dependent on our own orientation or demeanour towards disability,”¹⁶⁰ meaning that the way disability is interpreted by readers is dependent on the readers’ preconceptions about disability, which themselves were likely influenced by literature similar to that which they are interpreting. The same idea seems to hold true for those interpreting the Bible. Disability has been largely ignored in traditional biblical scholarship¹⁶¹ and, when it is mentioned more than in passing, it is to comment on the stigmatized nature of disabled people in the biblical world and rarely if ever more than that.¹⁶² Disabled people in the Bible are lucky if more than a footnote is dedicated to their experience rather than how their experience can teach something to able-bodied people. One of the clearest examples of this, according to Jeremy Schipper, exists in scholarship regarding the ‘suffering servant’ of Isaiah 53, which has

¹⁵⁹ John M. Hull, *In the Beginning, There was Darkness: A Blind Person’s Conversations with the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 4.

¹⁶⁰ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 163.

¹⁶¹ Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 26.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 24.

systematically erased the possibility that the figure in question is disabled.¹⁶³ Indeed, when trying to ascertain who the historical figure of the servant may have been, typically only able-bodied people are considered,¹⁶⁴ highlighting a larger problem in which “many interpreters use the disability imagery to focus on the suffering of almost any person or group *except* those with disabilities,”¹⁶⁵ rendering disability again as nothing but a metaphor applied to the able-bodied.

Part of this ethos that commentary on disability is a metaphor only and need not necessarily apply to actual disabled people may come from the Bible itself, in which there is much disability imagery but fewer disabled people, as much disability imagery is associated with the able-bodied.¹⁶⁶ But another issue at play is the way in which biblical studies itself is conducted. Traditionally the discipline has been interested in a largely historical field of research, which certainly holds great merit, but often leaves scholars able to do little but comment on the negative nature of having a marginalized nature in the biblical world.¹⁶⁷ Biblical studies, argue Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, was invented as an historical discipline in an effort to keep the Bible relevant in a growing secular age that seemed less interested in the theological message of the text.¹⁶⁸ Associated with this, however, was a setting aside of theological or ethical questions, because it was considered ‘socially corrosive’ to try and address certain of the Bible’s

¹⁶³ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability & Isaiah’s Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 61-80.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 106, emphasis added.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶⁷ Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 24.

¹⁶⁸ Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 46-47.

stories, such as Abraham's (near) sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22), or any of the various scenes of rape or murder that occur in the text, from a moral or ethical standpoint.¹⁶⁹ Indicting God for violations of a moral code was further than most scholars were willing to go in the early days of biblical criticism, and Moore and Sherwood make the argument that commenting on the historicity of the text was 'easier' than tackling the moral ambiguity of the text.¹⁷⁰

Moore and Sherwood's characterization is perhaps slightly on the polemical side of things. However, their argument that historical criticism has dominated biblical studies to the point where even apparently non-historical methods such as those in literary studies are primarily historical in thrust is sound.¹⁷¹ What has occurred as a result of this is that many scholars are interested in *interpreting* the Bible rather than necessarily *critiquing* it,¹⁷² or if one prefers to take it a step further with Moore and Sherwood, merely commenting on the text's contents rather than even interpreting them,¹⁷³ which tacitly approves of and thereby supports and perpetuates the moral and ethical standpoints of the text by not criticising them.¹⁷⁴ This type of reading is not acceptable if one is attempting to rehabilitate a damaging text for marginalized people. Indeed scholars who wish to do such readings have recognized this, and ideological criticism of the text is widely used by feminist scholars, postcolonial scholars, queer theorists, and so forth in order to criticize

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 61.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 58.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 41; 43.

¹⁷² David J.A. Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 23.

¹⁷³ Moore and Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar*, 113-114.

¹⁷⁴ Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 24.

and perhaps renegotiate some aspects of the biblical text that have contributed to injurious attitudes and marginalization of certain identities.¹⁷⁵ As Moore and Sherwood put it:

It is acceptable to critique the Bible as an African American, for example, or as a lesbian of any race or ethnicity, because the attack is being carried out in the name of subject positions and sites of difference that are widely acknowledged as demanding respect, and nowhere more than in the academy. Such critique is often made in the name of pain, victimization, and injustice. We hear and must hear the voices of those who have been damaged by a Bible that has repeatedly lent itself to a racist, sexist, homophobic, colonizing, and other dehumanizing agendas.¹⁷⁶

I would of course add disability to that list of victimized identities, and ableism to the list of ‘dehumanizing agendas.’ But even this strategy can only go so far in a field that is dominated by a specific type of reading. Ideological criticism has been “hamstrung by the trope of ‘reading as,’” meaning one can read as a woman, as a black person, a queer person, a person living in a colonized locale, but the field has carefully structured such ‘reading as’ something extraordinary—something from the margins, and therefore outside the realm of ‘normal’ biblical studies.¹⁷⁷

It is important not to marginalize these readings. All types of ‘criticism,’ including historical or literary criticism, are defined by that which they have chosen to centre their analysis around. In academic study, ‘criticism’ is merely a term that implies focus on a particular facet of the text,¹⁷⁸ thus historical critics are most concerned with historicity, literary critics with issues such as narrative form or characters, feminist critics with the representation of women and, of course, disability criticism, if I may term it such, is focused on how disability and disabled people are represented in the text and how these

¹⁷⁵ Moore and Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar*, 117.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 74.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 117-118.

¹⁷⁸ Avalos, “Sensory Criticism,” 47.

texts might be otherwise read to include an agency not given in the traditional reading of the text. Recall my rejection of Meir Sternberg's concept of 'illegitimate gap-filling' at the beginning of this chapter, which is motivated in part by concern that what is considered 'illegitimate' is that which does not align with the historical context of the document and therefore the traditional thrust of biblical scholarship. If any type of criticism is simply that which is focused on a specific issue, then prioritizing certain criticisms over others or marginalizing certain types of criticism as 'illegitimate' compared to the dominant method of reading is inappropriate. Ignoring disabled people in the text or simply understanding their inclusion as a metaphor for the betterment of able-bodied people is a dangerous activity that further marginalizes an already marginalized group of people by stripping them of personhood status, removing any agency they might have once had.¹⁷⁹

In the previous section I spent a significant amount of time on a small number of works because there are few others that treat biblical disability in such a way. The majority of authors writing on the topic of disability in biblical literature are doing so solely from the standpoint of historical biblical critics. This is a valid and valuable viewpoint that has produced many insights and brought to light the previously understudied fact of the marginalization of disabled people in biblical discourse, but such work does not go far enough and falls into some of the traps I have just outlined. One need only read through Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper's collection *Disability*

¹⁷⁹ Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 31.

Studies and Biblical Literature,¹⁸⁰ for example, to note that most of the contributors to this volume cite little if any disability theory, preferring to refer to other biblical scholars. They thus tend to overuse Olyan's definition of disability rather than those offered by disability scholars.¹⁸¹ There is a glaring lack of engagement with critical disability theory among many biblical scholars who are interested in disability and the Bible, and it is this lack that I hope to help remedy with my work in this thesis.

The purpose of this study is not to simply comment that blind people were marginalized in biblical times—that is a self-evident point that need not be argued at length. Rather the purpose is to read stories in such a way that there is room for blind people to negotiate a space for themselves, to challenge assumptions about blindness and to make clear that the knowledge systems used by the blind are equally valid but entirely separate from, the sighted experience. To quote Louise Lawrence once more on the importance of a method such as this:

Rather than swallowing the metaphorical discourse surrounding illness and sense-impairment wholesale, one needs to acknowledge that ableism itself is a fiction, particularly when dealing with sources from the ancient world, where corporeal diversity was 'the norm' rather than the exception for many. Whilst the study of the particular subculture and ideologies of the raft of people suffering from ophthalmic complaints in the ancient world may be lost to us, nonetheless, the multiple identities and minority group consciousness of sightless people today can offer important insights into their own reception of texts which use their condition as an ideological symbol. Historically, sightless people have had little chance, with various social and political powers silencing their voices, to articulate their own alternative sensory experiences. It is in listening to such voices however, that

¹⁸⁰ Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁸¹ This is not to say that there is anything problematic with Olyan's definition; indeed, it seems that he is one of the few who may have engaged with disability theory or at the very least the sociology of disability in formulating his definition. It is, however, notable that those who study disability in the Bible apparently prefer to cite another biblical scholar rather than the myriad of disability scholars who make the same argument in works dedicated to that very topic.

a playful and at times cathartic refiguring of sightlessness in literature and history can potentially be achieved.¹⁸²

It is in this spirit that I move forward with this project. However, I do so not in hopes of refiguring the blind characters, but allowing them to refigure themselves, reading agency onto characters traditionally denied it and giving them a space to define their own identity to the reader. My intention is that revealing alternate ways of reading texts that feature disability will finally allow for blind characters to be let out of the margins and footnotes of biblical studies, and to be defined by more than their defining adjective.

Conclusion

This project draws first and foremost from the field of biblical studies, which will be reflected in my method and approach. I read from a narrative standpoint, with a focus on characters, narrators, theme, plot and reliability, in order to fill gaps that I have identified in the text as regards characters who are blind. My reading is also inherently critical of my own field, as I challenge the lack of commentary on issues relating to disability in the larger academic tradition of which I am a part. Biblical studies is dominated by a historical-critical model of research, which I do not feel allows for much useful study of disability in the text, beyond affirmations that disability was not a valued experience in the time of the writing of the Bible. Because this information is not particularly useful in a redemptive reading, I prefer instead to work with something more akin to feminist or queer theory of the Bible, focusing on a specific marginalized population. I am not, however, content for this manner of reading to remain a marginal

¹⁸² Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 41.

reading; that it would be considered marginal in the first place is part of the problem in which disabled people are consistently assumed to be a deviation from the norm. It is that norm that I challenge, the notion that a disabled person's difference inherently implies the idea of 'less.' I object to the fact that the primacy of historical-critical methods in biblical studies have led to a dearth of research in areas pertaining to marginalized populations in mainstream research, and over the course of my work in this thesis I intend to show that the inclusion of this work is of vital importance. It is with this in mind that I now turn to my analyses of the text and its metaphors, and the work of destabilizing a dominant mode of thinking that has prevented blind and other disabled people from participating in the discussion about their own identities.

Chapter 3: The B(l)inding of Isaac: Blindness as Ignorance

“Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of the Lord?” (Isa. 42:19)

Introduction

There is perhaps no biblical motif related to blindness as prevalent as the association with ignorance. The connection between sight and knowledge gathering has been heavily ingrained in the history of Western society¹⁸³ and, in that context, a concomitant connection between blindness and a lack of knowledge seems almost inevitable. While it is true that there is continuity between ancient and classical views of blindness and more contemporary views,¹⁸⁴ it is also true that what we as readers ‘see’ in a text is heavily informed by our own pre-existing understanding of various phenomena. A confirmation bias therefore exists in that a collective understanding of blindness as metaphorical for ignorance causes a collection of biblical readers to read that metaphor onto the text, leaving them unable to see any other way of interpreting blindness but through their societally-dominant schema. The very difficulty of discussing understanding or knowledge in many contexts without the use of sight-related metaphors is testament to the breadth of the issue I am speaking of. In this very paragraph, I, in a work dedicated to this specific problem, have been forced to use multiple sight/knowledge metaphors merely to outline the primary issue. The reader can certainly comprehend, then, the sheer power that this metaphor has to control our thinking on blindness. Biblical studies is dominated by a ‘normate hermeneutic’¹⁸⁵ that cannot help but see the disabled body as an

¹⁸³ Lenin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, 2.

¹⁸⁴ See Kossed and Schumm, “Out of Darkness,” 77-92; Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 50; and Lackhoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we Live By*, 50.

¹⁸⁵ Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic,” 92.

aberration from the non-disabled norm, and which influences interpretation, generally in a way that disadvantages disabled characters and people.¹⁸⁶ It is in the theme of blindness and ignorance that this ableist ideology can be made most apparent and therefore unmasked.

In this chapter I look at the motif of blindness as a form of ignorance, with a specific focus on the story of Isaac blessing Jacob in Genesis 27. This story is, as I will show, frequently overlooked as an Isaac story, usually included as part of the Jacob narrative, and Isaac's role in the story is often diminished or not even commented upon by biblical scholars. This is the exact reason why I have chosen it—and Isaac—to be the subject of this chapter: Isaac's blindness contributes to what many see as his impotence as an agent in the larger biblical story, when in fact he is a crucial part of the patriarchal narrative that forms Genesis. In examining Isaac's blindness and the scholarship on it, I intend in this chapter to provide an alternate reading of blindness not as ignorance, but a form of knowledge that is equally valid to sight-based knowledge, and which biblical scholars ought to, if not see, then try to understand in their interpretations of biblical stories.

Isaac's Blindness as a Sign of Ignorance

There is one biblical story about Isaac's blindness: Genesis 27. This is the story in which Isaac blesses Jacob instead of Esau, apparently thanks to deception on the part of Jacob and his mother Rebekah. The story tells of Isaac, believing the day of his death

¹⁸⁶ This is true, one could argue, for most if not all of modern Western culture. However, I will limit discussion to my own field for the sake of brevity and relevance.

near, seeking to bless his elder son Esau and sends him out to hunt and prepare game for Isaac to eat as he does (Gen 27:1-4). Rebekah overhears and concocts a plan to trick Isaac into blessing her favoured son Jacob, and has Jacob prepare food for Isaac from the goats of their own flocks, and dresses him in animal hides to fool the blind Isaac into thinking that Jacob is his elder brother (Gen 27:5-17). This plan works and Jacob is given the blessing, much to the consternation of both Esau and Isaac (Gen 27:28-38). Esau even laments the apparent inevitability of Jacob's deception (Gen 27:36), which is interesting given that the plan to trick Isaac was Rebekah's, not Jacob's, on the basis of a prophecy she had been given on the twins' birth (Gen 25:23). Isaac's blindness, in a way, is almost incidental to the story at hand—just a narrative tool to allow him to be tricked. It can be read as a further indicator of Isaac's general lack of power in the text: despite being “very wealthy” (Gen 26:13) and having a “great household” (Gen 26:14), he is often understood as being weaker and less important than the other patriarchs.

It is not hard to understand why this might be the case when reading the biblical text. Isaac appears in very few stories and in almost all of them he is passive, ignorant of the realities of his situation and easily controlled by everyone around him. It would seem, given the way the narrator has constructed Isaac up until this story, that his blindness is a logical narrative extension of his relative lack of agency compared to other characters in the Genesis narrative. In nearly all of the important events in Isaac's life, he is either clearly ignorant of his situation as expressed through dialogue (Gen 22:7; 27:2) or simply not told important information by other characters, such as his father's servant going to get him a wife without telling him (Gen. 24:66). Rebekah apparently does not see fit to tell Isaac about the oracle concerning their two sons (Gen 25:33), though I will later

contest the reading that Isaac was unaware of this prophecy. For those who wish to read Isaac as an ignorant, passive figure who “can scarcely be called a memorable personality in his own right, [and] is important chiefly as a link in the patriarchal chain”¹⁸⁷ and exists merely to bridge Abraham and Jacob, it is easy to assume that the story of Isaac blessing Jacob is simply one last example of Isaac’s impotence before the Genesis narrative shifts focus to Jacob.

Indeed, many clearly are of this opinion, even if they do not state such in their work. Numerous commentaries exist on the book of Genesis, and the vast majority of them have little or nothing to say about Isaac. Many do not grant Isaac a section or chapter, moving right from Abraham to Jacob and including Isaac’s stories at the beginning and ending of the chapters relating to those figures.¹⁸⁸ Most commentaries do not comment on Isaac’s blindness,¹⁸⁹ and those that do make mention of it only in passing¹⁹⁰ or to emphasize his ignorance¹⁹¹ or to comment as Hermann Gunkel does on blindness being “the precondition for the subsequent deceit.”¹⁹² Contemporary biblical commentators seem to want Isaac to be weak and ignorant,¹⁹³ no matter how they must stretch narratorial power to do so. For example, John Gibson insists that Isaac’s blindness

¹⁸⁷ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007[1964]), 182.

¹⁸⁸ See for example John C. L. Gibson, *Genesis: Volume 2* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) and Speiser, *Genesis*.

¹⁸⁹ See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) as an example.

¹⁹⁰ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 139.

¹⁹¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 212.

¹⁹² Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted by Hermann Gunkel*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 302. Gunkel’s use of the word ‘subsequent’ suggests not just a correlation but a direct line of consequence between blindness and deception, if not an inevitability—Isaac is blind, therefore it logically follows that he will be deceived.

¹⁹³ Gibson, *Genesis*, 151-154.

is a sign that he is on his deathbed,¹⁹⁴ despite the fact that he does not die until years later, which forces him to assume misreporting of chronology by the narrator, or an editor.¹⁹⁵ This is a clear example of the normate hermeneutic as Kerry Wynn describes it,¹⁹⁶ with biblical scholars going out of their way to find textual reasons to uphold the idea of a disabled character's weakness, for naturally, according to this ideology, a disabled character cannot function as a whole person.¹⁹⁷ Nobody wants to discuss Isaac's blindness as a living condition experienced by a person, but all are quick to use it as evidence of his ignorance, weakness, and perhaps even moral failing.¹⁹⁸ However, this negative image of blindness held by contemporary scholars does not exist in a vacuum, nor does it exist only in relation to the Isaac story. Before I can go on to challenging the ideological construct of blindness that exists as a part of this normate hermeneutic, it is first necessary to look at how blindness and ignorance are associated in the larger tradition of biblical texts, and in biblical scholarship as well.

Blindness as Ignorance in the Larger Biblical Tradition

Genesis 27 is not the only place in the Bible where blindness and ignorance are conflated. It is a fairly common theme throughout the Bible, and though I do not intend to chronicle every instance of such a metaphor, there a number of notable examples to which I wish to draw attention, beginning with the creation myth itself, in which after

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 151.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 152.

¹⁹⁶ Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic," 93-94. In fact, Wynn specifically mentions interpretations of the Isaac story when discussing this hermeneutic.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 92.

¹⁹⁸ Gibson, *Genesis*, 154-156; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 212; Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 277-278.

eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the first couple’s “eyes [are] opened” to the knowledge they had previously lacked (Gen. 3:7). With an immediate, primal link between sight and knowledge, it later does not surprise when one reads a text such as Exodus 23:8a, which reads “you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials.” The Hebrew word the NRSV translates as ‘the officials’ is פְּקֻחִים, which has a more literal meaning ‘those who see.’ The implication is clearly meant to be a clouding of judgement, the metaphor of blindness telling the reader clearly that a person who has accepted a bribe will make bad or incorrect decisions, just like a blind person who lacks the perception to make good choices.¹⁹⁹ This command is repeated in Deuteronomy 16:19, with the difference that פְּקֻחִים is replaced with חֲכָמִים, ‘those who are wise,’ which furthers the association between blindness and a lack of judgement or intelligence: being blind, even (or perhaps especially) metaphorically, can cause even those who were previously wise to act with ill judgement. With the correlation between blindness and ignorance being made clear in the Law, it is, first, safe to assume that this metaphor was a common one in the culture in which the text was written and, further, it is not surprising to see it crop up so commonly in other biblical material.

The most common place where the motif of blindness as ignorance appears in the Hebrew Bible is in the prophetic literature. In the book of Isaiah, for example, blindness

¹⁹⁹ There is also a moral commentary at play here, which becomes obvious in the second half of the verse where the blinding of officials is coupled with the fact that bribes “subvert the cause of those who are in the right” (Exod. 23:8b). The word וַיַּסְלֵךְ, ‘and subverts,’ uses the waw consecutive to follow directly from the verb ‘blinds’ in the beginning of the verse and to clearly parallel it. וַיַּסְלֵךְ can also be (and commonly is) translated as ‘and perverts,’ and given that this term is meant to parallel ‘blinds,’ it is hard not to read them together and arrive at a moral pronouncement about blindness, which may not be surprising given that this is a verse about a morally inappropriate act—but the choice of metaphor is telling. Blindness as a moral issue is the topic of another chapter; however, it is important to be aware of the mixed connotations many of these metaphors have.

frequently appears as a metaphor to describe Israel or its people who are not appropriately following the Law. This theme is particularly strong in chapter 42; the reader sees that God will “lead the blind by a road they do not know” (Isa. 42:16). The blind need help, and to be led, because they cannot see and therefore cannot travel safely on their own. This seems to be a positive metaphor; God claiming that he will help the people, figured as blind, on the right path. It is followed by the condition that idol-worshippers will not be helped (Isa. 42:17). It is interesting to see blindness portrayed positively, though it is important to note that it still makes people dependant and unable to find their own way despite outside help. It was helpful to the writer or editor of Isaiah to use the metaphor in this case because the ignorance of the blind as per the metaphor works in his favour to showcase Israel’s need for God. The very next verse starts a section decrying Israel as both deaf and blind, claiming that “he sees many things but does not observe them” (Isa 42:20).²⁰⁰ The blindness here is clearly not a literal ophthalmic condition but a metaphorical blindness, an ignorance of God that will lead to punishment.

Chapter 44 of Isaiah includes a comment on idolatry as blindness, saying that people who worship idols “do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand.” (Isa. 44:18), the ambiguous subject of the sentence could be the idols themselves but is more likely those doing the worshipping. That is to say that ignorance of the Law is a form of blindness in prophetic thought. At the risk of prolonging the point, the theme returns in Isaiah 56:10, in which the sentinels of Israel are “blind, they are all without knowledge,”

²⁰⁰ Literally “You see many things.”

and again in 59:10, in which the prophet laments that “We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.” Here we also see blindness associated with death, which occurs both in the Isaac story (Gen. 27:2) and is a common theme in certain other ancient cultures, such as Greece, for example.²⁰¹ A similar association between blindness, ignorance and death appears in Lamentations 4:14, where the punishment for iniquity is both blindness and defilement with blood and filth. Similar associations can be seen in Zephaniah 1:17, Zechariah 10:17 and Deuteronomy 28:28. Of course, this material also generally sees blindness used as a punishment for wickedness, an overlapping theme to which I shall turn in the next chapter, but the link between blindness and not knowing is too obvious to be ignored.

Blindness as ignorance is also a theme throughout the New Testament material, where the same metaphor is often couched in terms of a healing narrative, in which Jesus restores the sight of a person born blind (an interesting comment in itself as people are often blinded later in life but rarely born that way in biblical thought) and the healed person praises Jesus as Lord, and the reader is meant to understand that the blindness was both a physical and spiritual ailment, possibly even caused by that person’s ignorance of the Truth. Jesus first heals the blind in Matthew 9:30, after being asked for mercy by two blind men.²⁰² As is common in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus then tells the men not to tell

²⁰¹ Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 11.

²⁰² Interestingly, the men do not ask for healing, but rather for Jesus to ‘have mercy on’ (Ἐλέησον) them. Jesus’s evident thinking that this is a request for their impairments to be removed is in line with both the logic of New Testament metaphors of blindness and the motivation of the Matthean narrator in telling the story, but is highly suspect from a disability-critical perspective.

anyone, or more specifically, to see that nobody knows (Ὁρᾶτε, μηδεὶς γινώσκέτω), which they do not do (Matt. 9:30-31). There is of course an intended irony in the text when the men call Jesus ‘son of David,’ something which only the narrator has done until this point, and a phrase which is frequently associated with Jesus healing the blind. These blind men know who Jesus is well enough to ask for his mercy. A second irony is created when Jesus orders them to ‘see that nobody knows.’ That is, now that these two can see (and know), they must make sure that others cannot. Similar stories are repeated throughout the Gospels, contrasting blind people who know something of Jesus’s nature with sighted disciples who do not.

One might argue that blindness and ignorance are therefore not equated in the New Testament, but other places just within the Gospels make it clear that this is not so. Several times in Matthew 23 Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for being ‘blind’ (Matt 23:16; 17; 26), meaning that in their adherence to the letter of the Law they have overlooked the true meaning, and also implying a moral corruption of their power. Luke 6:39 has Jesus asking rhetorically “can a blind person lead a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?” Regardless of what the meaning of the question is, the answer is meant to be obvious—of course a blind person leading another blind person will end in misfortune for both, as between the two people, neither of them possess the knowledge necessary to navigate the world without falling into pits. The Fourth Evangelist quotes Isaiah 6:10 in John 12:40 to inform the reader that “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart so they might not look with their eyes and understand with their heart,” equating seeing and understanding in an effort to explain why many Jews did not believe Jesus was the

messiah.²⁰³ In Romans 2:19, Paul equates being a teacher to being a guide for the blind, and the writer of 2 Peter tells his reader in 1:9 that those who do not possess knowledge (among other qualities) are “nearsighted and blind.” The equation of blindness and ignorance is clear across New Testament material, and the use of blindness as a narrative trope to show knowledge is a common tactic in ancient literature that inverted the common metaphor for the sake of irony.²⁰⁴ In addition to promoting blindness as ignorance, all of this also ties in strongly with the related concept of blindness as a redemptive tool, which is a primarily New Testament refiguring of the metaphor and which will be treated thoroughly in the fifth chapter.

I do not wish to overstate the issue here: blindness is not the most common metaphor in the biblical canon, especially in the Hebrew Bible. It does, however, appear with a frequency that is worth noting, and a large number of times when it appears, it is in this context as a metaphor for ignorance and lack of understanding of God’s will. The figurative use of blindness as metaphor is far more common than the literal use of blindness as a medically-defined condition, both in the Bible and the contemporary period,²⁰⁵ for of course sightedness is ‘the norm’ and a narrative must have a reason for having a character who would stray from that norm.²⁰⁶ There is value placed on the various senses, and that value is related to the value that is placed on individual people—lacking a valuable sense constitutes a lack of value in that person.²⁰⁷ The linking of

²⁰³ Blindness in John also often has an anti-Semitic lean to it. For more information on this topic, I refer the reader to Koosed and Schumm, “Out of Darkness.”

²⁰⁴ Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 50.

²⁰⁵ Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 21.

²⁰⁶ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 42

²⁰⁷ Avalos, “Introducing Sensory Criticism in Biblical Studies,” 47.

blindness and ignorance is a damaging metaphor that disallows the intelligence and agency of blind people in the real world, because the people with the power to determine metaphors have the power to determine what we as a culture think of as objectively ‘true.’²⁰⁸ It is for this reason that I now turn to a reading strategy that emphasizes the knowledge and power of the blind character who is in some ways archetypal of the trope: Isaac, the blind patriarch, lied to throughout his life, used and manipulated and seemingly powerless. It is on him that the reading will now focus.

Isaac the Powerful: Refiguring Blindness as an Alternate Form of Knowledge

It is obvious from the foregoing analysis that the metaphor of blindness as ignorance is pervasive in the biblical canon. Mitchell and Synder argue that that “disability inaugurates the act of interpretation.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, having a disabled character present in a text encourages the reader to interpret the story through the set of metaphors associated with that disability. Isaac’s blindness is not a footnote, but rather is among the first pieces of information the reader receives in this story, and when read with traditional schemas about disability, it is therefore a safe assumption that a blind character’s story will in some way hinge on that character not knowing or understanding something. And that safe assumption is exactly what biblical scholars throughout the ages have done, relegating Isaac to the status of little more than a segue between the able-bodied Abraham and Jacob.²¹⁰ But simply reading blindness as a metaphor for Isaac’s larger perceived

²⁰⁸ Lackhoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we Live By*, 160.

²⁰⁹ Mitchell and Synder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 6.

²¹⁰ Jacob is able-bodied for a time until he himself is disabled at the ford of Jabbok in Gen 32:25. Jacob’s disability is not the focus of this chapter or this thesis, but it is interesting to note that scholars throughout

passivity makes it difficult to see the lived reality of his disability, to see the person behind the metaphor,²¹¹ and the ways in which that person is capable of navigating his own world. The writer and narrator of the story chose to make Isaac blind and, even if this was done simply as an extension of Isaac's established character, to simply overlook Isaac's blindness as a lived reality is contributing to the overall problem of disability being used negatively to stereotype and stigmatize certain individuals. Given that what a reader 'sees' in a text is dependent on their own preconceptions about disability,²¹² it stands to reason that taking this fact 'as given' in its form as a metaphor is therefore going to result in Isaac being read as weak or ineffective. It is for this reason that it is important to read Isaac as a blind character in this story, without this interpretive ableist schema, to see how the events of the story might look (or more appropriately, sound, smell, taste and feel) to Isaac, rather than simply deciding, as able-bodied scholars, what the experience of a blind person should be and dismissing that in a few lines of commentary.

The entirety of the story in question revolves around assumptions of Isaac's ignorance. The most obvious is the assumption that he is unaware of Rebekah and Jacob's deceit, but even this is based on the thought that he is unaware of a much earlier event. At their sons' birth, Rebekah was given an oracle that her two sons would be nations and the elder would serve the younger (Gen 25:23). If Rebekah ever told her husband about this,

the ages seem to have struggled to find a way to argue that Jacob was not, in fact, disabled by God during their wrestling match, citing everything from editorial interference to the notion that somehow he was not permanently disabled by the injury given to him. Those who do see Jacob's disability as part of the story and as permanent end up making commentary along the lines that every person is imperfect in some way before God, and Jacob's disability is a metaphor for this experience. It seems likely that what is ultimately occurring here is discomfort with the idea that the founder of Israel could have been 'less' than an able-bodied person.

²¹¹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 58.

²¹² Ibid, 163.

the reader is not informed and Isaac's dialogue certainly seems to suggest he is not aware of the oracle. However, it must be noted that his actions end up fulfilling the prophecy, and though there is no place in the text in which the reader is implicitly told that Isaac was aware of the oracle, there is similarly no place in which the reader is told that Isaac is *unaware* of the oracle; there is no information either way, and the narrator uses Isaac's blindness as an ignorance metaphor to guide the reader into thinking a particular way in absence of any proof. There is, however, no substantial reason to believe that Isaac was unaware of his sons' destinies, any more than there is reason than to believe there was. There are, therefore, two ways in which this gap in the text could be filled, and the traditional solution has to allow the metaphor of blindness as ignorance to stand. If one argues against that trope, an entirely different reading of the text comes to the fore.

I argued earlier that the popular interpretation of this text relies on the assumption that Isaac is ignorant, but it might be more accurate to say that it relies on the assumption that Isaac, through his blindness, is *disabled*. If a disability is defined as an impairment which hinders expected function in society,²¹³ it is not clear that Isaac is disabled in this instance. Though he does seem to be less mobile than at previous times, there is no indication aside from his own claim to be near death (which is questionable in its truthfulness, taking into account how much longer Isaac does live) that Isaac is incapable of carrying out his responsibilities as patriarch—in fact, this story is all about him carrying out one of those duties as he designates an heir. Though being blind is a 'defect' (מח) in biblical parlance, I discussed earlier that it may not have been considered a

²¹³ Edwards, "Constructions of Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World," 35-50.

disability in a situation in which Isaac was still able to participate in his society.²¹⁴ Even if the reader still wishes to think of Isaac as ‘disabled,’ however, he is still clearly capable of doing what needs to be done. To show Isaac’s power in the situation, the reader should take a good look at the results of his actions—through which Jacob ends up with the family blessing and is therefore named as the next patriarch, just as God intended.

Though commentators are quick to say that Isaac must not have been aware of God’s plan,²¹⁵ it is rather telling that what was foretold did in fact come to pass, and that Isaac was the one to ensure that this would happen. Isaac is the character around which this entire narrative pivots; the narrator may wish the reader to see Jacob as the primary figure or Rebekah as the main actor, and perhaps they are, but it is ultimately Isaac’s action that allows the patriarchal story to move forward.

Isaac’s name means ‘he laughs,’ and laughter certainly seems to characterize his life in many ways. Both his father (Gen 17:17) and his mother (Gen 18:12) laugh when they hear (from no less an authority than God) that they will bear a son in their advanced age. After Isaac is born, his mother Sarah demands that Abraham banish Isaac’s half-brother Ishmael and Ishmael’s mother Hagar after seeing Ishmael “playing” (רָצַח) with Isaac (Gen. 21:9). The exact meaning of רָצַח is not entirely clear,²¹⁶ but the word stems

²¹⁴ Walls, “The Origins of the Disabled Body,” 17-18.

²¹⁵ Gibson, *Genesis*, 154.

²¹⁶ The NRSV translates the term as ‘playing,’ which seems innocuous enough and makes Sarah’s response seem an overreaction. Other translations use ‘mocking’ to suggest that Ishmael was making fun of Isaac rather than playing with him. The same word, however, is also used in Gen. 26:8, the only other instance in which it appears, to describe whatever Isaac was doing with Rebekah that caused Abimelech to conclude that they were husband and wife rather than brother and sister. In that context the word is often translated as ‘fondling’ and carries a clear sexual connotation, which has caused some scholars to suggest that Ishmael may have been engaging in sexually inappropriate behaviour with his young brother. The majority of scholars disagree with this interpretation (see for example Alter, *Genesis*, 103), as do I, but given the ambiguity of the word it does bear mentioning.

from the same root as Isaac's name (יִצְחָק), and it is this action which damns Ishmael. Later on, Isaac is seen יִצְחָק with Rebekah, which puts an end to his ruse of pretending she is his sister while in the presence of Abimelech (Gen. 26:8). And while there is no laughter in Isaac's most famous story in Genesis 22, the events of that chapter, the sacrificial switch at the end, the narrative irony of Isaac not knowing what is happening and the comparisons of Isaac with a lamb all could allow the Akedah to be read as a particularly dangerous joke God is playing on Abraham. From Isaac's point of view (entirely absent in the Akedah), it must have seemed as though either his father or his God were having fun at his expense—especially when Abraham leaves the mountain without him.²¹⁷ It is hardly surprising that the next time the reader sees Isaac (Gen. 24:62), he is living separate from his father. Given the laughter (usually at Isaac's expense) that characterized most of Isaac's life, it is not surprising that Jacob and Rebekah sought to play their father and husband for the fool as so many others had apparently done, especially now that he was blind and infirm. But in a reversal that (if I may be excused the expression) they did not see coming, this joke is Isaac's and he is the one who is left laughing in the end.

Briefly I wish to draw attention to Jacob's name as well. What might have possessed a parent to name their child something that means 'deceiver?' Unlike Isaac, Jacob and Esau were not named by God prior to their birth, so it stands to reason they were named by their parents (Gen. 25:24-26). One might be able to argue that in fact, Isaac was aware that Jacob was going to attempt to deceive him at some point in the

²¹⁷ The text of Genesis 22:19 states only that Abraham left the mountain.

future. Isaac does not display precognitive power at any point in the Genesis narrative, which is why I argue that the entire deception was not only done with Isaac's knowledge, but that he in fact willed it so. Regardless of whether Rebekah chose to tell Isaac about the oracle about their children, Isaac had good reason to not wish Esau to be his successor in the patriarchal line. After all, Esau had made life bitter for his parents (Gen. 26:35) by marrying two Hittite women in a culture where being or marrying a foreigner is arguably the quickest way to find oneself excluded from the covenant. It seems odd that we as readers are truly expected to believe that Isaac would allow stewardship of the covenant to be passed on to someone who would pollute the bloodline after so much effort was put into making sure that he himself carried the promise through an endogamous line of descent (Gen 17:16; 20:12; 24:3-4).

So why not simply allow the inheritance to pass on to Jacob? Perhaps because Isaac is notoriously non-confrontational, avoiding conflict with non-Israelite powers to the point where he is willing to put his wife in danger when asked about her by Abimelech's men in Gerar (Gen.26:7), before leaving Gerar without comment when he is told to (Gen. 26:16). He then proceeds to move a number of times again when his people dig wells which are then contested by local shepherds (Gen. 26:19-22). Rather than contesting the banishment and arguing for his own claim on the wells his people had dug, Isaac instead gives the wells the rather passive-aggressive names Esek and Sitnah, moving farther and farther from Abimelech until finally a covenant of peace is struck between them that does little for Isaac but serves to keep him away from Gerar. (Gen. 26:31). It is immediately after all of Isaac's adventures in Gerar that the narrator tells the reader about Isaac's bitterness towards Esau's foreign wives and immediately after this

that the story of the blessing takes place. Given the way Isaac has comported himself up until this point and the lengths to which he has already gone to avoid conflict with outside forces, it should not be surprising that he would wish to similarly avoid conflict within his own clan.

At some point in between the issues in Gerar and the blessing, Isaac goes blind (apparently) as a result of old age. The narrator does not impart upon the reader any information about how much time has passed or when Isaac became infirm, but to the reader of the text it certainly seems sudden that one chapter Isaac should be moving about, digging wells and founding cities, only to be bedridden and blind a mere three verses later. The timing is, perhaps, convenient for Isaac—if the suddenness of the event in the narrative implies a suddenness of onset of Isaac’s visual issues, perhaps his family is still adjusting as well to Isaac’s new blindness and to what he is and is not capable of now that he no longer has the faculty of sight. Jacob had already schemed to trick Esau out of his birthright (Gen. 25:29-34), so it is a safe assumption that he would have wished to do the same with the paternal blessing as well, and it could not have passed Isaac’s notice that Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau (Gen. 25:28).²¹⁸ Could Isaac have known with certainty that Jacob would try to deceive him? Even bearing in mind the name that was given to his son, the answer must be no, Isaac could not possibly have been absolutely certain about the outcome of this particular ploy—had Jacob not

²¹⁸ Though Isaac is stated to have loved Esau more, it is worth noting that Esau shares many traits with his banished uncle Ishmael, such as his proficiency with hunting, whereas Jacob’s preference for staying in the tents seems more similar to what the narrator has imparted to the reader about Isaac himself. God’s plan notwithstanding, Isaac may well have recognized in Jacob the qualities that God had wished for in Abraham’s successor when he had allowed Ishmael to be banished from the kin group and the main body of the covenant and chosen Isaac as the child of promise. Isaac’s decision to continue that trend is perfectly logical under the circumstances, regardless of his personal opinion.

attempted to hone in on Esau's blessing, the responsibility of carrying out the covenant might well have gone to Esau after all. Isaac, in many ways, is taking the exact same gamble Abraham took in Isaac's childhood when God asked him to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22). God has told them already that their youngest son is to inherit the covenant and rule over their eldest, and now it is up to God to ensure that. Rather than God testing Isaac with his son's life and the covenant in the balance as happened in Isaac's childhood, here Isaac is testing God—with his son's life and the covenant in the balance. Abraham was trusting God to stop him from killing Isaac, and here Isaac is trusting God to stop him from blessing Esau. But the notable difference is that in this situation it is Isaac who has initiated the test. Isaac states aloud that he intends to bless his elder son (Gen, 27:4), which can easily be read as an open challenge for God to stop him from doing that.

And God passes Isaac's test. Not recognizing Isaac's cunning, Rebekah and Jacob conspire to steal the blessing. The conspiracy is rather elaborate, including fooling Isaac on several different levels, which should give pause to any interpreter who wishes to cast Isaac as not being particularly intelligent—if he were not smart, why the need for so many levels of deception? Wynn points out that many scholars have discussed the fact that Isaac was not able to lift the blessing from Jacob and transfer it to Esau as a weakness, when in fact that should function as a testament to how powerful Isaac's blessing was.²¹⁹ Finally, Jacob's clear fear of recrimination and willingness to carry out the deception only after Rebekah assures him the blame will fall on her should indicate to the reader that Isaac is still the powerful and feared patriarch in his family group. Despite

²¹⁹ Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic," 94-5.

their concerns, however, Rebekah and Jacob make the mistake that Rodas explains sighted people frequently make about blind people—that Isaac’s visual abilities are a ‘deficient’ form of ‘normal’ visual acuity, and that there is a corresponding mental deficiency present as well,²²⁰ when in fact Isaac is just as competent, if not more so, at knowing and navigating the world as his sighted family. The fundamental misunderstanding in this story is not that Isaac does not understand what is happening in the tent, it is that his family does not understand what his blindness means and what it does not mean in terms of his competence.

And all that aside, as I argued before the reader should consider the consequences of Isaac’s actions rather than what interpreters and scholars might want to infer about his mental capacity through reading his impairment. Through this deception, Isaac confers the blessing upon the proper heir as ordained by God, avoids conflict with his elder son, sets up the scenario through which Jacob must leave to marry a woman of their own family line, ensures the safety of covenant—all without leaving his tent or once being hindered by his blindness. To say Isaac’s blindness makes him ineffective or weak is to read very narrowly indeed, and to subscribe to an ableist interpretive agenda that aims to marginalize the experience of disabled people by casting them in a negative light. Isaac’s impairment is never once disabling for him and in fact he uses it to subvert the notion of compulsory able-bodiedness that prevents impaired persons from participating fully in society, by placing himself in the centre of a vital narrative and causing his entire able-bodied family to act according to his wishes.

²²⁰ Rodas, “On Blindness,” 122.

Conclusion

Isaac's blindness is often used to code him as ignorant and weak, but as I have shown in this chapter, that is only one potential reading, and one that falls into various traps set by an able-bodied, ableist scholarship to stigmatize persons with disabilities. Rather than assessing a blind character by what he or she must be unaware of, it is much more useful from the point of view of disability advocacy to consider what they are aware of and how they might be perceiving the world differently, and more importantly, the outcomes of that person's actions—the yardstick by which able-bodied people are measured. Isaac may not have been the strongest patriarch in the Genesis narrative, but by using his own disability to convince those around him that he was weaker than he was, he was able to carry out God's will in a way singularly his own. To assume as many biblical texts and critics do that being blind makes one weak or stupid is a fallacy built on a normate hermeneutic that is structured specifically to disadvantage disabled people in scholarship, media and public perception. Reading the text through the lens of this normate hermeneutic allows the reader to see Isaac as weak, easily deceived and overall rather unimportant in the patriarchal narrative that begins the story of Israel. However, reading without that filter and allowing for Isaac's story to come through as that of a person regardless of perceived ability creates a new image, one of a man who expertly navigates his family issues and what is expected from him as the child of promise, a man who may not be able to see, but is perfectly capable of knowing. It is time we discard the image of the blind person groping along the city walls and replace it with one of a man who, regardless of his capacity for sight, confidently leads others down the path.

Chapter 4: An Eye for an Eye: Blindness as a Biblical Punishment

“The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges” (Job 9:24)

Introduction

When characters in the Bible are suddenly struck blind as part of their narrative arc, it is fairly likely that this as a result of some misdeed on their part. Numerous characters are blinded as a punishment in the biblical stories, either by God himself or by human forces seeking retribution for some injury or insult. Possibly the most dramatic tale in the Bible which includes a vengeful blinding is that of Samson in Judges 16. Though it is often eclipsed by the other events of this story, Samson’s eyes are gouged out as part of his eventual capture by the Philistines after Delilah’s deceit. After this he is taken prisoner and made to grind grain in prison for the entertainment of the Philistines, Samson seeks revenge for the taking of his eyes but apparently not for any other wrongs done to him, destroying their temple and killing everyone inside, including himself. This chapter uses the story of Samson’s blinding, a detail often overlooked by scholars, as a means of investigating blindness as a biblical punishment. This theme, as I will show, is heavily related to, and highly dependent on, the construction of blindness as a physical manifestation of ignorance or stupidity as discussed in the previous chapter. Blindness as a punishment also, especially in the Samson story, plays into a theme in literature wherein those who are blind (or otherwise disabled) are possessed of some extraordinary ability that allows them to function as effective agents in their worlds despite their blindness. While blind, Samson does more damage to the enemies of Israel than he ever did as a sighted person, thus rendering his disability meaningless in this schema.

However, a literary trope that allows a blind character to succeed ‘in spite of’ his or her blindness is not an affirmation but a denigration of the status of blind people, who are only allowed to be considered ‘useful’ if there is some other, possibly supernatural, ability they can display to fill the void left by their sight. Therefore, this chapter will reject this reading of the text. I will focus instead on the use of blindness as a punishment and its ineffectiveness as such in the Samson case, pointing to a larger destabilization of the trope. To resort to disabling an individual as a form of punishment is a statement about the valuation of disabled and non-disabled people in a given society, and Samson’s subversion of that punishment can be read as a clear criticism of that stance, as I will show in this chapter. Prior to that, however, it is necessary to consider the biblical tradition of blindness as punishment, and to read the Samson story again from the perspective that doesn’t privilege sight. It is to these two efforts in sequence that I now turn.

Blindness as a Punishment from God

It should come as no surprise that blindness is often a punishment for misdeed. One finds this trope throughout the Hebrew Bible, starting as early as Genesis 19, in which the citizens of Sodom who wish to ‘know’ Lot’s visitors are struck blind by the two messengers of God after they threaten harm to Lot and his guests (Gen. 19:10). This allows for Lot and his family to escape the city before it is destroyed as part of God’s larger punishment for the rest of Sodom’s iniquities. This blindness with which the citizens of Sodom are afflicted will be repeated throughout many other biblical stories—they are blinded, suddenly reduced to groping around in the darkness, unable to locate a

door which they had been on the verge of breaking down only moments before (Gen. 19:9-10). This is a sighted person's conception of blindness, a complete lack of ability to navigate world of sight without assistance,²²¹ a sudden reduction to a state of helplessness that leaves people unable to carry out basic functions on their own when, in reality, most real blind people should have no trouble locating a door which is directly in front of them. It is this idea of a groping, panicked blindness that the reader of the text sees repeated throughout the biblical stories with this theme.

As mentioned previously, blindness being used as a punishment often overlaps with blindness as a form of ignorance as discussed in the previous chapter. Given the prevalence and widespread acceptance of that trope, it should surprise that there is often an element of poetic justice to blindness given to someone as a punishment—often the punishment seems to be resultant from some ignorance on behalf of the punished party. Samson himself could be read as an example of this, as his lack of intelligence does seem to be a factor in his own downfall (it could certainly be read that his apparent inability to refuse his secrets to Delilah is born from a clear lack of understanding of the situation). Another example would be Eli, the high priest during Samuel's time, whose sons defiled the temple, ate the choice meat from the sacrifices and generally comported themselves poorly as priests of the Lord. Eli was either unaware of this or powerless to stop it, and the last the reader sees of Eli is that he is struck blind in his old age and, in surprise when hearing about the capture of the Ark of the Covenant and the death of his two sons all at

²²¹ Rodas, "On Blindness," 118.

the hands of the Philistines, falls from his chair and breaks his neck (1 Sam. 4:17), an ignoble end for a figure who ultimately was a failure at the position given to him by God.

Given the connection seen last chapter between blindness and idolatry, it should not come as a surprise to see blindness, often in its metaphorical sense, effected as a punishment for idolatrous behaviour, especially in the Hebrew Bible's prophetic material. Kelsie Job points out that false prophets who turn people towards idols in Isaiah are struck blind by God, and therefore prevented from ever grasping the true works that God is trying to show the world.²²² This is as a result of the false prophecy but also because that falsity was what the people of Israel wanted to hear. They did not want prophets telling them they were living their lives incorrectly and that God required them to change their ways, and so God (metaphorically) blinded their prophets, punishing the prophets and the people of Israel by giving them exactly what they wanted.²²³ The blindness in this case is more a metaphorical blindness than a physical one, but the lack of reliable prophecy leaves the people groping about in the darkness in imagery similar to that discussed above, "like drunkards and the blind, unable to perceive and hear what God is telling them or might tell them."²²⁴ It is evident, therefore, that God is the author of this inability to perceive the world properly, inflicting upon the straying people of Israel a metaphorical blindness that matches their perspective on the world. Blindness as a punishment is seen in other prophetic works as well; in various instances God promises to

²²² Kelsie Job, "To Open Eyes That Are Blind . . . ' [Isa 42:7]: Senses, Idolatry, and Unity in Isaiah," MA Thesis (Seattle: Seattle Pacific University Library, 2014), 15. Retrieved April 23rd, 2016 from <http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=etd>

²²³ Ibid, 15-16.

²²⁴ Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 38.

blind the people of Israel as in the previous examples, such as in Zephaniah 1:17, in which it is explicitly stated that God “will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord,” Many of the examples given in the previous chapter in regards to blindness as ignorance overlap with this concept. I will not repeat all those examples here, but the frequent overlap between these two tropes is certainly worth noting, and will become very important in the following chapter as the arc of this trope finds completion in the narrative of blindness as a road to salvation.

The New Testament is rife with blind people, and though the reader never sees most of these people blinded, on occasion there are discussions of blindness as a punishment. The Pharisees ask Jesus whether a man born blind is so afflicted because of his own sin or the sin of his parents (John 9:2), making it clear that his blindness cannot possibly be a simple biological condition or the result of some medical process, but must necessarily be as a result of sin—that is to say that either he or his family is being punished for something through his blindness. Many of the people who are blind in the New Testament are cured of their blindness through faith in Jesus (for example see Matthew 9:27-31, Mark 10:46-52 and Luke 18:35-43), which ties clearly into Jesus’s salvific narrative that people can be free of punishment for their sins through him. This ties into the focus of the third chapter, which is blindness as a redemptive tool, and will be discussed in detail at that time; for now it shall suffice to say that by the time of the New Testament, there was an established culture of assuming that blindness (and other disabilities) was caused not necessarily through natural processes but as a result of God’s displeasure with a person.

What should be very clear by this point is that this trope of blindness as a punishment is not only heavily tied into the previously-discussed usage of blindness as a metaphor for ignorance, but that it is in fact an extension of that same concept. People who are blinded in the Bible are often blinded because of a crime that could reasonably be tied to ignorance or stupidity on their own part, or at least that is the way that it is meant to appear to the reader. In the case of Samson as well, the argument can definitely be made that he is being punished for mistakes stemming from his own failure to recognize what God expected from him. My own argument will be somewhat different from this, but before I come to that, it will be necessary to take a close look at the Samson story itself.

Samson's Blinding as Punishment for Misdeed

Samson is blinded as part of the larger effort on behalf of his life-long enemies the Philistines to remove a large threat to their people. He falls in love with Delilah, who may or may not have been Philistine herself,²²⁵ and this is used against him as the Philistines bribe Delilah into seeking out Samson's weakness so that they can bind, capture, blind, imprison and torture him. From the perspective of the biblical writer, the Philistines are the antagonists of this story, capturing one of God's judges and treating him in this manner. However, from the Philistines' point of view, Samson must clearly be a villainous figure, one who kills indiscriminately at the slightest provocation with both unrestrained violence and alarmingly clever tactics (Judges 14:19, 15:4-5, 15:15). The

²²⁵ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 69.

only real wonder is that the Philistines did not kill Samson the minute they had him in their grasp. So even if Samson's blindness cannot be considered a punishment from God, surely it is a punishment from the Philistines, vengeance meted out in the name of justice.

Or is it the case that Samson's blindness was not divinely ordained? First of all, the reader of the Bible must be aware that God is the power who gives and takes away sight (Exod. 4:11), and as has been shown above, God using blindness to punish those who have committed misdeed or violated his covenant is not an unusual occurrence. 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. Breaking his vow to God as a Nazarite might well have caused his anger—Samson was not to allow any razor to come upon his head, after all (Judges 13:5), and in telling Delilah his weakness (Judges 16:17), he has implicitly allowed this to happen. If that were not enough, previously Samson has eaten unclean food (Judges 14:9), a violation of the vow that cannot be passed off as someone else's doing,²²⁶ though it is worth noting that the vow specifically stipulated that “no razor is to come on his head” (Judges 13:5), not that Samson himself may not cut his hair. If the vow 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 “left him” (Judges 16:20).²²⁷ It is not inevitable that the reader should conclude that Samson's blindness is resultant from God's

²²⁶ Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel, the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 180.

²²⁷ Incidentally, the reader will note that Samson “did not know” that God had abandoned him, and in the very next sentence he is blinded.

displeasure, but there is more than enough information in the text for the reader to make this inference if he or she wished.

It is interesting that the Philistines should have chosen to blind Samson rather than committing any other insult upon him, and indeed, it does not seem that his 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 reader to once again fill in the gaps. I argue that the reason why this punishment is chosen (with no textual explanation) is twofold: first, blindness is seen as both a punishment and a profoundly negative state of being in which to exist, and therefore is an adequately terrible thing to inflict upon one's enemy, which 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 Samson *saw* (וַיֵּרֶא) a Philistine woman at Timnah and wanted her for his wife (Judges 14:1-2). This was orchestrated by God, who was seeking a pretext to attack the Philistines (Judges 14:4), but nonetheless all of the ensuing conflict between Samson and the Philistines was as a result of him 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. On the level of character, blinding as a punishment makes sense, 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 (Judges 16:30). As one final comment on this matter, Alter indicates that gouging out one's eyes was also sometimes "a punishment for a rebellious vassal."²²⁸ 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.

The removal of the eyes is often a metaphor for castration.²²⁹ It is interesting to note, in light of this information, that blindness is a universally male disability in the Bible—it is never women who are blinded²³⁰ and if one wishes to read blindness as a sign of forced feminization, it may very well be easy to understand why. Given that Samson's hair is removed, which is also a symbolic castration,²³¹ 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,²³² and the danger posed by women, as well as a caution on the necessity of men controlling women.²³³ The gender issues inherent in the Samson story are outside of the scope of this work and I will leave them to scholars more versed than I in feminist methodology, but it is worth noting again that blindness is not a

²²⁸ Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 192.

²²⁹ Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 24.

²³⁰ 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.

²³¹ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993), 79.

²³² *Ibid.*, 75-76.

²³³ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 62.

neutral physiological condition, 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.’

It might perhaps be unsurprising at this point to state that contemporary biblical commentators have been largely silent on the topic of Samson’s blinding. Of the commentaries read for this project, Robert Alter’s *Ancient Israel* is the only work that even makes mention of Samson being blinded, and that is only to mention the Freudian castration metaphor mentioned above, and to point out the fact that blinding was a punishment for disobedient vassals.²³⁴ One particularly notable instance to which I wish to draw attention is Robert G. Boling’s commentary on Judges, in which he exegetes the Samson and Delilah story verse by verse in admirable detail, with attention to the meanings of various words and narrative structures, but completely omits not only mention of Samson’s blindness, but the entirety of verse 21 in which the event takes place.²³⁵ This is quite literally the only verse of the story which does not receive mention in Boling’s commentary, and the omission cannot have been accidental.

²³⁴ Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 192.

²³⁵ Robert G. Boling, *The Anchor Bible: Judges* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 248-252.

It is possible that Boling merely believed that the verse was so straightforward as to not require any explanation, which in itself is a comment on how he considers blindness as a biblical trope, but there is a more intriguing possibility to which I wish to draw attention. In his monograph on Samson, Gregory Mobley comments that Samson is often overlooked by biblical commentators, especially those who are concerned with source criticism of the Hebrew Bible, as he is difficult to categorize into any of the acknowledged authorial traditions.²³⁶ As a result of the difficulty in categorizing him, Samson is therefore often omitted from many works, according to Mobley. And it is 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 case of Ishmael, Esau or even John the Baptist in the New Testament.²³⁷ This character is generally a foil for a more ‘civilized’ character who will ultimately triumph, rather than the primary actor in God's plan. But in this story that expectation is inverted and the ‘wild man’ is the primary character with whom the audience is meant to identify. It seems natural that biblical readers used to certain archetypes would find Samson somewhat challenging to sort, and therefore uncomfortable.

And yet in the very work in which Mobley makes this argument, there is not a single mention of Samson's blindness. Is the reader to believe that in an otherwise very thorough character study of Samson, the fact that he is blinded near the end of his life is

²³⁶ Gregory Mobley, *Samson the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 3-5.

²³⁷ Ibid, 44-45.

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 an otherwise very thorough commentary on Judges. Taking Mobley's argument that Samson is omitted because commentators are uncomfortable 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 previous chapter) is overlooked not because it is not important but because the prospect of discussing it makes biblical commentators uncomfortable. Until recently, disability was not a topic discussed 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.²³⁸ Not talking about the blindness is the very problem this thesis seeks to address, and so with that in mind, I now turn to my reading of Samson and his blindness.

The Inefficiency of Blindness as a Punishment

My reading of the Samson story hinges upon 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

²³⁸ Birch, "Impairment as a Condition in Biblical Scholarship," 185.

hunter/gatherer society and a pastoral one,²³⁹ 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 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 penchant for choosing 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 (Judges 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—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). Many of the 'heroes' of Bible are people who would, in the culture in which the stories were

²³⁹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 417.

transmitted, have been considered unusual choices. Yet God seems to clearly prefer such individuals when selecting those through whom God's intentions will be carried out.

There is, therefore, a strong message running throughout the biblical texts²⁴⁰ 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.²⁴¹ 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 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. 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 delve into this further 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 overthrows the very notion that blindness should be thought of as a punishment. In

²⁴⁰ I have given examples only from the Hebrew Bible, but this theme of unlikely heroes is carried over into the New Testament as well.

²⁴¹ 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, but the racial and ethnic politics of the Bible are far outside the scope of this reading and are best left to scholars more competent in that field than I.

destroying the temple, he is also shattering any claim to comprehensibility that this idea may have held.

This destruction begins with three mistakes made by the Philistines. 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 (Exod. 4:11; Ps. 146:8), and though one may recall my comment above that it is very possible God authored Samson's blindness as punishment for Samson's breaking of his Nazarite vows, 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 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 consider their misdeeds, find their humanity and through suffering, grow as a human being.²⁴² 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 (Judges 16:26-30).²⁴³ Though his plan

²⁴² Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 190-191.

²⁴³ 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? Recall Darling's comments that theoretical exercises in disability theory do not necessarily lead to a measurable increase in positive self-identities among disabled individuals (Darling, *Disability and*

seems clever as many of Samson's plans have in the past, it is no less impulsive than the others. Narratively speaking, as well as on the level of character, 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 sighted person's mistake when considering the blind. In the words of John Hull, "As is so often the case, they [the Philistines] exaggerate the impact of his blindness."²⁴⁴ The castration metaphor becomes apt in this circumstance; the Philistines believe they have neutered Samson. 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 so 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 (Judges 16:25).

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

Identity, 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.

²⁴⁴ Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness*, 17.

there are going to be pillars supporting to the bulk of the building. “Given the opportunity,” writes Rodas, “always get directions from a blind person.”²⁴⁵ 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 need to 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 was assumed to be weak and ignorant, because he was blind. The Philistines and the boy²⁴⁶ 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 the blind are capable of. And so 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 to have made. He does not yet have his strength back; the mere regrowing of his hair was not enough to rectify his vow having been broken. Only as he moves to put his hands on the pillars does

²⁴⁵ Rodas, “On Blindness,” 121.

²⁴⁶ 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.

Samson ask God for his strength back, “only this once” (Judges 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. And Samson must have been concerned, for surely he must have known that God once said to Moses that “no one who has a blemish (מִדָּם) shall draw near, one who is blind or lame” (Lev. 21:18).²⁴⁷ But God does accept the ‘blemished’ Nazarite, Samson does have his strength returned for one last moment,²⁴⁸ 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 he or she will remember that God was the original author of all of these events (Judges 14:4) and that the strike against the Philistines was the intention all along. The text is very clear, too, to tell the reader that Samson’s parents did not know about God’s hand in the events that were unfolding with their son, 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.

²⁴⁷ This proscription applied to priests specifically, but it is not hard to intuit the people of Israel following God’s valuation of humans and applying such terms to all individuals with a ‘blemish’ (מִדָּם).

²⁴⁸ 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.

Samson's potential consent to his own blinding presents an interesting interpretive perspective, though I do not categorically argue that this is the case. 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, and indeed at this juncture the final point of my argument should not come as a surprise, Samson's biggest liability in life was always his ability to see. He saw the woman at Timnah who he desired for a wife (Judges 14:1), which set off the string of violence. He saw a prostitute in Gaza (Judges 16:1), which led to him relocating to the valley of Sorek, where he met Delilah and his eventual capture. Hull points out that Samson, in his early conflicts with the Philistines, exhibits traits typical of a sighted person, including his ability to act as an individual and his intimate knowledge of the countryside.²⁴⁹ These traits bring on successes that only serve to further incense the Philistines against him. That Samson can see is the single most dangerous thing about him, both to himself and to everyone around him. But in chapter 16, Samson notably does not 'see' (וַיִּרְאֵה, as in the other instances) Delilah, but 'loves' (וַיֶּאֱהָב) her (Judges 16:4). Has he already become aware at this point 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. Above I 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

²⁴⁹ Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness*, 11.

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.

Through these events, the radical misperception that blindness works as a punishment is laid bare for the fallacy that it is. Samson, God and the text's narrator have made quite plain that blinding a person doesn't work in the intended manner and more, that disabling a person as a punishment is not an acceptable way to behave. After all, it is the Philistines who are punished as the end result of this story. The reader of the story will know that God is the one who has the authority, in the biblical text, to control who becomes blind and who can see (Exod 4:11), and so first and foremost it can be said that God is displeased at the Philistines' belief that they can usurp this authority. But the added narrative touches of the Philistines' downfall happening directly at the hands of the man they have blinded indicate a larger point, which is that disability generally speaking cannot be said to be a punishment in the eyes of God. The people of Israel may not have received that message clearly, as will be shown in the next chapter, but through Samson the reader of the Bible can perceive a clear shift in the ideology surrounding blindness—a breakdown in the punishment narrative. If Samson's blindness was not a punishment in truth, then the reader must wonder about the other examples of this trope being employed as well. If the Philistines were punished for blinding a man, then perhaps the reader must at least consider the possibility that this is an indictment not only of their behaviour in this particular instance, but of able-bodied people who presume to interpret disability for the disabled more generally. Samson's ability to function in society was improved vastly upon his blinding. Sighted interpreters of the Bible have had little to say about this, and

perhaps one of the reasons for that is because a different valuation of human experience, one that does not privilege sight at all but rather the opposite, one in which blindness is not a punishment but a blessing, is completely incomprehensible to them.

Conclusion

Even among the unlikely heroes of the Bible, Samson may seem particularly unlikely, but that is only because his is a different story than what many readers might come to the Bible expecting to find. Samson's is a story of a man chosen from birth to be set aside from his community, to be the man of God that Israel needed. He is ruthlessly violent, sexually aggressive, a slave to his desires, and highly dependent on his sight as his main means of navigating the world. But it is not through his physical prowess that God uses his talents—Samson does not win battles on the battlefield as do other judges, he does not score political victories or have grand ambitions. Samson is a man whose only desires seem to be his own, not what is best for the people around him. And yet God chose this individual to be his judge, his champion, the tool through which the Philistines would be wounded. The Philistines may well have believed, when they captured Samson, that blinding him was a punishment for all the harms he had inflicted upon them. But ultimately it was they who were punished, for their hubris, their assumption that a blind man was no threat to them. God allowed Samson to be blinded not as a punishment but as a way of showing that He can accomplish his goals through anybody, that anybody, regardless of ability, can accomplish great things under the right circumstances. In fact, it is quite clear that Samson was a more effective judge after his blinding, an open challenge to sighted interpreters of the text who want to overlook that part of the story and an open

invitation to blind readers to find their own experience in the text rather than the experience sighted writers and readers have expected them to have.

Blindness is frequently used as a punishment in the biblical text—there is no way around this simple fact. But the Samson story shows that this need not always be the case, that not all those who are blind are blind because God is punishing them for some misdeed. And the story shows that blindness need not be a negative aspect of a person's existence either. Being blind did not make Samson weak or useless, and in fact it was something he was able to use to his advantage and ultimately achieve both his and God's goals in the destruction of so many Philistines. In Samson the image of the fumbling, disoriented blind person who gropes about in the dark for that which is right in front of him or her falls apart, and we see a blind man who has a good knowledge of his surroundings and uses it to maximum effect. Yes, Samson does feel that the blindness imposed upon him by the Philistines is an injustice that requires recompense, for he had lived his entire life as a sighted person and was not yet fully prepared to embrace his new reality. God gave Samson the strength to do what God had wanted all along, not as an approval of the notion that blindness needed to be avenged, but to show the sighted Philistines and the sighted readers of Judges that a blind individual was not defective or in need of punishment, but rather in need of support in order to fully carry out their part in God's plan. God, it seems, has reconsidered the position that "no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame" (Lev. 21:18), and makes this plain to all in embracing Samson after his blindness, not as a defective and unclean person but as a Nazarite and a judge of Israel.

Chapter 5: Seeing the Light: Blindness as a Salvific Tool

“Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement, so those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.’” (John 9:39)

Introduction

The final point in the conceptual narrative of blindness in the Bible builds from blindness being a metaphor for ignorance as seen in the third chapter, as well as blindness serving as a punishment, often for that very same ignorance, as sketched in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I will show how those two points, combined with common classical tropes of blind characters holding wisdom that sighted characters do not, lead logically into a conception of blindness serving as a redemptive tool in the New Testament narrative. The primary character through whom I will examine this trope is Saul of Tarsus,²⁵⁰ who in Acts 9 is blinded by a divine light on the road to Damascus, met by the risen Christ and converted to ‘the Way,’ the religious tradition that would later become Christianity. Little is actually said about Saul’s experience while blind in Acts, but it is clear that the event as a whole is very important in the narrative of Acts, for Luke later repeats it twice, in dialogue attributed to Paul, in chapters 22 and 26. In writings attributed to the historical figure of Paul²⁵¹ as well the event is mentioned, in 1

²⁵⁰ Saul would later go by his Roman name Paul, the name under which all of his own correspondence is written. Many scholars of Acts refer to the character as Paul even at this earlier point in the narrative, but as I am focusing largely on the narrative section of Acts in which this specific event takes place and rarely beyond that, I will be referring to the character as Saul, the name he was using at the time. However, on occasion that I refer to other places in the narrative after his name has been changed, or his own writings that exist elsewhere in the New Testament, I will refer to him as Paul.

²⁵¹ As with the rest of this thesis, I am primarily concerned with the narrative aspect of the text rather than the historical elements. Therefore I am reading Saul/Paul as a character in a story, written by the author of the Gospel of Luke, rather than as a historical figure. The historical Paul, in writing Galatians and 1 Corinthians, did not mention being blinded during the experience recorded in Acts 9 (and in 1 Corinthians only mentions that he was converted, not any of the circumstances surrounding the event), but the historicity of the event does not concern me—the fact of Saul’s blindness on the road to Damascus may or may not be a narrative addition by Luke, but regardless of the history of redaction, the story that has

Corinthians 15 and Galatians 1. In order to properly analyse this important story, I will briefly discuss both healing and conversion narratives, and the New Testament trope of blindness being a conduit through which the message of Jesus is transmitted. For from being a positive message, I will show, this still rests upon a negative portrayal of the blind for its efficacy. The story of Saul's blinding and conversion will be looked at in detail and then I will offer an alternative reading that does not rely on an rhetoric of blindness that once again reduces it to a metaphor for something 'more important,' and instead focuses on the person experiencing the condition.

Blindness as Salvation in the New Testament

The New Testament material, and in particular the Gospel texts, is full of blind characters who appear in healing narratives. The frequency with which Jesus heals the blind throughout his journeys would indicate either an epidemic of blindness in Roman Judea at the time of Jesus or a belief on the part of the authors that they were conveying something more than a simple healing narrative by including blind characters in numbers that eclipse those of characters with other ailments. Given that the Gospels are narrative texts and there was a tendency to use blindness as a metaphor for something greater in writing from this time period, as I have already shown, I believe it is reasonable to suppose the latter. It should not be too controversial to state that healing narratives in the

impacted readers through the ages has included this detail. I do not, therefore, find it constructive to debate the historical accuracy of the text, and focus instead on the narrative itself. On the rare occasions where it will be necessary to discuss Paul's own take on the situation, I will specify that I am discussing the historical Paul at that point. At all other times, it can be assumed that I am discussing Luke's literary character.

New Testament often function as vehicles for a message of salvation through Jesus.²⁵² As such, it is logical that blindness in that schema is going to be figured as a sort of spiritual distance from God—a religious ignorance, to continue the biblical theme. The various stories of blindness in the New Testament are nearly always associated with people ‘seeing the light’ about Jesus and following him.²⁵³

Such stories generally follow a similar pattern. Jesus is travelling through an area, he either encounters a blind individual or individuals or they hear about him and seek him out, they request healing and are duly healed by Jesus, and either before or after this event they profess faith in Jesus as the messiah (for examples of this trope, see Matt. 20:29-34, Mark 8:22-26, Luke 18:35-43 and John 9). One of the better known stories of blindness being healed in the New Testament is the Markan story of Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), a blind man who recognizes Jesus as the Son of David, something which the disciples have not yet done, from the side of the road and begs to be healed. This is the only narrative of sight being returned in the New Testament to feature a named character, aside from that of Saul in Acts, making it easily distinct from most other healing narratives.²⁵⁴ The blind knowing more than the sighted is not an uncommon theme in these stories, as we have seen, nor was it uncommon in classical literature more generally—many concurrent writings feature a blind character or characters who, despite their blindness, have insight and knowledge of a given situation beyond that of any sighted individuals present.²⁵⁵ This

²⁵² Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 36.

²⁵³ Ibid, 35.

²⁵⁴ It is worth noting that this story or some version of it appears in Matthew and Luke as well, though Bartimaeus’s name isn’t mentioned on those versions of the story. Why Mark chose to include this detail and the other Evangelists did not is not a matter that I am fit to speculate on, but the story appearing in all three Synoptic Gospels is a clear attestation that the writers of the New Testament felt it was important.

²⁵⁵ Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light*, 3; 50.

was meant as a form of narrative irony, for the audience was to understand that it was not typical for blind people to have this level of ability, and therefore the character is graced with some near-supernatural ability.²⁵⁶ In the New Testament literature, of course, these characters are always healed of their blindness after displaying this wisdom, the implication being that the only ones who are truly blind are those who do not understand the message of Jesus.²⁵⁷

If that implication were not clear, the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John makes very plain the idea of blindness that the New Testament as a whole seems to support. Admittedly more theological and composed later than the rest of the Gospels, John has Jesus healing a man born blind and then later stating that “I came into this world for judgement, so those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind” (John 9:39). That Jesus speaks of metaphorical blindness rather than literal blindness is made obvious at the beginning of the chapter when he clearly indicates that the man he is about to heal is blind in order to show (sighted) people the works of God, culminating in the famous saying that “I am the light of the world” (John 9:3-5). Very little could be done to make the intention of this chapter more obvious when it comes to interpreting blindness, though I will later return to this part of John and read it in tandem with Acts to offer a different understanding of the condition. All of this understanding of blindness being a spiritual condition related to one’s physical condition is rooted in the predominant

²⁵⁶ Nor was this trope limited to the ancient and classical worlds—it can still be seen in contemporary media.

²⁵⁷ Koosed and Schumm, “Out of Darkness,” 88.

thought at the time, that physiognomic traits are indicative of a person's nature,²⁵⁸ and embedded in that understanding of the world is the belief that the eyes are among the most important parts of the body for determining character, if not the most important.²⁵⁹ Therefore, it follows logically that when a blind character shows up in a text, the encounter "would inevitably cause the reader to make assumptions about the moral character of that person."²⁶⁰

Hartsock argues that in the New Testament, because most of the healing narratives are not about those healed but the power of Christ, the reader should be careful not to assume that the disabilities assigned to those in need of healing necessarily say anything about the character,²⁶¹ a point echoed by Lawrence, who argues that the Gospels' disabled characters are there to help characterize the named, 'important' characters.²⁶² However, I disagree with this sentiment—the reader is being told something about these flat characters whom Jesus heals. When all the readers know is that the character is disabled and when that disability implies a corresponding moral or spiritual deficiency, the readers also know that this character is morally or spiritually deficient, and that by being healed they are being made morally or spiritually whole. That is, by having their blindness removed, they are being saved. The healing narratives are not just healing narratives but are also conversion narratives, and the main purpose of the blind characters in these stories is to find salvation in Jesus. Disability in the New Testament is always a

²⁵⁸ Chad Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterization* (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2008), 7.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 58.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 61.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 128.

²⁶² Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 35.

theological tool. In writing their article on blindness in John, Jennifer Koosed and Darla Schumm state that disability is never “simply an expression of the various possibilities inherent in the human body. Never is it an accident. And never is the condition seen as a positive gift of God. Rather, disability is always present for some reason or purpose.”²⁶³ This is the case in all New Testament material, arguably in all biblical material more broadly, and should not be surprising, given how common this issue is even in contemporary literature.²⁶⁴ Disability is present in the narrative to make a broader point and, furthermore, it requires healing because it is understood as a lesser state than able-bodiedness. The New Testament uses blindness as a way of separating early Christians from Jews and pagans—those who belong to the ‘in-group’ of early Christians are sighted, for they know the Truth, while those who do not are blind because they do not know.²⁶⁵ Through healing, a person is not only made whole for being able to see, but also for coming to learn that Jesus is Lord. While the blindness as ignorance motif has been shown to be unstable and unhelpful in previous chapters, here it has been refigured into something that is arguably more dangerous to actual blind people. In the repetitive and formulaic stories of the New Testament, the people who are blind are lost in the larger metaphor that blindness has become; real people have thrust upon them a damaging narrative that they are not only physically defective and morally inferior, but also spiritually weak and possibly damned as a result.

²⁶³ Koosed and Schumm, “Out of Darkness,” 80.

²⁶⁴ Mitchell and Synder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 47.

²⁶⁵ Koosed and Schumm, “Out of Darkness,” 90-92.

Saul's Blindness as a Healing/Conversion Narrative

The story of Saul's blindness is quite straightforward. Saul, in his continuing quest to persecute followers of the Way, has received permission from the high priest to round up any of Jesus's followers he might find in the city of Damascus and take them to Jerusalem for punishment (Acts 9:1-2). On the way to Damascus, Saul is beset by a bright light that causes him to fall to the ground, whereupon he hears the voice of the risen Jesus, whom he is persecuting. This voice tells him to go to Damascus and await instructions (Acts 9:4-6). This vision is unique to Saul—the men with him hear the voice but do not see the light as Saul does (Acts 9:7) and when Saul gets up, he can 'see nothing' (οὐδὲν ἑβλεπεν), has to be led into Damascus by his followers, and is 'without sight' (μὴ βλέπων) for three days, during which he fasts (Acts 9:8-9), until a disciple named Ananias, after some debate, comes and heals him (Acts 9:18).

There are a number of important points to discuss in regards to this story, and the first one that I wish to address is that the narrative of Saul's experience is retold twice in the book of Acts, both times through dialogue spoken by Paul in his own defence as he is challenged for his faith in Jesus. The most significant difference is the first retelling in Acts 22, in which Paul indicates that his companions saw the light that Saul was seeing, but did not hear the voice (Acts 22:9), a direct contradiction with the narrative in Acts 9. Paul also adds the detail that it was the brightness of the light which caused his blindness (Acts 22:11), a justification which is not present in the narrative version of the story. In the second retelling in Acts 26, Paul does not comment on what his companions saw or heard at the time, and nor does he mention that the encounter caused him to become blind. However, Paul does embellish Jesus's dialogue quite substantially (Acts 26:15-18),

adding some theological points and a justification of Paul's mission that were not present in the narrative telling of the story. The reason I mention this is because among the additions to Jesus's dialogue that Paul includes are the following phrases:

“I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:17-18)

It is notable that Paul omits mention of his own blindness in his retelling but includes a new aspect that he has been sent to help cure (spiritual) blindness in others, which is directly tied in with salvation and forgiveness. In the estimation of Paul and the writer of Acts, it would seem that curing blindness is not just a humanitarian act carried out by Jesus and his followers, but in fact the *mission itself*.

In attempts to explain the discrepancy between Luke's narrative report of the incident on the road to Damascus and Paul's verbal report on the same event, as filtered through Luke, scholars of the New Testament have suggested a number of ways in which the difference might have occurred. Martin Dibelius echoes many scholars in attempting to parse the redaction history of the text, suggesting that the stories may have been from different regions and that Paul's dialogue in chapter 26 is the historical Paul's take on the story, while the narrative version of the story in chapter 9 is Luke's take on the event, with chapter 22 being a compromise to smooth the tension between the two out.²⁶⁶ Others try to argue that the textual discrepancy is not a discrepancy at all as both stories convey the same point, which is “the fact that though the phenomenon was to some extent

²⁶⁶ Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles, Second Edition* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1973), 158-159.

perceived by others, it was intelligible only to Paul.”²⁶⁷ Gaventa also argues the importance of Saul’s singular understanding of the event when compared to those around him, pointing out that there are two words in the story that mean ‘to see,’ θεωρέω and βλέπω. The former verb is frequently employed by Luke to indicate seeing a manifestation of God’s powers, whereas the latter is a more general, mundane sort of ‘seeing.’²⁶⁸ One might draw comparison to the English terms ‘sight’ and ‘vision.’ These two terms mean the same thing in modern parlance, but the latter term’s original connotation was that of a metaphysical understanding, whereas ‘sight’ implied the simple act of seeing.²⁶⁹ In Acts 9, Luke states that Saul’s companions “saw no one” (μηδένα δὲ θεωροῦντες), but that Saul, after the encounter, “could see nothing” (οὐδὲν ἑβλεπεν). Gaventa argues that the implication is that Saul’s companions may have ‘seen’ some measure of the event, but did not understand it.²⁷⁰

The juxtaposition between spiritual vision and physical sight is highlighted one further time in Acts 9:12, in which God is instructing Ananias to go heal Saul’s blindness. Ananias is told that Saul is praying and has “seen in a vision, a man” (εἶδεν ἄνδρα ἐν ὁράματι, though some texts do not include ἐν ὁράματι and simply say ‘seen a man’), who will come heal him. Despite being physically blind, it is clear that Saul can still ‘see’ in the way that matters, he possess vision; “Paul,” writes Luke Timothy Johnson, “‘was blind but now can see’; the Light that blinded him paradoxically relieved him of his

²⁶⁷ Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles, Vol IV: English Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 101.

²⁶⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 150.

²⁶⁹ Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 22.

²⁷⁰ Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 150.

spiritual blindness.”²⁷¹ Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability is always either ‘fixed’ or punished by the end of a narrative in order to fit into the dominant norm of compulsory able-bodiedness²⁷² and of course, in New Testament parlance, a physically blind man can hardly go about converting people to the Way. Therefore, although Saul is now sighted in the way that matters, it still falls to Ananias to heal his eyes as well. This healing is done in a baptismal scene in Acts 9:18 in which “something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored” (ἀπέπεσαν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ὡς λεπίδες, ἀνέβλεψέν), a phrase noted to contain medical terminology, possibly because of Luke’s background but also potentially to denote the physical aspect of the healing.²⁷³ At the same time, however, the term ἀνέβλεψέν in particular is noted to appear in other Greek literature in reference to the healing of people *born* blind,²⁷⁴ so the reader is one last time reminded that there was more than a physical ailment at play here.

Unlike Isaac, Samson or any of the Hebrew Bible characters who are blinded in their stories, Saul is both an extremely pivotal character in the narrative—Johnson argues that he is not Luke’s ‘main character,’²⁷⁵ but most of the rest of Acts centres around his travels nonetheless—and a verifiable historical person who wrote or whose name was attributed to a sizable portion of the New Testament and whose influence in the early Christian period cannot be overstated. Therefore, unlike my other two subjects in the preceding chapters, Saul/Paul has had a great deal of literature dedicated to him as a

²⁷¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006), 165.

²⁷² Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 57.

²⁷³ David John Williams, *Acts* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 172.

²⁷⁴ Lake and Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles, Vol IV*, 103.

²⁷⁵ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 167.

figure, so it would stand to reason that there is a substantial amount of scholarship on Saul's blindness. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case. Despite the fact that "[w]ithout question, the story of Saul's 'conversion' is one of the most important events, if not the most important event, that Luke records in Acts,"²⁷⁶ a rather significant aspect of that event is talked about only in a cursory fashion at best. Aside from linguistic peculiarities, some of which I noted above, comments on Luke's word choice or discussions of the similarities and dissimilarities between the narrative and Paul's two recountings of it, New Testament scholars, much like their Hebrew Bible counterparts, are unwilling or unable to say more than a few words about Saul's blindness.

In a way, this is not a surprising development. The vast majority of New Testament scholars (and biblical scholars more generally) prefer the historical-critical method²⁷⁷ to other types of criticism, and as previously indicated, I am inclined to agree with Moore and Sherwood when they state that the dominant mode of reading historically has both prevented more ideological types of criticism from being widely respected or indeed practiced in the field.²⁷⁸ It has also led to a decline of actual 'criticism' of the text, and the creation of a scholarly environment in which most scholars are more comfortable simply reading and 'interpreting' (in a historical sense) the text but not actually critiquing it.²⁷⁹ I have already made arguments about the danger of allowing such a culture of non-critical scholarship to continue and will not repeat them here. Suffice it to say, however,

²⁷⁶ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 303.

²⁷⁷ Moore and Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar*, 9-10.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 117-118.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 63.

when there are books upon books written about a figure and nearly all of them focus on his theology²⁸⁰ or, more commonly, the historical circumstances or accuracy of the textual accounts surrounding him,²⁸¹ and hardly any of them even deign to comment upon the lived reality that this individual was blind for a time in his adult life, it is hard not to see the problem. Saul's blindness is remarked upon only to reinforce nearly every negative stereotype of blind people that I have outlined throughout this thesis. William Willimon states that "The one who was so active going to and fro, seeking letters of introduction, pursuing believers all the way to Damascus has now become passive, helpless, like a little child."²⁸² Merely because of his blindness, Saul is now passive, helpless and childlike. Witherington invokes the trope of blindness entailing wisdom with a comment that Saul will be in receipt of a 'second' or 'spiritual' sight now that he is baptized,²⁸³ a trope echoed by many of the scholars cited above. Johnson invokes the spectre of blindness being a punishment with a causal mention that Saul later causes blindness in a pagan magician in Acts 13.²⁸⁴ Scholarly interest in the blindness of Saul does not seem to extend past concerns about whether the condition was biological or supernatural in origin,²⁸⁵ that is to say, whether it is potentially historical or not. I wish to repeat that the historical-critical method is not without merit and has contributed immensely to understanding of

²⁸⁰ See for example Joong Suk Suh, *The Gospel of Paul* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003); John L. White, *The Apostle of God: Paul and the Promise of Abraham* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999).

²⁸¹ Aside from those I have already cited, see also Paul W. Walaskay, *Acts* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998); Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967) and C. K. Barrett, *On Paul: Aspects of His Life, Work and Influence in the Early Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

²⁸² William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 76.

²⁸³ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 319.

²⁸⁴ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 163.

²⁸⁵ Josef Kürnizger, *The Acts of the Apostles: Vol. 1* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 162.

the Bible and the New Testament in particular, but when reading a story like this from the point of view of a marginalized figure, the historical-critical method has serious limitations, which is why I employ elements of it only sparingly.

Most scholars are more interested in the three days of fasting Paul undertook than the three days of blindness he lived in,²⁸⁶ and that tends to be for the narrative point that Paul is being made similar to Jesus in his three-day ordeal. Jesus was not blind, so perhaps mentioning that fact would have been problematic for that interpretation of the narrative. It is also possible that this story is being read as a healing narrative, in which the infirmity of the one healed is generally of lesser importance to the miraculous power of the healer himself,²⁸⁷ and indeed, after Saul is blinded, the focus of the story does shift to Ananias for a time, only to return to Saul once he can see again. Even the narrator of the text seems to want readers to focus on the sighted characters rather than the blind character, even if the blind character is the central figure in the narrative, and scholars and readers of Acts seem happy to allow the narrator to guide them in this manner.

But this healing narrative, like all healing narratives in the New Testament, is also a conversion narrative. Saul is baptized and receives the Holy Spirit at the same time as his sight is returned (Acts 9:18-19). Notably, Saul does not actually receive the Holy Spirit, at least according to the text's narrator. But he does receive his sight from Ananias, and from this the reader is to understand that the latter event has also occurred, because healing is synonymous with salvation in this context. Theologically-oriented commentaries are among the only texts where Saul's blindness is commented upon, and it

²⁸⁶ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 164.

²⁸⁷ Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 153.

is always directly linked to his conversion in those texts. Robinson and Wall state that “Conversion, not conceived of in narrowly moral terms, is rather seen as coming to a new understanding,”²⁸⁸ or one might say that it is ‘having one’s eyes opened’ to the Truth. They further point out that “His [Saul’s] literal blindness is, in some ways, a symbol of a more figurative blindness to what was beyond him and outside him.”²⁸⁹ Johnson points out that Saul’s physical blindness has cured a spiritual blindness from which he was suffering,²⁹⁰ Willimon argues that Saul has a typical conversion experience; for a conversion is effective when “[t]he one who knows so much must become as one who knows nothing, one who must be led by the hand, healed, and instructed by the very ones he once despised,” and argues that the confusion associated with this process is “the beginning of wisdom.”²⁹¹ It begins to seem that not only is the healing a crucial part of Saul’s conversion, but that the blindness itself was the first step on the path, something the reader of the New Testament should not be surprised by, for it has been the case numerous times that the blind were further along on the path to salvation than the sighted.

And still, none of this leaves the reader any closer to understanding the experience of a blind man named Saul, who once could see and now cannot. In all of this, Saul’s blindness is still relegated to the status of a metaphor, a narrative tool of salvation, authorial shorthand for his awakening to the Truth. With all of that interpretive background, the historical weight of a soteriological metaphor being applied to a common

²⁸⁸ Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to the Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 141

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 145

²⁹⁰ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 165.

²⁹¹ Willimon, *Acts*, 79.

physical condition into which so much has already been read, I now turn to a blind man named Saul, who is not trying to make a theological point, who is not trying to be a walking metaphor for salvation. I will read the text of Acts 9 as being a story about a person, and show that even if it is an elevated rhetorical work meant to showcase the soteriological power of Jesus, that reading is easily troubled when the actual person involved is allowed to take the centre of the story.

Saul's Salvation, Saul's Sight

Much of the discourse surrounding Acts 9 comes from a very specific scholarly position. That is to say that most commentators on Acts discuss Saul's experiences in this chapter as a healing narrative. Healing narratives, as I have previously discussed, do not place much emphasis on the person being healed,²⁹² preferring instead to focus on the miraculous power of the healer.²⁹³ For this reason, I believe that reading the Acts 9 story as a healing narrative is counterproductive to the goal of locating Saul and his experiences as a person within this narrative. I do not deny that a healing occurs in the course of this story, but I do not read the story itself according to the schema accorded to a healing narrative—that it is a story of the miraculous power of God overcoming the power of a physical ailment, and that the reader should be more concerned with the actions and words of the healer than those of the healed, who is only present to help spread the message. Furthermore, I will not necessarily be reading this story as a conversion narrative, a story which exists to show the power of God to change the hearts and minds

²⁹² Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts*, 128.

²⁹³ Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*, 35.

of even those who opposed the Way. Again, a conversion undeniably occurs over the course of Acts 9, but that is not my main concern, and reading the story in a proscribed way has led to centuries of interpretations that are not interested in the human experience of Saul's blindness. Therefore, I read Acts 9 as a story unfettered from traditionally-expected narrative forms, so as to better focus on the character it portrays.

To begin, I want to return to John 9. I discussed above that this is an archetypical Gospel healing narrative, containing Jesus's healing of a man born blind and a very clear argument that sight and salvation are synonymous and that blindness is a dangerous form of ignorant otherness. At least according to Jesus's dialogue. Read another way, the rest of this story need not necessarily mean this, and there are three particular points to which I wish to draw the reader's attention before returning to Saul. The first point is that Jesus directs the man to go to a specific place, the "pool of Siloam" (John 9:7) which he goes to, apparently unaided and under his own power, needing no direction or assistance. This is not the shambling, groping blind man the reader of the Bible has been conditioned to expect, but a fully competent individual who knows his surroundings well. Second, no conversion actually occurs until long after the healing has taken place. The man surely believes that Jesus is a prophet and presumably has faith in his healing powers (John 9:17), but it is not until Jesus makes a point of finding him later on, and explains to him who he is, that the man comes to understand Jesus as the Son of Man (John 9:35-37). Certainly, one might still argue that being cured of his blindness was part of the conversion process, but I read these as two separate incidents that happened to the same individual. The final point that is of note in John 9 is that the Pharisees, unsatisfied with their interrogation of the now-sighted man, ask his parents what has happened (John

9:18). The parents deliver what for my reading is one of the most important lines about a blind person in the New Testament and arguably the whole Bible: ““We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself”” (John 9:20-21). The man can speak for himself regarding his own experience—he does not require sighted people to define for him what he felt or what happened to him, because he is perfectly capable on his own of doing this. If this nameless man is to be allowed to speak for himself, and he is, then it stands to reason that it is not appropriate to prevent other blind or previously blind individuals from doing the same. All of these are points that I wish to consider in relation to Acts 9, to which I now return.

First, there is an assumption that Saul was in need of assistance due to his newfound blindness. I have tackled in previous chapters similar assumptions of the incompetency of blind subjects simply as a result of their blindness, so it is not necessary to reiterate all of those arguments in this chapter. However, I do wish to note that the belief that Saul was now been reduced to a helpless, childlike state²⁹⁴ is a bit unusual. Yes, Saul was ‘led by the hand’ (χειραγωγοῦντες, Acts 9:8) into Damascus—a common term applied to blind people in Greek writing²⁹⁵ but nowhere in the text does it say he *needed* this assistance. Saul didn’t ask for it and further, in his later narration on the event, he does not mention that anybody helped him, leaving his companions as what Gaventa calls ‘sheer presence’ in Acts 26:13b-14a,²⁹⁶ that is to say that the reader is

²⁹⁴ Willimon, *Acts*, 76.

²⁹⁵ Lake and Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 101.

²⁹⁶ Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 342.

aware of their presence but they apparently do not contribute to the action at all. It could be argued that in telling the story, Paul simply didn't think it was an important enough detail to include—or perhaps he is trying to emphasize that he did not, as a blind individual, require such assistance. Certainly, many blind people do require assistance mobilizing, but that is not always the case and the reader should not assume that it was so in this instance.

The second point here, regarding conversion and blindness, is crucial for the overall point of this chapter. Luke and his narrator are expecting the reader to make a connection between Saul's blindness and his conversion, but there is no legitimate textual reason to assume such a connection if one does not accept the rhetoric of blindness being ignorance and sight being salvation. In order to back up this argument, the reader need only look at when the actual conversion took place. Though conversion is often considered a process rather than a definitive action by contemporary Christians,²⁹⁷ in the New Testament it is often an event that takes place at a given moment as a result of a given action. In many cases, the reader of the New Testament observes Jesus heal the blind in a manner that is clearly a symbolic (or actual) conversion to his Way; a common theme in these stories, however, is that the blind individuals call out to Jesus using titles or names that it is not reasonable for them to have known, such as 'Son of David' (as in Matthew 9:27), implying that conversion has already taken place. It is not the healing, then, that brings about the change of mind. And in the case of Acts as well, when Ananias heals Saul's blindness and baptises him (Acts 9:17), Saul's conversion does not take

²⁹⁷ Willimon, *Acts*, 79.

place—it already has at a point prior to this. The conversion took place, much like in the other stories of blindness, long before Saul was healed and, in fact, before he was even blinded. Saul's blindness occurred after his conversation with Jesus (Acts 9:8), which is the definitive action that caused his conversion. The idea, therefore, that the blindness was necessary for his conversion is logically incoherent. Just like the man in John 9, Saul's blindness and his conversion to the Way are two events which just happen to have occurred to the same person in proximity to one another.

As my third point above was that the reader ought to listen to what the blind person himself has to say, it is crucial to consider Saul's point of view. Hearing his voice is difficult because unlike Isaac or Samson, Saul does not say anything throughout this entire story. So the reader is left with his actions, which seem precious few, unlike the previous characters discussed. I have already commented on his being lead into the city, so I shall focus here on what happens when Saul is in Damascus. Though Saul does seem to have sat in a house in the city and done little but pray during his time blind, with specific attention being paid to the fact that he didn't eat (Acts 9:9), the only aspect of that fact that is unusual is that the reader would find it surprising—this was a very fervent man who had just had his entire understanding of the world and God overturned all at once. It is not entirely unreasonable, that, in that instance, a person might choose to take some time and reflect. That notwithstanding, Saul is doing as he was told in his encounter with Jesus—he has gone to Damascus and waiting to be told what he is to do as promised in Acts 9:6, and he knew that Ananias was coming to heal him (Acts 9:12). Saul is not passive or helpless; he is following the instructions Jesus gave to him and expecting others to do the same. The text is silent on how Saul might have felt about his sudden

blindness—was he distraught or upset at his newfound infirmity? Did he accept it as part of a plan or perhaps even a punishment for persecuting followers of Jesus, a punishment that he, as a capable practitioner of Jewish law, may very well have found apt? Did he resent it? I believe it is likely he did not, nor did he have to spend much time wondering what his life would be like now that he was disabled, for he knew from his vision that Ananias would be coming to heal him. For Saul, blindness was not a terrifying prospect that would define the rest of his life but rather a temporary inconvenience that he merely had to wait to pass. Did he come to have a different understanding of or respect for the blind after his brief period of infirmity? It is hard to say given the limited information available, but I will argue momentarily that the blindness was not something that Paul would later believe was something particularly significant in his life, a fact which in itself subverts attitudes typical of the time that suggest blindness to be the worst situation one can possibly experience.²⁹⁸

The healing-conversion parallel is, by my reading, not a parallel at all. But it is not merely the healing of blindness that is part of the conversion narrative—in this ideology the blindness itself is also a part of that path. One needs to be blind in the first place in order to receive sight, after all, and, as I have shown, physically sightless people were endowed with a metaphysical or spiritual vision in New Testament parlance that allowed them to ‘overcome’ their disabilities and be healed. However, consider again that Saul was converted to the Way *before* he was blinded. The healing of his blindness was not an ‘opening of his eyes’ to the truth as I described above, and his physical blinding was not a

²⁹⁸ Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts*, 66.

way of having him ‘see the light’ as many commentators have argued, for the sequence of events does not line up. That Saul was blinded after his conversion throws into doubt the whole narrative of blindness being part of the path to the truth—clearly it is not necessary. Nobody is allowed to see the face of God (Exod 33:20), which has been suggested as a cause of Saul’s blindness,²⁹⁹ though the reader may notice in the story that Saul is never said to actually see Jesus. Barring a physiological reason for the loss of sight as some scholars have posited,³⁰⁰ there is no reasonable explanation for why Saul might have been blinded during this encounter, leading the reader to the possibly inevitable conclusion that this was in some way the will of Jesus.

That Jesus felt it necessary to blind Saul after converting him is baffling to the point of incomprehensibility. It does not fit into the schema that Saul or the reader of the New Testament would expect when blindness and conversion are linked, and it does not have any obvious effect on Saul’s conversion process or indeed on him as a person—notably, the historical Paul never mentions being blinded in his own recounting of the story (Gal. 1:13-17), and even Paul the literary character in Acts does not mention it in the second, more detailed, retelling of the story (Acts 26:13-17).³⁰¹ Jesus having blinded Saul cannot be explained within the bounds of the New Testament ideology and indeed the larger biblical ideology of blindness. It does not fit within the ignorance-punishment-redemption arc that runs through the biblical texts. I do not have an explanation for why

²⁹⁹ Williams, *Acts*, 168.

³⁰⁰ Kürnizger, *Acts of the Apostles*, 165.

³⁰¹ The detail is included in the first retelling in Acts 22:11, but it seems cursory, as if Saul’s blindness was nothing more than a tool to allow Ananias to be introduced to him and deliver the speech Paul reports. It is also possible that, as Paul’s mission went on, he began to consider his former blindness less and less relevant.

Jesus might have chosen to blind Saul or why Luke might have chosen to include this detail, but I will note that its inclusion in the story is highly subversive to the dominant thinking on blindness. It seems as if, in taking elements of a familiar story and putting them in the wrong order, Jesus is trying to make a point about the inherent senselessness of the story in the first place. Given that Luke was fond of subverting physiognomically-based expectations about people that were common in this time period by having people who fall short of the Greek body ideal, such as eunuchs, be allowed into the Kingdom,³⁰² it should perhaps not be surprising that he chose to do something similar here by destabilizing common notions about blindness. The blindness-salvation narrative is, as I have shown in this chapter, not a particularly stable connection and does not function as a coherent metaphor. In Acts 9, Jesus and Saul have demonstrated that, problematizing the overriding attitude towards blindness that existed at the time the text was written and through much, if not all, of the New Testament's reception history. If Isaac reversed expectations about blindness and ignorance and Samson undermined narratives about blindness and punishment, Saul and Jesus have now put the final nail in the coffin of this schema by showing how, on close inspection, the metaphor of blindness and salvation collapses as well.

Conclusion

The story of Saul's conversion to the Way on the road to Damascus is "[o]ne of the most memorable events in human history."³⁰³ And yet, as I have shown on various

³⁰² Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts*, 171.

³⁰³ Kürnizger, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 161.

biblical texts, the very important element that one of the characters is blind for part of the story is under-researched, hardly discussed and, for the most part, ignored by biblical scholars. In reading Acts 9 as the final point in an interpretive arc that began in Genesis, I have, in this chapter, shown that the final point of that arc, which is blindness being a tool or path towards salvation, is just as unstable and incoherent as the rest of the ignorance-punishment-salvation schema. Saul was blinded on the road to Damascus during or after an encounter with Jesus, but that is the only aspect of the story that is clear. Why he was blinded or how is unknown. This story cannot be said to exist in a tradition of healing narratives that lead to conversion, for the elements of the story are not in the correct order—normally one would expect a blind person, who may already have some insight that sighted people do not have about Jesus, to be healed/converted after displaying this. But in this story the protagonist is a sighted person who encounters Jesus suddenly, is converted, is then blinded, and is then healed afterwards. Even if one accepts the trope of blindness and healing being linked, which I have also argued is not coherent, the progression of events in this story is simply not logical when applied against the schema that the reader of the New Testament is expected to understand. A story that seems to be emblematic of the blindness-salvation trope is in fact a destabilization of that very trope, and, read in this way, the reader has little choice but to recognize that interpreting blindness in this way simply does not make sense. Saul was not blinded because he was converted, or so he could be converted. Saul is a human being, and the reader of Acts must simply accept that sometimes, human beings go blind. There need not be a deep theological meaning embedded behind the loss of sight, as the Saul story in Acts 9 makes

clear. Of course, many blind people could have made this point easily at any time, had only sighted people been willing to listen to them.

Conclusion: Removing the Stumbling Block

“Ask him. He is of age. He will speak for himself.” (John 9:21)

Blindness in the Hebrew Bible exists in an interpretive arc that begins with the attitude, common the ancient world, that to be blind is to be ignorant or stupid, moves into a belief that the condition is a punishment from a higher power for some terrible misdeed, and culminates in the New Testament narrative of blindness is a necessary part of a path to salvation through Jesus Christ. None of those points should take any reader of the Bible by surprise, because they have been ingrained in biblical interpretation to the point where many readers and scholars do not even realize they are interpreting, taking the text uncritically and allowing the dominant thinking surrounding disability to dictate their reading without realizing it. In this thesis, I have argued that every point on this spectrum of interpretation is incoherent, understudied and can be subverted by an alternate reading of some key texts containing blind characters. This focus on characters is a key point in my work, as I wish to read, and to encourage others to read, blindness not as narrative shorthand for character traits or plot developments, but as a lived condition that affects human beings. I wish further to encourage readings of blindness not as a passive, groping helplessness, but as simply another form of experience that is just as valid as a way of knowing the world.

The first two chapters of this thesis focused on the literature surrounding disability and the Bible, and on the contributions that I believe disability theory can make to biblical studies. Of particular interest was that the vast majority of biblical scholars have, thus far, been silent on the issue of disability in the Bible, preferring to allow harmful stereotypes to stand in for interpretive rigour, either repeating common (mis)perception about

disability in their exegesis, or more usually simply ignoring the subject altogether. I acknowledge that biblical scholars cannot feasibly focus on every possible issue that arises from interpreting the biblical text, which is why studies such as this one are necessary, but such widespread silence on an issue cannot be seen as anything other than a contribution, however unwitting, to a problematic silence on issues facing disabled people in the real world. In much the same way that women, people of colour and queer people were largely ignored in scholarship until movements arose that prioritized their experience, disabled people are frequently silenced not through malevolence but through apathy or ignorance on behalf of able-bodied scholars. A person can hardly be faulted for not considering the position of blind people in the text when that person has never been taught or expected to do so. A key goal of this thesis, and other works like it, is to fill this gap in scholarship, but more important still to bring it to the attention of the main body of biblical scholarship, to teach scholars to see disabled people, to listen to what they have to say, and to stop interpreting their disabilities as though they are metaphors for something larger rather than simply a manifestation of the manifold possibility of human experience.

To that end, the third, fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis were devoted to telling the stories of blind individuals within the text, with a focus on character rather than metaphor, in order to destabilize dominant metaphors surrounding blindness and the Bible by showing that when one takes a good look at the people on the shoulders of whom the burden of those metaphors are borne, one sees a person and not an ideology. Isaac was not blind so the reader would understand he was weak, incompetent or stupid. Samson was not blind for the sake of punishment or to invoke pity. And Saul was not blind because he had had his eyes metaphorically opened to the spiritual Truth. To assume that

they were blind for those reasons is to support a normative able-bodiedness that marginalizes and harms disabled people in the real world, whose lived experiences are often unconsciously relegated to some metaphorical abstraction in the minds of able-bodied individuals. We must come to accept that sometimes people are blind. While there may be physical, medical or biological reasons for this, explaining that condition as though disability requires ‘a reason’ to exist, as though in the narrative of our lived world deviations from the norm cannot happen without greater cause, is unhelpful to blind people at best and dangerous at worst. I am not arguing that we are misinterpreting blindness in biblical texts—I am arguing that we should not be interpreting it at all. We are so used to reading narratives in which anything of interest is likely there for a reason that it is hard at times to remember that deviations from a prescribed norm occur only because norms are arbitrary and are based in hegemonic power structures that are designed to benefit a very specific group of individuals and are not representative of the variety of human experience.

This thesis is not going to topple hegemonic able-bodiedness, nor is it going to redefine bodily norms and expectations to move blind individuals away from the margins. But by subverting and destabilizing the dominant interpretive thought on blindness as related to the biblical text, I am encouraging other scholars to see the gap in which I have been working, and to break their silence on disability, and to apply the same critical acumen to disabled characters in the Bible as they do to so many other things. I further implore biblical scholars to remember that, even if the Bible is a text and even if the characters are only characters in a story, they are also people, and that by ignoring them, there is a significant population of people in our lived world that they are ignoring as

well. Rather than telling blind people what their experience is to be, better that we as biblical scholars listen to what they have to say, to allow them to define their own experience. It is in this manner that the gap can be filled, that the silence can be broken, and that we as blind people can drop the veil of metaphor and be not *interpreted*, but *seen*.

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