Different Bodies: A Study of Biblical Characters and Disability

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - An Overview of Disability and Disability in the Hebrew Bible **2**

Chapter 2 - Isaac and Samson: Losing Sight **13**

Chapter 3 - Jacob and Mephiboshet: Suffering Injury **36**

Chapter 4 - Moses and Leah: A Question of Disability **61**

Chapter 5 - Moving Forwards: Thinking about Disability in Life and Text **86**

Bibliography **90**

Chapter 1 - An Overview of Disability and Disability in the Hebrew Bible

Part I: Introduction to Disability

At a historical moment when we are questioning how we define ourselves and how and when others define us, our bodies inevitably come into the conversation. When they work, when they do not work, when they match how we see ourselves and when they do not, we struggle to understand how our internal sense of self and our bodies are in relationship. Moreover, we struggle with the effect of society's assessment of our physicality on our internal sense of self. What role does our physicality have in shaping who we are? What role does our physicality have in shaping how others perceive us and how we interact with the world? These questions become more pressing in the face of changes to how our bodies function especially when those changes are counter to how we believe our bodies should work. Given our own human diversity, how are we defined by, limited by, or expanded by our individual body's physical nature?

We are living in a time when we can alter so much of the way our body looks and works. Culture today focuses on optimization, driving us towards an ideal that many will never achieve. As a result, society typically views any difference in function or limitation in function as negative, resulting in a label like "disability." In society, disability, whether physical or mental, renders someone as "less than" a full human, often resulting in the dehumanizing and disenfranchising of individuals with disabilities.[1] This is neither

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[1] Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 92.

deserved nor just - and, moreover, factually inaccurate. Humanity exists in all its diversity. How then could a human example of this diversity be less than human?

In the academic world, the precise nature of what disability means is a matter of debate: the concept of disability "emerges as a complex product of social, institutional, environmental and biological discourses...a subject of critical inquiry...as scholars in the humanities and social sciences have critically theorized race, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers."[2] Indeed, scholars have identified a number of different models through which different aspects of the meaning and impact of disability are highlighted or de-emphasized. In the "medical model," "disability" refers to a function of the body not behaving as it would in a healthy body, "a biological defect...that needs to be cured."[3] By contrast, the "minority model" focuses on the individuals who society labels as having disabilities who together make up "an oppressed group subjugated by able-bodied ideologies encoded into larger social structures."[4] In the "social model," a distinction is made between impairment, which is the bodily difference present in an individual, and disability, which is understood as the social disadvantage from which people with impairments suffer.[5] Another model, the "cultural model," understands disability as an intrinsic part of societal structure and therefore in interested in examining how

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[2] Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, "Introduction," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 2.
[3] Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 7.
[4] Schipper, *Figuring Mephibosheth*, 7.
[5] Schipper, *Figuring Mephibosheth*, 17.

"disability" is used as a concept, in addition to eliminating the social stigma that comes with the label.[6]

Part II: My Interest

Judaism clearly establishes an understanding of a human as body and spirit. As a result, the tension of embodiment, of bringing together earthly and spiritual, is especially live in our tradition. As a person with a medical condition that impairs my ability to perform certain tasks, I know living with disability is neither tragic nor heroic, neither inspirational nor insignificant. As I have struggled in my own life to understand the effect of my body's functioning on who I am, how I see myself, and how I am perceived by others, I wanted to bring that struggle to Tanakh. I chose to examine characters in biblical and extra-biblical literature whose physical differences represent some type of variation that could be considered a disability: descriptions of the body behaving or appearing differently than bodies are expected to behave or appear.

Out of my desire to be seen fully, my project will attempt to see the biblical characters I investigated as (potentially) possessing a disability and to uncover how that feature influences the whole person: their character, how they behave, and how others perceive them. In my study, I hope to consider what these characters have to say about the experience of having a disability for people today: how are these characters' experiences different or similar and how they might challenge modern assumptions about what it means to have a disability. I am not a character in a sacred text, but Isaac and Samson, Jacob and Mephiboshet, and Moses and Leah are; and the Jewish project has

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[6] Schipper, *Figuring Mephibosheth*, 19-20.

been to make sense–to make meaning–out of the stories and laws our tradition has handed down.

Part III: Disability in the Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, the issue of disabilities comes up both in the descriptions of specific characters, in reference to groups of people who are considered vulnerable, and in laws governing how different people participate in society and, more specifically in the cult. Characters with disabilities range from brief mentions of physical difference in the text's narration, as with Isaac (Gen. 27:1) and Leah (Gen. 29:17), to the character's own mentioning of their limitation as with Moses (Ex. 4:10 and 6:12), to extended episodes that concern or influence characters' physicality, as with Mephiboshet (II Sam. 4:4, 9:1-13, 19:25-31), Jacob (Gen. 32:25-33), and Samson (Jud.16:21-30). Metaphorical figures such as the so-called "suffering servant" in Isaiah 52-53 paint a picture of Israel's experience of suffering as physically embodied, and threats made to Israel by God warn of punishments akin to physical disability.[7]

Disabilities are explored in the legal material in Torah as well. The Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26) contains laws that restrict participation in the cult of those born to priestly families but possessing physical differences considered blemishes (Lev. 21:16-24).[8] This section is often understood to parallel Torah's instructions regarding animals that are ineligible for sacrifice.[9]

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[7] See Deut. 28:27-29 and Zeph. 1:17. See Isa. 59:10 and Lam. 4:14 for comparisons of Israel to someone blind.
[8] Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 23.
[9] See Deut. 15:19-23.

Many times, the Hebrew Bible entreats readers to protect those with physical differences as vulnerable groups.[10] References to "the blind" or "the deaf" as paradigmatic vulnerable populations occur frequently as well.[11] Such limitations provide opportunities for the text to extoll God's power, reversing or overcoming human limitations and allowing such individuals sight or hearing they had previously been denied.[12] Disabilities are thus presented as deviations from health or wholeness.

Part IV: Biblical Disability Studies

Biblical scholars have only recently begun considering the characters in the Bible who possess these physical differences in light of the critical theory developed in the field of disability studies. Out of this broader academic discipline has emerged the field of biblical disability studies. Scholars have devoted much research and attention to the legalistic biblical and *halakhic* material concerning those individuals whose bodily functions have implications for their ability to engage in cultic rituals for the priesthood and for the general population.[13] Of note, in her book *Judaism and Disability*, Judith Z. Abrams explores the concept of disability as it relates to an individual's ability to participate in ritual observance and society in general, as disability is utilized

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[10] See Lev. 19:14 and Deut. 27:18 for examples.
[11] See II Sam. 5:6, Jer. 31:7, and Mal. 1:8 for examples.
[12] See Isa. 29:18, 35:5, 42:7, and 43:8, Ps. 146:8, and Job 29:15 for examples.
[13] Jeremy Schipper mentions the following works in footnote 12: Tzvi Marks, *Disability in Jewish Law* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Sarah Melcher, "Visualizing the Perfect Cult: The Priestly Rationale for Exclusion," in Eisland and Saliers, eds., *Human Disability and the Service of God*, 57-71; Henri-Jacques Stiker, "The Bible and Disability: The Cult of God," in *A History of Disability* (trans. William Sayers; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 1999), 23-37. To these I add: Michael D. Fiorello, *The Physically Disabled in Ancient Israel According to the Old Testament and Ancient near Eastern Sources* (Bucks: Paternoster, 2014).

metaphorically, and as it relates to concepts of the mirroring of one's inner and outer self.[14] Abrams begins by considering the biblical material and then builds her study out into rabbinic literature, mirroring the development of Jewish tradition.[15] In doing so, she traces the evolution of attitudes towards and differing views on disability as they are reflected in the biblical and rabbinic material she examines, providing a time lapse of the history of Jewish anxiety about the body.

Saul M. Olyan's work *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* offers a comprehensive study of human physicality in Tanakh. In his meticulous study of each topic, he carefully refrains from applying a modern or revisionist lens in his reading of the biblical text. Instead, he arrives at his explanation of what would have been the contemporary understanding of the biblical conditions he studies by considering the societal context from which these texts came. This is present particularly in his reinforcing of the power dynamics that exist between God and Moses and Jacob and the being he wrestles.[16] Likewise, in assessing physical appearance, he relies upon linguistic patterns in the biblical text to determine standards of beauty and deviations from that, as in the case of Leah.[17] Because he limits the scope of his work to the biblical text, however, and restricts his analysis of the Bible to a consideration of the socio-historical context in which it was redacted, his analysis ultimately speaks to what

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[14] For example, in matters of sin/atonement, moral behavior, etc.
[15] Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998).
[16] Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10.
[17] Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 17, 20.

the biblical text likely meant to say when it was written, without venturing to explore what it might say now.

The major collection *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, considers disabilities in biblical studies from three angles.[18] The first section of the book contains chapters written by scholars who take a comparative approach and examine biblical disabilities studies in light of other nearby ancient cultures' texts. In the second section, scholars directly address biblical texts dealing with disabilities. These texts include: a study of Jacob and Isaac, images of disability in the Deuteronomistic History, and metaphorical usages of disability in Latter Prophets as well as New Testament texts. The final section consists of responses to these first two sections. By crafting the compilation in this way, the editors of *This Abled Body* provide a fairly comprehensive survey without bearing the burden of necessarily touching on every issue of disability in the biblical canon.

In *This Abled Body*, I encountered a number of ideas that shaped the way I will approach my subject material and influenced the choices I have made regarding which characters I will investigate. In particular, Kerry H. Wynn's chapter on "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives" in *This Abled Body* explores the ways in which modern textual interpretation assumes those differences categorized as "disabilities" are negative despite the seemingly positive

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[18] *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

benefits or adaptations certain characters are able to make in light of their changed status.[19] He refers to this bias as the "normate hermeneutic."[20]

My project's focus is on people: specific characters, not generic groups subject to particular laws. Jeremy Schipper ably argues for the examination of human examples rather than the legal theory, in his introduction to *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story*.[21] The interest in bringing to light individual characters with disabilities in the biblical canon as emblematic figures representing a historically oppressed group is still relatively new: when Schipper wrote the book, published in 2006, he still had to justify this approach, which now feels a natural component of the field of biblical disability studies.

Another work that deals with individual characters is Ora Horn Prouser's *Esau's Blessing: How the Bible embraces those with Special Needs*.[22] Wanting to empower families to see themselves and their children in the text, she reads the biblical text with "an inclusive lens" that proposes an understanding of certain biblical characters in light of modern diagnoses and explores the descriptions of the explicit special needs of those characters who are described as such.[23] What she does with real depth is consider each character in a holistic way and attempt to reconcile a sometimes uneven narrative and sparse biblical text to create an understanding of a complete character. I discovered only

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[19] Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 91-101.
[20] Wynn, "Normate Hermeneutic," 92.
[21] Schipper, *Figuring Mephibosheth*, 1-28.
[22] Ora Horn Prouser, *Esau's Blessing: How the Bible embraces those with Special Needs* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2011).
[23] Prouser, *Esau*, xii.

after conceiving of the structure of this project that Ora Horn Prouser also examines Jacob and Mephiboshet in relation to each other. Reading her book challenged my assumptions about which biblical characters might qualify for my study. Prouser's willingness to engage in this kind of speculative diagnosis inspired me to more closely consider how freely we might use the term "disability" and whether the term truly applies in every instance in which it is used.

Part V: Parameters of My Project

My struggle to understand and contextualize the ways in which my own body behaves differently serves as the backdrop for my study of the following biblical characters: Isaac and Samson, Jacob and Mephiboshet, and Moses and Leah. Intending to select a diverse cast of characters, my six characters represent two patriarchs and one matriarch, one prophet, one judge, and one royal heir. They come from Genesis, Exodus, [24] Judges, and II Samuel.[25] I have, however, five male characters and only one female character.

Given historic attitudes towards the female body as an incomplete or imperfect version of the male body, female characters with disabilities are even more prone to historic erasure than women in general.[26] Because my question is asked with an eye to what the modern reader can learn, I aspirationally decided to exclude women as female in

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[24] Moses also appears in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, however the verses that describe his difficulty with speech appear in Exodus.
[25] Mephiboshet also appears in I Chronicles, however his injury is not mentioned there.
[26] Carole R. Fontaine, "'Be Men, O Philistines!' (I Sam. 4:9): Iconographic Representations and Reflections on Female Gender as Disability in the Ancient World," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 61-72.

my consideration of disabilities. I also declined to examine characters who suffer from incidences of infertility, which seem to be treated biblically as a limitation that God regularly causes and reverses. As a result, my selection includes only one female character.

Once I chose my characters, certain themes emerged. Isaac and Samson both suffer from a loss of eyesight, though one is presumably a product of aging, and the other is a result of the violent gouging of his eyes. Jacob and Mephibosheth both incur injuries that affect their movement, but Jacob's mobility is preserved, while Mephibosheth's laming of both legs renders him immobile. Finally, with Leah and Moses, the text ambiguously describes each character in such a way that their claim to disability is uncertain. By studying my characters in these pairs, their similarities and differences shed light on the diversity and complexity of disability and the experience of physical impairment.

In addition to closely reading the biblical source material, I will examine traditional rabbinic texts and medieval commentaries that explore these six characters and their disabilities, and also consider how modern biblical disability studies treats these biblical figures. I sought to investigate how these characters' portrayals might evolve as they move through our textual tradition. How do later biblical readers perceive how their bodies play into who they are, how they behave, and what happens to them? For some, disability may be a central feature of how we see them, while for others, their disability may be almost forgotten against the backdrop of their character's journey. Still others' claim to disability might be less certain than initially believed. Through this approach,

this thesis aims to excavate assumptions and anxieties about disabilities in the Bible, explore how attitudes towards disabilities play out in related midrashim and classical Jewish commentaries, and then reflect on the contemporary implications of this topic.

Chapter 2 - Isaac and Samson: Losing Sight

The characters paired in this chapter share a loss of sight but come about their situation through very different means. Isaac's limited vision is presented as a result of his long life, while Samson's physical eyes are violently torn from his body. In considering how each responds to their limitation, I hope to shed light on how the manner of loss can affect one's reaction to it, and to consider a context for understanding the different ways Samson and Isaac react to a similar debility.

Part I: Isaac

A. Isaac's Loss of Sight in the Bible

Genesis 15 foretold the birth of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 15:4-5). His birth serves as the resolution for a story arc that involved Sarah offering her handmaid to Abraham as a surrogate, in Sarah's anxiety over her own infertility (Gen. 16:1-4). Isaac's birth illustrates the power of God to act in the world, as Sarah births Isaac when Abraham is one hundred-years-old and Sarah is ninety-years-old (Gen. 21:1-5). In being born, Isaac supplants the place of Ishmael, Abraham's son by Sarah's handmaid Hagar (Gen. 21:10-13). In Torah, it is Isaac who is bound and nearly sacrificed until an angel comes to save him from Abraham's knife (Gen. 22:2, 22:9-12). Arranging Isaac's marriage to Rebecca is one of the final acts ascribed to Abraham (Gen. 24:1-4). The Torah narrative does not fully focus on Isaac until after the death of both Abraham and Ishmael (Gen. 25:1-18). With the birth of Jacob and Esau, Isaac fathers the child who would continue the family's transformation into a nation, but the combined trickery of

Jacob and Rebecca supplants Isaac's plan for his children, as Jacob wins both birthright and blessing for himself (Gen. 25:23-27, 25:33, 27:5-40).

The biblical narrative first mentions Isaac's advanced age and loss of vision when Isaac prepares to bless Esau, Isaac's favorite son (Gen. 27:1).[27] The text introduces Isaac's vision using the word וַתִּכְהֶיָן, generally translated as "to dim" from the root כהה: "And it happened when Isaac was old, that his eyes grew too bleary to see, and he called to Esau his elder son and said to him, 'My son!' and he said, 'Here I am.'" (Gen. 21:1a).[28]

וַיְהִי כִּי-זָקֵן יִצְחָק, וַתִּכְהֶיָן עֵינָיו מֵרְאֹת; וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-עֵשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדֹל, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, הִנֵּנִי.

More literally, this means "his eyes were too dim to see (with)."[29] This description of Isaac's diminishment serves to underscore his fears of his death's immediacy. This phrasing, rather than the word for blindess עִוֵּר is evocative of the loss Isaac has suffered: blindness is a state of being, where "dimming" illustrates a process of diminishment. The text places the process of aging parallel to the process of Isaac's eyes dimming.

As the verb כהה occurs relatively infrequently in the corpus of the Hebrew Bible, the meaning of the word in Gen. 27:1 can be further illuminated in considering the other usages in the biblical text where the root carries a meaning related to "to weaken" or "to become weak." The root carries a similar meaning in Job's lament: "My eye is dimmed with anguish," (Job 17:7).[30]

וַתֵּכַהּ מִכַּעַשׂ עֵינִי

[27] Isaac favors Esau despite the immediately preceding description of Esau marrying two Hittite women who displease Rebecca and Isaac.
[28] Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2004), 139.
[29] Alter, *Five Books*, 208.
[30] Marvin H. Pope, *Job*. [3rd Ed.] ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 15. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1979), 127.

Like in Genesis 27:1, the text implies a specific experience has caused Job's dim eye: his anguish. This perhaps suggests a distinction between dim eyes and blindness: life experience seems to cause dim eyes, where perhaps the Bible indicates to environmental cause of blindness.

Perhaps the most relevant usage for comparison's sake occurs in Deuteronomy 34:7: "Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated."[31]

וּמֹשֶׁה, בֶּן-מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה--בְּמֹתוֹ; לֹא-כָהֲתָה עֵינוֹ, וְלֹא-נָס לֵחֹה.

Jeffrey H. Tigay notes: "Biblical and other ancient texts commonly describe the eyesight and other faculties of the aged to indicate whether they have remained healthy or become feeble."[32] With Isaac, the experience of aging is paired with the dimming of his eyes, presumably establishing a correlation between advanced age and a natural decline in vision. The fact that he lives for twenty more years, however, would seem an indication of Isaac's overall physical health (Gen. 31:41, 35:28-29). The Moses narrative supports this usage, since Moses' undimming eye is presented as a miraculous element of Moses' existence at the end of his life: the text emphasizes that he has not experienced an otherwise normal degradation mentally or to his vision. For Isaac, this lends credence to the reading of the *p'shat* that Isaac's eyes dimming is a natural result of his advanced age and approaching death. With this understanding, Isaac's disability is rendered a natural process, rather than an abnormal or aberrant one.

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[31] Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1996), 338.
[32] Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 338.

In contrast to this sense of dimming eyes as a natural part of aging, Zechariah 11:17 presents the loss of one's right eye function as indicative of impairments beyond only visual. The following warns shepherds who abandon their flocks, a metaphorical stand-in for false prophets and bad leaders[33]: "Woe O worthless shepherd, the one who abandons the flock! May a sword be against his arm, and against his right eye. His arm will surely wither, and his right eye will surely go blind."[34]

הוֹי רֹעִי הָאֱלִיל עֹזְבִי הַצֹּאן, חֶרֶב עַל-זְרוֹעוֹ וְעַל-עֵין יְמִינוֹ; זְרֹעוֹ יָבוֹשׁ תִּיבָשׁ, וְעֵין יְמִינוֹ כָּהֹה תִכְהֶה.

The grammatical construction here of the infinitive absolute followed by an imperfect strengthens the statement, so that the basic meaning of "to grow dim" is intensified to mean blindness.[35] In this context, the verb suggests a metaphorical disabling, be it mentally, spiritually, or militarily, in the image of the blind right eye.[36]

Some of the usages of this verb do not refer specifically to eyes, but carry the same sense of "weaken." In Ezekiel 21:12, Ezekiel warns of the reaction his audience in the south will have to the prophecy he has to share:

> "When they say to you, 'Why are you sighing,' say: Because of news that is coming, at which every heart shall melt, and all hands go slack, and every spirit shall faint, and all knees run with water. It is coming and it shall happen, declares Lored YHWH"[37]

וְהָיָה כִּי-יֹאמְרוּ אֵלֶיךָ, עַל-מָה אַתָּה נֶאֱנָח; וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל-שְׁמוּעָה כִּי-בָאָה וְנָמֵס כָּל-לֵב וְרָפוּ כָל-יָדַיִם וְכֵהֶתָה כָּל-רוּחַ, וְכָל-בִּרְכַּיִם תֵּלַכְנָה מַיִם--הִנֵּה בָאָה וְנִהְיָתָה, נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה.

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[33] Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.*1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 25c. (New York: Doubleday 1993) 238.
[34] Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14*, 301.
[35] Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14*, 292.
[36] Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14*, 291.
[37] Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 22a. (New York: Doubleday 1997), 415.

This is one in a list of four parallel reactions that all involve a loosening or softening of previously firm attributes: heart, hands, spirit and knees. Here, this fainting is presented as an anticipated negative reaction to a life experience. Isaiah 42:4 uses a similar meaning, but the context describes how the Servant, whom God elects to correct the ills of the world, will not act: "He shall not grow dim or be crushed/Till he has established justice on earth,/And the coastlands shall await His teaching."[38]

לֹא יִכְהֶה וְלֹא יָרוּץ, עַד-יָשִׂים בָּאָרֶץ מִשְׁפָּט; וּלְתוֹרָתוֹ, אִיִּים יְיַחֵלוּ.

Finally, Leviticus 13:6 and 13:56 both use the root in ways that echo the meaning of a more general lessening with regard to a skin condition or contaminated fabric. Leviticus 13:6 presents the possibility that a skin rash can heal: "On the seventh day the priest shall examine him again: if the affection has faded…"[39]

וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֹתוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, שֵׁנִית, וְהִנֵּה כֵהָה הַנֶּגַע,...

Here, fading is unambiguously positive, allowing the individual to rejoin the community with the knowledge that he is ritually clean. Later in the chapter, Leviticus 13:56 considers fabric that has been contaminated: "But if the priest sees that the affected part, after it has been washed, is faded…"[40]

וְאִם, רָאָה הַכֹּהֵן, וְהִנֵּה כֵּהָה הַנֶּגַע, אַחֲרֵי הֻכַּבַּס אֹתוֹ...

this indicates a contamination that necessitates the removal of that part of the cloth. These usages paired present the ambiguity of the term: a positive sign of healing or a sign

[38] Shalom M Paul, *Isaiah 40-66: Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2012), 78.
[39] Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1989), 77.
[40] Levine, *Leviticus*, 84.

of permanent damage and contamination. This ambiguity finds a parallel in the mixed messages the biblical text contains about Isaac's state.

While the narrative indicates that Isaac's eyesight is weakened, his advancing age does not seem to negatively affect his other senses.[41] Throughout the story that follows, the narrative portrays Isaac as sensitive to his surroundings, if perhaps too trusting of the people around him. He questions Jacob immediately upon his entrance, asking מי אתה בני "Yes, which of my sons are you?" (Gen. 27:18).[42] He demonstrates surprise, if not outright suspicion, at the speed with which "Esau" has ostensibly returned, saying: מה זה מהרת למצא בני "How did you succeed so quickly, my son?" (Gen. 27:19).[43] Even after Jacob assures Isaac, Isaac still doubts him, and attempts to use a different sense still available to him to confirm the identity of the son before him. He tells Jacob: גשה נא ואמשך בני "Come closer that I may feel you, my son," (Gen. 27:21) since he knows that smooth Jacob and hairy Esau will feel different under his hands.[44] Even when his hands tell him Jacob's lie, Isaac voices the truth, saying הקל קול יעקב "The voice is the voice of Jacob" (Gen. 27:22).[45] Despite the input he receives from his senses, the text tells us, ולא הכירו he [Isaac] did not recognize him [Jacob] (Gen. 27:23).[46] Hence, Isaac did recognize Jacob, but could not reconcile what he recognized with what Jacob told him. In a beautiful way, the story illustrates the danger of being without sight, which requires one

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[41] Jon D. Levenson, "Genesis: Introductions and Annotations" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press 2014), 51.
[42] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1989), 191.
[43] Sarna, *Genesis*, 191.
[44] Sarna, *Genesis*, 192.
[45] Sarna, *Genesis*, 192.
[46] Sarna, *Genesis*, 192.

to trust in other senses and makes one vulnerable to unexpected and unseen obstacles and barriers.

B. Isaac's Loss of Sight in Midrashic Literature

In the midrashic compilation *Bereishit Rabbah*, the rabbis explore a number of different explanations for Isaac's dim eyes. Some explanations blame Isaac for the limitations in his eyesight, viewing his condition as a divine punishment.[47] Views of what precisely God punished Isaac for vary. In trying to find actions that are deserving of this loss of vision, *Breishit Rabbah* demonstrates the bias held by the classical midrashists against Esau, and their determination to vilify him: since Torah states that Isaac favored Esau (Gen. 25:28), then Isaac's favoring of Esau tars Isaac himself.[48] One explanation argues that Isaac's unjust behavior in favoring Esau results in a punishment that costs him his vision.[49] Without ever directly stating it, the midrashists argue that God caused the blindness from which Isaac suffers. Moreover, in arguing this point, Isaac's blindness allows Rebecca the opportunity to act as a corrective for her husband Isaac's wrongly held preference, and ensure that Jacob, the proper son to favor, receive Isaac's blessing.[50] Alternatively, another argument states that Isaac's situation illustrates one possible consequence parents incur for having a preference for wickedness or for their "bad" children.[51] These explanations assume Isaac deserves punishment for favoring Esau. According to the biblical text, Esau's misdeeds entail marrying women of whom his

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[47] J. Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, ed. Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books 1965). 65:5-7, 10.
[48] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:5.
[49] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:5.
[50] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:6.
[51] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:10.

parents did not approve (Gen. 26:34-35). This disapproval, however, does not prevent Isaac from intending to offer Esau his blessing.

Not every midrashic explanation renders Esau to blame, however. Another argument attributes Isaac's wrongdoing to his demand that Esau prepare a meal for him in exchange for a blessing that should have been Esau's by right.[52] According to this reading, Isaac demands of Esau a meal as a bribe before Isaac will give Esau a blessing to which he is entitled. Since this episode begins with a description of Isaac's dim eyes and only after does Isaac ask Esau for the food, the sequence of events on which the midrashists base this explanation seems inconsistent with the biblical text.

By contrast, another midrash paints Isaac's dimmed eyes as an act of mercy, arguing that he should have died when he looked up at the moment of his binding and saw God. So highly did God value Abraham that God tempered Isaac's punishment, and spared Isaac's life. Here, the explanation comes with a *mashal*, equating Isaac's "crime" to a crime against an earthly ruler. In doing so, the idea of punishment is made comprehensible: readers are more likely to concretely understand the idea that earthly rulers punish than the theoretical punishment of a divinity never seen. This explanation has a parallel in *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer*, which makes a different point. Citing Ex. 33:2, where God states that none can look upon God and live, the conclusion is made that blindness, Isaac's punishment for gazing upon God, is equated with death.[53]

Not all of the explanations provided in *Breishit Rabbah*, understand Isaac's eyes dimming as a punishment. One midrash presents the possibility that Isaac's eyes dim as

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[52] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:7.
[53] Chapter 32, *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, (New York: Om Publishing 1946), 73b.

the result of an unfortunate circumstance: angels' tears fall into his open eyes during his binding (Gen. 22:9).[54] The tears changed Isaac's eyes, resulting in their dimming. This midrash presents Isaac's eyes as a natural consequence of Isaac's life experience.

Other explanations see a utility in Isaac's dim eyes. One explanation argues that God causes Isaac's dim eyes as a protective measure on Isaac's behalf, shielding Isaac from the reality of public opinion about Esau.[55] Isaac's limited vision requires him to stay at home and thus prevents him from learning of Esau's reputation in the eyes of the community. God spares Isaac from the public's scorn for Esau, Isaac's favored son, which Isaac would otherwise painfully encounter. This midrash demonstrates an understanding of disability as a difference in ability which ultimately benefits the individual by preventing greater harm.

Another explanation argues that Isaac's blindness is a narrative necessity, in order for the proper son to receive the blessing, against Isaac's own preference.[56] This presents a slightly different understanding than that of punishment: rather, here, Isaac's eyes are collateral of the narrative, sacrificed for the sake of the hero Jacob's future. This understanding does not address the loss of vision as a loss, but rather as a *deus ex machina* that allows the history of the people who become Israelites to begin.

Perhaps the strangest explanation offered is one that describes Isaac as asking for suffering, which God grants in the form of Isaac's dimmed eyes (Gen. 27:1).[57] The

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[54] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:10, also Ch. N. Bialik and Y. Ch. Ravnitzky, *Sefer HaAggadah* 60, ed. Avigdor Shinan (Israel: Avi Chai and Dvir 2015), 59.
[55] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:9, see also *Sefer HaAggadah* 60
[56] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:8
[57] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:9.

midrash explains Isaac's reasoning for this seemingly strange request: God extends the full measure of Divine Judgment against a man who dies without suffering. This implies that suffering in life will count towards any punishment to which God would sentence a person in the world to come. In the midrash, God sees the wisdom in Isaac's request and grants Isaac suffering, in the form of Isaac's dim eyes. The midrash does not clarify whether the eyes dim state is enough to cause suffering or simply a means by which Isaac will suffer, like the shock he experiences upon realizing he has blessed Jacob and not Esau, as he intended (Gen. 27:33).

C. Isaac's Loss of Sight in Medieval Commentaries

Like the rabbis in the midrash, the *mefarshim,* medieval biblical commentators, also attempt to understand Isaac's loss of vision. Rather than the many explanations in midrash that posit supernatural intervention causes Isaac's dim eyes, the medieval rabbis tend to offer explanations that associate loss of vision with old age and cite other biblical examples where they identify similar situations. When they reference midrashim, they avoid midrashim that blame Isaac and instead pain Isaac as innocent, and even righteous..

Rashi focuses on the wording used to describe Isaac's dimming eyes, explaining that the eyes look cloudy, perhaps alluding to cataracts, which often accompany old age.[58] He also offers other possible understandings, which echo ideas in *Bereishit Rabbah*: that Isaac's eyes had to dim in order for Jacob to receive the blessing, and the possibility that angels' tears caused the dimming.[59] The midrashic explanations Rashi references

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[58] Menachem Cohen, *Mikraot G'dolot HaKeter - Bereishit* vol. 2 (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar Ilan 1999) 14.
[59] Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, 65:8, 65:10.

preserve Isaac's character and reputation, instead of assuming God intended to punish Isaac for some misdeed. Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, also supports the idea that dimming eyes is a natural effect of age, citing a similar text in 1 Samuel 3:2, which describes Eli's eyes as having dimmed:[60] "his eyes had begun to fail and he could barely see."[61]

וְעֵינָו הֵחֵלּוּ כֵּהוֹת, לֹא יוּכַל לִרְאוֹת.

Radak too supports the "old age" argument, explaining that many people's eyesight grows dim and their ears grow heavy with old age.[62] To support this, he references Jacob's eyes which the text describes as "heavy" towards the end of his life (Gen 48:10).[63] He notes that Isaac is twenty years from death at the time his eyes dim, but their dimming leads him to believe that his death is imminent. He also offers the possibility that the dimming of Isaac's eyes' may be an example of the kind of affliction God sometimes bestows on the righteous. To support this, he references a midrash positing that Esau's wives burnt incense as part of their idol worship, and Isaac's eyes dimmed as a result of the smoke the incense produced.

D. Isaac's Loss of Sight in Biblical Disabilities Studies

Modern scholarship continues the trend away from blaming Isaac for his dim eyes. In his chapter "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability" in *This Abled Body*, Wynn notes the prevailing modern bias against disability affects

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[60] Cohen, *Bereishit*, 14.
[61] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia, Pa: Jewish Publication Society 2003), 577.
[62] Cohen, *Bereishit*, 15.
[63] About Gen. 48:10, Sforno argues that in order for someone to offer a blessing or curse, that person must see who or what it is they intend to bless or curse. He explains that this is why Joseph brings Ephraim and Manasseh close to Jacob (Gen. 48:10), and why Balaam moves to where he can see the Israelites (Numbers 23:13).

interpretation of Isaac as a character. Much of modern biblical scholarship sees Isaac as a less commanding, less authoritative, less important figure, in part due to the fact that in this major narrative, they read Isaac as played upon by other characters rather than as an independent actor himself.[64] The major moments in Isaac's narrative arc involve the patriarchs that precede and follow him, leaving Isaac underestimated and sandwiched between his father Abraham and his son Jacob. Yet, Wynn points out, Isaac notices the inconsistencies in Jacob's attempt to pass for Esau despite Isaac's blindness.[65] These are not the actions of a patriarch out of touch with the world or incapable of making thoughtful decisions, but rather indicate Isaac's insight.

Wynn maintains that to read Isaac as powerless or effeminate in light of his weak eyesight is to ignore the power Isaac commands.[66] Chapter 27 focuses on acquiring a blessing that only Isaac has the power to bestow a blessing that, once bestowed, cannot be altered or transferred.[67] The very fact that Rebecca and Jacob consider Isaac's blessing worthy of the efforts they exert in order to secure it underlines the power that Isaac commands.[68] Isaac can no more take back or reverse the blessing he bestows on Jacob in favor of Esau (Gen. 27: 32-40) than Ahashverosh can overrule his own genocidal decree in the book of Esther (Est. 8:8) or Darius his royal ban in the book of Daniel (6:6-18), because, Wynn argues: "To revoke his word is to treat him as powerless."[69]

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[64] Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 93-94.
[65] Wynn, "Normate," 96.
[66] Wynn, "Normate," 93-94.
[67] Wynn, "Normate," 94.
[68] Wynn, "Normate," 95.
[69] Wynn, "Normate," 95.

To make this argument, Wynn relies heavily on the text of Genesis 27, reading carefully for clues regarding Isaac's abilities and limitations. With a text as terse as Torah, however, those clues can be limited, emboldening scholars to look to what is not said. For those who look to the biblical text hoping to find parallels to their own situations, identifying characters with the range of disabilities recognized today in our sacred texts can be challenging. Ora Horn Prouser's book *Esau's Blessing: How the Bible Embraces Those with Special Needs* embarks on this challenging mission of reading biblical characters through a lens of modern understanding of what Prouser refers to as "special needs."[70] In her chapter entitled "Isaac and Mental Retardation," her reading of Isaac's character across his narrative arc suggests the possibility that Isaac exhibits "symptoms of mild mental retardation," that enables Isaac to be fooled.[71] To get to this conclusion, Prouser takes advantage of modern medical and psychological understanding of the potential problems that result from pregnancy late in life, the social dynamic of Isaac's relationship with God and with his wife Rebecca, and other factors present in Isaac's story.[72]

While Prouser's reading is sympathetic and compassionate and does much to fill in the possible lines of Isaac's character, she neglects to address the insight Isaac explicitly demonstrates in Genesis when he questions Jacob's speed (Gen. 27:20), the texture of Jacob's arms (Gen. 27:21), Jacob's voice (Gen. 27:22), and continues to express doubt (Gen. 27:24). Moreover, Jacob's expressed concern that Isaac might detect

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[70] Ora Horn Prouser, *Esau's Blessing: How the Bible embraces those with Special Needs* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2011), xi.
[71] Prouser, *Esau*, 22, 31.
[72] Prouser, *Esau*, 22-24, 25-27, 28-30.

the substitution indicates an awareness that even Rebecca's comprehensive plan might be insufficient to thwart Isaac's sensitivity to detail (Gen. 27:11-12). Ultimately, while Prouser's attempt to create an opportunity for all who read Torah to see themselves reflected back comes from good intentions, the case she makes seems to read against the text, further limiting Isaac, rather than acknowledging the abilities he has. By closely reading the text, Isaac's abilities emerge, rather than his limitations.

Part II: Samson

A. Samson's Loss of His Eyes in the Bible

Compared to Isaac, Samson's loss of his eyes is violent and sudden. Samson appears in the book of Judges, an outlier among his fellow chieftains.[73] Like them, he is a military figure, but Samson fights as a solo combatant, rather than as commander of forces. His deeds seem supernatural in nature and serve to underline the unique connection he has with God as a Nazirite (Jud. 13:7). Indeed, so extraordinary is Samson that he attracts attention from the Philistines, who rightly recognize Samson as a threat and seek to disarm him (Jud. 16:5). Through trickery, they learn that Samson's hair, if shorn, would render Samson's strength ordinary and mount a plan to disable him (Jud.16:16-19). After Delilah orders a man to cut off Samson's hair, leaving Samson in a weakened state, the Philistines seize and blind Samson (Jud. 16:19-21): "The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes."[74]

וַיֹּאחֲזוּהוּ פְלִשְׁתִּים, וַיְנַקְּרוּ אֶת-עֵינָיו;

[73] Yairah Amit, "Judges: Introduction and Annotations," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele and Marc Zvi Brettler, trans. Jewish Publication Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 526.
[74] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 555.

Judges 16:21 uses violent language: the root נקר is understood to mean "to pluck" or "to dig out," appears in the Tanakh four times specifically referring to eyes, always in the context of punishment. Samson's punishment consists of several components: his loss of strength, his loss of eyes, his capture and shackling and his forced labor (Jud. 16:21). What is interesting about the juxtaposition as it occurs here is that the story makes it clear that Samson's weakness comes from his hair being cut off, thus breaking the promise his mother swore to God (Jud. 13:5, 16:17, 16:19). That is the disabling act, which causes God to depart from Samson (Jud. 16:20). Yet his eyes are undoubtedly gouged out. What is to be made of the physical, irreversible injury Samson incurs, in light of the loss of his hair and closeness with God?

Gouging of the eyes was a known punishment for runaway slaves, captured enemies, and others who angered a more powerful authority.[75] The biblical usage seems to indicate that this injury would have been a shameful one. Proverbs 30:17 uses this image, describing the punishment for a contemptuous child: "An eye that mocks the father...the ravens of the creek will gouge it out..."[76]

עַיִן, תִּלְעַג לְאָב...יִקְּרוּהָ, עוֹרְבֵי-נַחַל...

Fox explains that the punishment, which suggests that nature itself recognizes the perversity of such disrespect, suits the crime because the "eye is the organ of greed."[77]

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[75] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 321. See also Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, 4. (New York: Doubleday 1993), 414.
[76] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Yale Bible. (New York: Doubleday 2000), 869.
[77] Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 869.

The Philistines paid Delilah to betray Samson, yet Samson suffers from this punishment on account of Delilah's greed.

In Numbers 16:14, Jacob Milgrom reads the rebellious Dathan and Abiram as accusing Moses of hoodwinking them with the idiom: "'Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men's eyes? We will not come!"[78]

אַף לֹא אֶל-אֶרֶץ זָבַת חָלָב וּדְבַשׁ, הֱבִיאֹתָנוּ, וַתִּתֶּן-לָנוּ, נַחֲלַת שָׂדֶה וְכָרֶם; הַעֵינֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם, תְּנַקֵּר--לֹא נַעֲלֶה.

Milgrom compares this to the modern idiom of "pulling the wool over the eyes," rendering them unable to sense what is actually happening.[79] Delilah thrice attempts to subdue Samson and fails only because he lies to her about his true weakness (Jud. 16:6-14). For Samson to believe that telling Delilah the truth would not result in his capture would seem to require considerable denial.

In a similarly humiliating reference, I Samuel 11:2b uses this imagery when Nahash the king of the Ammonites offers to make a treaty with the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead, as long as they agree to the following condition: "'On this condition I shall make a treaty with you,' Nahash the Ammonite told them, 'that the right eye of each of you be gouged out! Then I shall make it a reproach upon all Israel!'"[80]

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם, נָחָשׁ הָעַמּוֹנִי, בְּזֹאת אֶכְרֹת לָכֶם, בִּנְקוֹר לָכֶם כָּל-עֵין יָמִין; וְשַׂמְתִּיהָ חֶרְפָּה, עַל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל.

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[78] Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1990), 133.
[79] Milgrom, *Numbers*, 133.
[80] P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel : A New Translation*. 1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, vol. 8. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1980), 198.

McCarter understands "reproach" to mean "a visible token of shame and humiliation," as a result of the loss of everyone's right eye.[81] This also more clearly indicates how eye-gouging demonstrates dominance and power over the victim. For Samson who had been so strong to be laid so low, his humiliation would have been complete.

Judges 16:26 describes a young servant holding up Samson, which could be an indication of his need for assistance. Yet, immediately prior the text describes Samson dancing for the Philistines (Jud. 16:25),[82] and just a few verses later, Samson tears the building down (Jud. 16:30); thus a lack of physical strength does not account for Samson being led by the servant. Given that Samson asks for help so that he can lean on the pillars of the temple, it seems reasonable to assume that the help the young man provides is due to Samson's loss of sight (Jud. 16:26). The importance placed on this loss is underlined by Samson's entreaty to God (Jud. 16:28): "O Lord God! Please remember me, and give me strength just this once, O God, to take revenge of the Philistines, if only for one of my two eyes."[83]

אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה זָכְרֵנִי נָא וְחַזְּקֵנִי נָא אַךְ הַפַּעַם הַזֶּה, הָאֱלֹהִים, וְאִנָּקְמָה נְקַם-אַחַת מִשְׁתֵּי עֵינַי, מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים.

Samson's willingness to die in pursuit of this vengeance is perhaps indicative of the extent to which Samson feels the loss of his eyes is the loss he most mourns.

B. Samson's Loss of His Eyes in Rabbinic Texts

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[81] McCarter, *I Samuel*, 203.

[82] This could be a euphemism indicative of a greater humiliation, sexual in nature. See Susan Niditch, *Judges : A Commentary*. 1st Ed. ed. The Old Testament Library. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2008), 171.

[83] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1999), 556.

In Sotah 9b, the mishnah lists Samson as one of the biblical characters whose misbehavior is eventually corrected when the vehicle of misdeed is remedied in some way. The rabbis characterize Samson as following his eyes in his pursuit of women, as a result of which the Philistines plucked out his eyes. The rabbis thus understood Samson's blindness as a fitting remedy to his crime. The Gemara elaborates on this, explaining that Samson's rebellion was with or through his eyes in prizing the Philistine woman he wanted to take as his wife: "The Sages taught that Samson rebelled with his eyes...therefore the Philistines plucked out his eyes."[84]

ת"ר שמשון בעיניו מרד... לפיכך נקרו פלשתים את עיניו

The voice of the *stam* questions this explanation because the text of Judges states that, while his parents did not support his pursuit of the Philistine women, they did not know that Samson's actions were divinely sanctioned (Jud. 14:3-4). However, the gemara responds by saying that, while God intended to punish the Philistines, Samson was following his own inclination and in pursuing the Philistine woman was acting of his own volition. In charging Samson with insufficient self-control, the Talmud justifies the actions of the Philistines who pluck out Samson's eyes. This argument could even be understood to ultimately support this kind of corrective corporal punishment, as it served to prevent Samson from future sinning.

C. Samson's Loss of His Eyes in Medieval Commentaries

The *mefarshim* choose to focus their attentions elsewhere. Rashi understands Samson's plea for vengeance for one eye in Judges 16:28 to imply that Samson expects

[84] Private translation.

reparations for each eye, with the sacrifice of Samson's other eye to be rewarded in the world to come.[85] Radak, citing Yerushalmi Sotah 1:8, understands that Samson wants vengeance for both eyes: one now, and one later, similar to Rashi.[86]

Joseph Karo, however, understands משתי to mean "dry" rather than "two."[87] This changes Samson's request to an expectation for a two-fold retribution into a plea on behalf of his empty eye sockets, as drained as the river and sea in the Isaiah verse he cites (Isa. 19:5). The imagery in the verse highlights the perversion of what Samson is suffering. Both understand Samson as a victim of an unjust crime, deserving of the kind of murderous retribution that Samson visits on the Philistines. In doing so, they fall in line with an understanding of Samson's injury as horrific and debilitating, without ever saying so explicitly.

D. Samson's Loss of His Eyes in Biblical Disability Studies

Modern biblical scholars continue the attempt to understand Samson's eye-gouging. Samson's folk and mythic qualities invite reading his story as a sociological artifact. In his article "More to the Eye than Meets the Eye," Uriah Y. Kim observes that this may well have been "a form of punishment and humiliation, even a way of feminizing/emasculating/castrating the victims," since such treatment may have preceded the forcing of a captured individual to sexually perform for the captors.[88] Such treatment

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[85] Menachem Cohen, *Mikraot G'dolot HaKeter - Yehoshua - Shoftim* (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar Ilan 1992) 158.
[86] Cohen, *Yehoshua - Shoftim*, 158.
[87] Cohen, *Yehoshua - Shoftim*, 159.
[88] Uriah Y. Kim, "More to the Eye than Meets the Eye: A Protest against Empire in Samson's Death?," *Biblical Interpretation* 22 (2014), 11-13. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-0221p0001

may well have overshadowed for Samson the loss of the connection with God Samson enjoyed as part of his Nazirite vows. Kim reads Samson's story as a story from exile in conversation David M. Gunn's reading of Samson alongside the passages in Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) about the Suffering Servant.[89] Kim focuses on unearthing the theology of the exilic community in Babylon, rather than staying with the human experience Samson suffers.

Jeremy Schipper understands Samson's loss of vision to be merely one in a series of mentions of eyesight or loss thereof in reference to leaders of Israel. Schipper reads Samson's loss of vision as a larger statement about the state of the tribes and their lack of leadership at the end of Samson's life and in the times thereafter. Here, sight and vision seem connected, as Samson's capture and blinding limit Samson's power and ability to lead.[90] Yet Saul M. Olyan, while not contradicting Schipper's analysis about the lack of leadership in Israel, nonetheless paints a different picture of Samson after losing his eyes. He notes that the Philistines assume Samson to be harmless thereafter, but that the text does nothing to contradict this. He reads Samson's tearing down of the temple to be a powerful statement of God's power, rather than the ability of Samson to possess such power within himself, at this point.[91]

Contradicting Olyan, Judith Z. Abrams observes that Samson's eyes lead him astray; she considers the loss of his eyes as a corrective, enabling him to more

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[89] Kim, "More to the Eye," 12, 15-17.
[90] Jeremy Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 110-111.
[91] Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9.

successfully act against the Philistines than before. She says: "Samson's physical disability brings symmetry into the protagonist's life and actually enables him to act potently again."[92] In reading this, Abrams comes directly into conflict with Olyan's reading. She credits Samson with the destruction at the end of Judges 16, while Olyan understands that to be a result of God's grace, rather than reflecting upon Samson himself.

Part III: Isaac and Samson: Grief and Adaptation with Loss

In considering these two characters, both of whom suffer a loss of their eyesight, the differences between them are startling. The portrayal of Isaac's eyes' dimming as part of natural aging, his reliance upon his other senses, and the power he yet wields as patriarch of the family stand in sharp contrast to the violence of Samson's injury presumably while still in the prime of his life, his dependence on those around him, and his plea to God for vengeance and strength. Yet a consideration of the circumstances of each character's loss of vision helps to contextualize their differences.

The Samson story illustrates the trauma and shock of a sudden disability. Reading about the rapid reversal of the divinely bestowed health and vitality that Samson enjoyed so immediately prior is sharply painful, rendering perverse and horrific the loss of sight that might have happened gradually and naturally at the end of a life. Samson expresses his grief over the loss of his eyes in anger and bargaining, two of the stages Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified as part of grieving.[93] Samson prays to God for justice to be done

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[92] Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 86.
[93] Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974).

on account of what happened to him and violently lashes out (Judges 16:28). The compounded trauma of betrayal, capture, and disfigurement, from which Samson suffers could conceivably leave Samson emotionally paralyzed and explain his choice to die while killing as many Philistines as he can. He does not move beyond this traumatic grief before his death, leaving readers with an impression of the sharp pain of Samson's loss and of Samson bereft of any healing.

By contrast, Isaac's loss of vision happens over time, with the biblical narrative introducing this detail once the process of Isaac's eyes' dimming has reached a critical point. This gradual loss provides a different experience for the individual, taking place over time and allowing for the potential for acceptance and adaptation, in the context of normative aging: while not celebrated, readers understand declining eyesight to be a natural part of aging. In Isaac's case, the biblical account provides an illustration of a character who seems to have come to terms with a physical limitation. Isaac is aware of his weakness and has learned to rely on other senses to compensate. His uncertainty in the face of the mixed messages he receives is less a reflection on Isaac's character than on the deliberate attempt to confound and deceive him.

Readers of the biblical narrative will not find an opportunity in the biblical text for Samson to move beyond his pain to a place of greater acceptance and peace, nor will they find anecdotes illustrating Isaac's frustration with his body's failure. Yet these moments and many more can make up the grieving process when one experiences a loss of vision. With this understanding, readers can appreciate how Samson and Isaac react so

differently to their experience of vision loss. Hopefully this observation can bring that empathy to their everyday interactions with the people in their lives.

Chapter 3 - Jacob and Mephiboshet: Suffering Injury

The characters paired in this chapter both sustain injuries at defining moments in their lives. Jacob's injury occurs during a transformational moment in his life, while, for Mephiboshet, his injury becomes a primary element of his identity. In considering how physicality and physical limitation shapes identity, I hope to uncover how receiving an injury can limit expectations and expand opportunities depending on how the person and other people understand that injury.

Part I: Jacob

A. Jacob's Injury in the Bible

Jacob enters the biblical narrative as the younger twin, quieter and less hairy than his twin Esau (Gen. 25:25-27). Jacob is the trickster who runs rather than fights (Gen. 27:42-28:5, 31:17-18, 32:8-9). He bargains with Esau for Esau's birthright and steals the blessing Isaac intended for his firstborn (Gen. 25:31-35, 27:19-29). He flees from his brother and settles with his mother's family (Gen. 27:42-28:5). When his father-in-law Laban's feelings about him change, he flees from Laban with his wives and children (31:17-21). As he approaches the meeting with his estranged brother Esau, he divides the party in half so that if one group were attacked, the other could escape (Genesis 32:8-9). Then, while fighting with a man,[94] Jacob receives the injury that causes Jacob to limp - and, more critically the name that will be passed down to a nation, "Israel":

Genesis 32:25-32
כה וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב, לְבַדּוֹ; וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ, עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר. **כו** וַיַּרְא, כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ, וַיִּגַּע, בְּכַף-יְרֵכוֹ; וַתֵּקַע

[94] Robert Alter proposes this be translated as "man" because that is how Jacob first perceives him (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2004), 179).

כַּף-יֶרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב, בְּהֵאָבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ. **כז** וַיֹּאמֶר שַׁלְּחֵנִי, כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר; וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלֵּחֲךָ, כִּי אִם-בֵּרַכְתָּנִי. **כח** וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, מַה-שְּׁמֶךָ; וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב. **כט** וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ--כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׂרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים, וַתּוּכָל. **ל** וַיִּשְׁאַל יַעֲקֹב, וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה-נָּא שְׁמֶךָ, וַיֹּאמֶר, לָמָּה זֶּה תִּשְׁאַל לִשְׁמִי; וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ, שָׁם. **לא** וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם, פְּנִיאֵל: כִּי-רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים, וַתִּנָּצֵל נַפְשִׁי. **לב** וַיִּזְרַח-לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, כַּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת-פְּנוּאֵל; וְהוּא צֹלֵעַ, עַל-יְרֵכוֹ.

"And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. And he saw that he had not won out against him and he touched his hip-socket and Jacob's hip-socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him. And he said, 'Let me go, for dawn is breaking.' And he said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' And he said, 'Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out.' And Jacob asked and said, 'Tell your name, pray.' And he said, 'Why should you ask my name?' and there he blessed him. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, meaning, 'I have seen God face to face and I came out alive.' And the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel and he was limping on his hip."[95]

The text explicitly details what happens to Jacob physically during this altercation: ויגע בכף-ירכו ותקע כף-ירך "he struck the hollow of his [Jacob's] thigh and dislocated his [Jacob's] thigh joint" (Genesis 32:26). While the verb נגע usually has the meaning "to touch," as Alter translates it, given the violence of this encounter, "to strike" seems a more appropriate translation, because of the violent intent behind the action and the injury that results.[96] JPS translates נגע as "wrenched," also suggestive of the violence of this attack on Jacob's leg.[97]

In considering other occurrences of this root with similar meanings, several verses emerge that use this root with this meaning in connection with God's destructive touch. For example, in Amos 9:5, the verb נגע describes the dramatic effect of God's touch on

[95] Alter, *Five Books*, 179-182.
[96] *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* vol. 5, ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1993), 608. Also, Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. II, trans. M. E. J Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill 1995), 668.
[97] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1999), 68.

earth, thus underscoring the destructive potential of this verb: "My Lord Yahweh of hosts:/who strikes the earth so that it melts,/and all who dwell in it mourn;/ it all rises like the Nile/and subsides like the Nile of Egypt."[98]

וַאדֹנָי יְהוִה הַצְּבָאוֹת, הַנּוֹגֵעַ בָּאָרֶץ וַתָּמוֹג, וְאָבְלוּ, כָּל-יוֹשְׁבֵי בָהּ; וְעָלְתָה כַיְאוֹר כֻּלָּהּ, וְשָׁקְעָה כִּיאוֹר מִצְרָיִם.

Anderson and Freedman emphasize the violence of God's touch by translating the verb as "strikes." The verb is used similarly in Ps. 104:32b, which praises God and uses the mountains' reaction to God's touch as an illustration of God's power in the natural world: "...[God] but touches the mountains - they smoke."[99]

...יִגַּע בֶּהָרִים וְיֶעֱשָׁנוּ

This image of God's touch causing mountains to smoke appears again in Ps. 144:5: "Lord, tilt Your heavens and come down,/but touch the mountains, that they smoke."[100]

יְהוָה, הַט-שָׁמֶיךָ וְתֵרֵד; גַּע בֶּהָרִים וְיֶעֱשָׁנוּ.

When the root again appears in Job 1:19a, the destructive touch comes from the wind, but readers know that Job's suffering comes with God's permission: "'And, look, a great wind came from beyond the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house..."[101]

וְהִנֵּה רוּחַ גְּדוֹלָה בָּאָה מֵעֵבֶר הַמִּדְבָּר, וַיִּגַּע בְּאַרְבַּע פִּנּוֹת הַבַּיִת,

While less direct, this verse too may be suggestive of God's power over nature. The reference to God in Ezekiel 17:10 is similarly indirect and indicated in the presence of

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[98] Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Amos*. The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1989), 844.
[99] Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2007), 368.
[100] Alter, *Psalms*, 496.
[101] Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2010), 14.

wind, like in the previous verse from Job: "Although it is planted will it prosper? /Surely but touch it /the east wind/it will wither up/On the bed where it sprouted it will wither."[102]

וְהִנֵּה שְׁתוּלָה, הֲתִצְלָח; הֲלֹא כְגַעַת בָּהּ רוּחַ הַקָּדִים, תִּיבַשׁ יָבֵשׁ, עַל-עֲרֻגֹת צַמְחָהּ, תִּיבָשׁ.

Greenberg notes that "biblical associations of the east wind are...instrumental of YHWH's will," which means that Ezekiel in this verse asserts God's power over the destiny of all things, no matter how substantial.[103] These verses' allusions or assertions of God's might and control over outcomes supports the idea that the touch described in Gen. 32:26 is neither ordinary, nor lacking in force behind it.

The verb יקע also appears in Gen. 32:26. The root normally carries the meaning "to dislocate" or "to turn away or to be alienated."[104] In usage in Gen. 32:26, the verb refers to a physical separation of body parts, but this root can also refer to a spiritual leave-taking as in Jeremiah 6:8 and Ezekiel 23:17-18. In Jeremiah 6:8, God warns of the consequences to come: "Correct yourself, Jerusalem/lest my soul be wrenched from you/lest I make you a desolation/a land uninhabited."[105]

הִוָּסְרִי, יְרוּשָׁלִַם--פֶּן-תֵּקַע נַפְשִׁי, מִמֵּךְ: פֶּן-אֲשִׂימֵךְ שְׁמָמָה, אֶרֶץ לוֹא נוֹשָׁבָה.

God pairs God's self-removal with physical repercussions, like the dislocation is paired with a significant injury in Gen. 32:26. Ezekiel 23:17-18 sees a similar spiritual rejection but from a human towards another human, as opposed to a divine spiritual rejection:

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[102] Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 22 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 308.
[103] Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 314.
[104]See *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* vol. 4, ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1993), 274-275. Also, Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. II, trans. M. E. J Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill 1995), 431.
[105] Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20,* [1st Ed.], ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 21a (New York: Doubleday 1999), 421.

> "The Babylonians came to her for lovemaking and defiled her with their fornication. Becoming defiled by them, her soul recoiled from them. She displayed her harlotry and displayed her nakedness, and my soul recoiled from her as it had recoiled from her sister."[106]

יז וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵלֶיהָ בְּנֵי-בָבֶל לְמִשְׁכַּב דֹּדִים, וַיְטַמְּאוּ אוֹתָהּ בְּתַזְנוּתָם; וַתִּטְמָא-בָם--וַתֵּקַע נַפְשָׁהּ, מֵהֶם.יח וַתִּגַל, תַּזְנוּתֶיהָ, וַתִּגַל, אֶת-עֶרְוָתָהּ; וַתֵּקַע נַפְשִׁי מֵעָלֶיהָ, כַּאֲשֶׁר נָקְעָה נַפְשִׁי מֵעַל אֲחוֹתָהּ.

Jacob's dislocated hip-socket, caused by a wrestling opponent who Jacob refuses to release seems evocative of the spiritual rejection described here: Jacob does not allow himself to be pushed away, so instead his opponent pushes Jacob's body parts away from each other.

When the fight is over, והוא צלע על -ירכו "he [Jacob] limped on his thigh" (Genesis 32:32). The *qal* verb צלע, meaning "to limp"[107] only appears this one time in reference to a person; elsewhere, the term describes sheep, with sheep acting as stand-ins for Israel as a nation.[108] Micah 4:6-7 states:

> "On that day, Yahweh said,/ 'I will gather in the one who limps/And gather in the one who has strayed,/And the one who I did harm./Then I will make the one who limps a remnant,/And the far off one a populous nation.'/Then Yahweh will rule over them on Mount Zion,/ From now and forever."[109]

ו בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נְאֻם-יְהוָה, אֹסְפָה הַצֹּלֵעָה, וְהַנִּדָּחָה, אֲקַבְּצָה; וַאֲשֶׁר, הֲרֵעֹתִי.ז וְשַׂמְתִּי אֶת-הַצֹּלֵעָה לִשְׁאֵרִית, וְהַנַּהֲלָאָה לְגוֹי עָצוּם; וּמָלַךְ יְהוָה עֲלֵיהֶם בְּהַר צִיּוֹן, מֵעַתָּה וְעַד-עוֹלָם.

This may indeed refer to people who have been physically battered by the "loss of most of Israel's territory and much of her populace, the fall of Samaria, the invasion of Judah,

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[106] Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, 1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 22a (New York: Doubleday 1997), 471.

[107] The root צלע does appear throughout the Hebrew Bible as a noun meaning "limping" or "stumbling". What is to be understood from this? In using this root, it may be that readers are meant to understand this to be a stumble.

[108] Delbert R. Hillers, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah*, ed. Paul D. Hanson and Loren Fisher (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984), 55.

[109] Hillers, *Micah*, 54.

and a siege of Jerusalem," but it also may be a metaphorical spiritual injury that is causing the metaphorical limping of this nation.[110] The limping in Zephaniah 3:19 is likely also metaphorical: "Behold, I will deal with all your tormentors at that time,/And I will rescue the lame, and the strayed I will gather in./And I will turn their condemnation into praise and fame throughout the whole earth."[111]

הִנְנִי עֹשֶׂה אֶת-כָּל-מְעַנַּיִךְ, בָּעֵת הַהִיא; וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי אֶת-הַצֹּלֵעָה, וְהַנִּדָּחָה אֲקַבֵּץ, וְשַׂמְתִּים לִתְהִלָּה וּלְשֵׁם, בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ בָּשְׁתָּם.

Both of these occurrences refer to a group of people who are weak or vulnerable, but not necessarily to actually impaired movement.[112] Yet Gen. 32:26 applies the word to a specific person which would seem to describe a significant injury. Indeed, the injury is momentous enough to warrant the explanation in v. 33 that, because of this injury, the children of Israel do not eat the thigh sinew.

Yet, for an injury apparently so serious, this episode receives no mention throughout the rest of Jacob's narrative. Indeed, the next chapter describes Jacob prostrating himself seven times when he first encounters Esau (Gen. 33:3). Does this imply that the injury healed, rather than leaving Jacob permanently injured? Or does the injury affect walking but not prevent other physical movements? Or is the injury a non-issue, and simply does not warrant additional mention, since the Torah has already

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[110] Hillers, *Micah*, 54-55.
[111] Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* 1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 25A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. 1994), 141.
[112] See *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* vol. 7, ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1993), 125. Also, Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. III, trans. M. E. J Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill 1995), 1030.

told readers what happened? The text does not answer these questions, yet the lack of further mention in the biblical text of Jacob's injury raises questions for readers.

In the Anchor Bible Genesis commentary, E.A. Speiser asserts: "Jacob's injury was grave enough to cost him the contest...a permanent injury to remind Jacob of what had taken place."[113] This comment certainly supports the idea that the injury indicates a transformation that has internally occurred within Jacob. Yet, in the context of this story, which occurs with a name change that seems to stick far less readily than the one experienced by Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17:5 and 17:15), it seems fitting that this new identity does not quite adhere to Jacob's slippery figure. If, as Wynn suggests, the story is meant to parallel Abraham's circumcision (Genesis 17) as a physical reminder of the covenant, then it would seem reasonable to believe this is a permanent action.[114] The text refers to him as "Jacob" throughout the rest of this chapter and those that follow, until Jacob again receives the name "Israel" directly from God in Genesis 35:10.[115] Although the verses that follow this second re-naming use "Israel" more frequently, he continues to be called by the name Jacob.[116] If the text intends the physical injury to mirror an internal transformation signified by the name change from "Jacob" to "Israel," the inconsistent

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[113] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*. 3rd Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. 1964), 256-257.
[114] See Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 100, for comparisons to Abraham's circumcision.
[115] For a selection of the verses that use "Jacob" following his receiving the name "Israel" in Gen. 32:29 until he is renamed, see Gen. 27:30-31, 27:33, 33:1, 33:10, 33:17-18, 34:1, 34:3, 34:5-7, 34:13, and 34:19.
[116] For a selection of the verses that use "Jacob" following his re-receiving the name "Israel" in Gen. 35:10, see Gen. 35:14-15, 35:20, 35:22, 35:23, 35:26-27, 35:29, 36:6, and 37:1-2.

use of "Israel" would seem to indicate a temporary physical condition, rather than a permanently altered state.

B. Jacob's Injury in Midrashic Literature

The rabbis express conflicting opinions regarding the severity and permanence of Jacob's injury. *Breishit Rabbah* 77 quotes Rabbi Eliezer as saying that ותקע means "to flatten," which sounds uncomfortable but not likely to leave lasting damage. In the name of Rabbi Assi, Rabbi Berachia said, that in fact the verb means to split like a fish. Such an action of butchering would undoubtedly leave lasting injury on the victim. Rabbi Nachman bar Yaakov identified what happens to Jacob's thigh with the kind of spiritual separation implied by the verb's usage in Ezekiel 23:18. This might suggest that, while the separation was significant, it could be reversed.

In *Midrash Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 37[117] explains that Jacob's refusal to release "the man" and his desire to overpower him resulted in "the man" reacting violently and making that tendon like the fat around the forbidden tendon of the thigh. The midrash points to this connection to Genesis 32:33 as evidence that the injury was permanent with the implication being that as the law stands עַד, הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה, "until today," Jacob's injury was likewise permanent.

The Book of Legends 83 cites Midrash Avkir, a smaller midrashic compilation especially interested in angelology, as the source for a story where it is the angel Michael with whom Jacob wrestles. In this story, God becomes angered that Michael has injured Jacob, so Michael calls for Raphael to come and heal Jacob's injury. God says that Jacob

[117] Chapter 37, *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, (New York: Om Publishing 1946), 86a-b.

should no more be injured as God's priest on earth than Michael, as God's priest in the heavens. This story highlights an important element of this physical disability: the injury would disqualify from the priesthood according to laws regarding who can serve as a priest (Leviticus 21:16-24). While Jacob lives prior to the creation of the priesthood, as the namesake of the nation, for him to bear this kind of injury permanently could call into question his future descendants' fitness to become priests at all. The healing by Raphael ensures that Jacob is unblemished and a suitable father to the tribal namesakes he fathers.

C. Jacob's Injury in Medieval Commentaries

The *mfarshim* attempt to explain the vocabulary used to describe what happens to Jacob, with implications for their understanding of the severity of Jacob's injury. Rashi and Rashbam both use Jeremiah 6:8 to explain the injury as being like the threat of God's spirit being alienated from Jerusalem. This verse, which is meant as a warning to prevent such alienation, nonetheless seems indicative of a separation that could be reversed, as God could choose to reverse the separation threatened in Jeremiah. Rashi later offers a comparison text from Malachi 3:20 to justify a reading that the risen sun heals Jacob's limp. The text reads: "But a sun of righteousness will arise for you, those revering my name; and healing [is] in her wings. And so you will go out and you will frisk about like stall-fed calves,"[118]

וְזָרְחָה לָכֶם יִרְאֵי שְׁמִי, שֶׁמֶשׁ צְדָקָה, וּמַרְפֵּא, בִּכְנָפֶיהָ; וִיצָאתֶם וּפִשִּׁתֶם, כְּעֶגְלֵי מַרְבֵּק.

which Rashi brings to support his assertion that Jacob's relationship with God enabled him to receive the solar healing described in Malachi 3:20. Rashbam does not go this far.

[118] Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, [1st Ed.] ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 25d (New York: Doubleday 1998), 326.

Instead, he reads והוא צלע על -ירכו as indicative of Jacob's moment of realization in the morning that he was limping, just as he realized in the morning that he married Leah and not Rachel (Gen. 29:25).

Radak's explanation of what occurs contains elements of both a temporary and permanent understanding of Jacob's injury. He places Jacob's wrestling encounter in the context of a dream, where the injury is the physical sign to Jacob meant to warn him of future pain from his offspring. Radak explains that this is meant to warn Jacob about what will happen to Dinah, because כף is a feminine form; but Jacob does not understand this. This injury, Radak says, was not intended to be permanent, but Jacob's obsequious behavior towards Esau results in the injury being made permanent, as God punishes Jacob for not trusting that God will keep him from harm.

D. Jacob's Injury in Biblical Disabilities Studies

Modern biblical scholars devote considerable attention to Jacob's injury, but they too reach no consensus on the nature or permanence of Jacob's injury. Judith Z. Abrams, in analyzing Jacob in her book *Judaism and Disability*, makes the case that Jacob's injury reflects his inner state: "His flawed moral state has finally been made manifest in his physical state and he is, somehow, released from his sin of tricking his father and brother."[119] Abrams' reading casts Jacob's injury as retributive justice for wrongs he has done, thereby arguing that Jacob earned or deserved this injury for previous wrongdoings. Such an interpretation proves problematic because it implicates an injury as evidence of internal character flaws. From the *pshat* of the narrative, Jacob earns the injury by

[119] Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 85.

refusing to stop fighting, rather than as a result of previous actions. While some modern readers may be uncomfortable with Jacob's actions towards his brother and father, the biblical text does little to condemn Jacob explicitly, and indeed champions Jacob's survival and success in each venture.[120] Abrams does not cite specific evidence to support the assertion that Jacob's injury is meant to be a punishment, rather than a natural consequence of his behavior: he was wrestled with someone, who he refused to release, and who injured him as a result, but he nevertheless continued to fight until he got what he wanted.

Kerry Wynn offers a very different perspective on Jacob's injury in his chapter in *This Abled Body*. He considers prior scholarship that views Jacob as simultaneously winning and losing, a tragic hero who walks away from the fight injured.[121] By establishing that the injury makes the victory less than complete and also makes Jacob less than complete, these scholars propagate assumptions about physical limitations and the people who receive them, assuming that Jacob would be better off without his injury. Wynn argues that by making Jacob's injury a tragedy and by promoting an understanding of the victory as less than it would be had he emerged unscathed, scholars promote a

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[120] Rebecca sends Jacob away from his brother Esau's murderous rage (Gen. 27:42-28:5) but they meet again peacefully (Gen. 33:3-4). Jacob and his family flee from Laban (31:17-21), and when Laban angrily chases after them, they make a covenant with each other and leave each other in peace (Gen. 31:43-32:1). When there is famine in Canaan, Jacob sends his sons to bring back grain to save their family from starvation (Gen. 42:1-2) and discovers his beloved son Joseph, whom he believed dead, is governor in Egypt and establishes the whole family in Goshen (Gen. 45:9-11, 45:26-27).

[121] Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability," in *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

sense that the injury minimizes Jacob's accomplishment.[122] Still other scholars consider Jacob's injury as a symbol of Jacob's still-incomplete self-improvement as part of his journey from "Jacob" to "Israel," or as foreshadowing of the imperfection of future people of Israel or the Church and its followers. This establishes injury and disability as demeaning, and hence marginalizes those with such injuries. The discomfort with injury and its negative perception is such that some claim that the איש is neither God nor angel, but a demon, because to posit that such an imperfection comes from divine source is impossible for some to reconcile theologically.[123] Others struggle with what could be considered a contradiction: Jacob, severely injured, nonetheless holds the איש captive. In his own analysis of this incident, Wynn sees these various interpretations as evidence of the "normate hermeneutic" that exists in modern scholarship yet is not present in the biblical text.[124] He argues that, in fact, Jacob's injury becomes a symbol of the covenant, comparable to Abraham's circumcision, and made permanent for the generations to come in the dietary law that is connected to this incident.[125] According to Wynn, Jacob's persistence in fighting despite the injury proves him worthy of such a relationship with God.

Saul M. Olyan takes another angle in examining this encounter. In his book, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, he argues, counter to Wynn, that this particular encounter does little to break down stigmatization of people with disabilities. Rather, Olyan understands Jacob's injury as a sign of divine power over humanity, rather than evidence

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[122] Wynn, "Normate," 96-97.
[123] Wynn, "Normate," 97-98.
[124] Wynn, "Normate," 98.
[125] Wynn, "Normate," 100.

of qualities present in Jacob himself.[126] While that explains Jacob's injury, Olyan's explanation does not seem to account for the איש asking to be let go, or why Jacob's opponent acceded to Jacob's demand for a blessing. In doing so, Olyan seems to minimize Jacob's active role in the events in favor of highlighting what he assumes to be a divine aggressor and victor. In doing so, he may fall prey to some of the biases that Kerry Wynn sees in many other biblical scholars.

Part II: Mephiboshet

A. Mephiboshet's Injury in the Bible

Like Jacob, Mephiboshet experiences a transformative injury which, for Mephiboshet, coincides with an undeniable change in status. The narrator in II Samuel 4:4 introduces Mephiboshet at a moment of decline in the fortune and power of the House of Saul and rise of the House of David. As a surviving member of the House of Saul, Mephiboshet's position is precarious. His first textual appearance comes at a moment that underlines the vulnerability of the Saulide line: his introduction is inserted into the middle of a narrative describing the murder of Ishbosheth, the last Saulide king of Israel (Second Samuel 4). The text introduces him in a noteworthy manner: the text first describes his royal lineage and his physical impairment, then the text explains his accident and reiterates Mephiboshet's altered physical condition, and only at the end mentioning his name:

> "And Jonathan son of Saul had a lame son, five years old he was when the news of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. And his nurse bore him off

[126] Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10.

and fled, and it happened in her haste to flee that he fell and was crippled. And his name was Mephibosheth," (II Sam. 4:4).[127]

וְלִיהוֹנָתָן, בֶּן-שָׁאוּל, בֵּן, נְכֵה רַגְלָיִם; בֶּן-חָמֵשׁ שָׁנִים הָיָה בְּבֹא שְׁמֻעַת שָׁאוּל וִיהוֹנָתָן מִיִּזְרְעֶאל, וַתִּשָּׂאֵהוּ אֹמַנְתּוֹ וַתָּנָס, וַיְהִי בְּחָפְזָהּ לָנוּס וַיִּפֹּל וַיִּפָּסַח, וּשְׁמוֹ מְפִיבֹשֶׁת.

Introducing him in this way provides justification for Mephiboshet's presence in the David story, neutralizes him as a possible political threat by emphasizing his lack of physical fitness to be king, and presents him as an innocent child during the period of David's rise to power. Throughout the rest of the narrative, the text continues to remind readers of Mephiboshet's injury, a physical manifestation of Mephiboshet's changed fortunes: from grandson to the king and son to the prince, to a lowly supplicant granted allowances on the whims of David, the new king.[128] Ziba, a former servant of Saul, names Mephiboshet as a surviving member of Jonathan's family, prompting David to summon him and give to Mephiboshet his family's ancestral lands as well as secure him a seat in the king's household, gifts for which Mephiboshet demonstrates considerable gratitude (Second Samuel 9) . Later, Ziba tells David that Mephiboshet has been hoping for David's failure and the reinstating of the Saulide dynasty, resulting in David's gifting to Ziba the territory he previously bestowed upon Mephiboshet (II Sam. 16:1-4). When David returns to Jerusalem some time later, Mephiboshet greets him dressed as if in mourning to defend his name and accuse Ziba of lying (II Sam.19:26-29). David replies by dividing the property between Ziba and Mephiboshet, who says Ziba can have

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[127] Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company 2013), 448.
[128] The text references Mephiboshet's injury in II Sam. 9:3 when Ziba describes Mephiboshet but does not name him, in 9:13 when the text described his presence at David's table, and in 19:27 when Mephiboshet mentions his injury. The text mentions him without reference to his injury in II Sam. 16:1-4 when Ziba implicates him for treason, and in 21:7 when he is described only by lineage.

everything (II Sam. 19:30-31). The last mention of Mephiboshet is to clarify that David saved him from the Gideonites when seven other men of the Saul line were killed out of the love he had for Jonathan (II Sam. 21:7).

Etymologically, "Mephiboshet" means "from the mouth of shame"; the account in I Chronicles 8:34 and 9:40 use the variant "Meribaal," which means "advocate of Ba'al.'[129] This inconsistency may reflect the existence of two different figures; or that the name change represents an attempt by textual redactors to sanitize a name that had uncomfortable references to a pagan deity.[130] In several chapters of Second Samuel, Mephiboshet appears as a recurring character described as suffering from a physical disability. The text also presents another character named Mephiboshet who is described as Saul's son by Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, and brother to Armoni (II Sam. 21:8).[131] To further muddy the waters, in one case the text refers to the Mephiboshet with the physical impairment simply as "son of Saul" as opposed to "son of Jonathan son of Saul" (II Sam. 19:25, 19:27).[132] All of this complicates an attempt to understand Mephiboshet's character. For the purposes of this character study, I assume that each mention of Mephiboshet, with the exception of II Sam. 21:8, refers to the same character, as the narrative consistently mentions the detail regarding his legs as his story advances.[133] First

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[129] See II Sam. 4:4, 9:6, 9:10-13, 16:1, 16:4, 19:25-26, 19:31, and 21:7 for instances of "Mephiboshet." See 1 Chron. 8:34 and 9:40 for "Meribaal."
[130] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible* [2nd Ed.] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 620. Robert Alter asserts that the original form was Mephibaal (Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 448).
[131] See P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *II Samuel*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1984), 124-125 for an analysis of the various name iterations and evolution.
[132] McCarter mentions that the Septuagint has "grandson of Saul" (417).
[133] I acknowledge that there are scholars who have argued for a more nuanced differentiation between these figures, however for the purposes of this study which is

Chronicles only supplies the detail that he had a child named Micah.[134] This detail raises questions about Mephiboshet's social status in David's kingdom and the extent of his physical debility. Judging from the lineage listed in 1 Chronicles 8:34-40 and 9:40-44, the preservation of the Saul line extended beyond Mephiboshet, perhaps hinting at a political reality that challenged or threatened the Davidic claim to the throne.

The potential political threat posed by Mephiboshet might perhaps account for the text's repeated mentioning of his physical imperfection. In describing the injury to Mephiboshet's legs, the text utilizes different phrases. His injury is first referenced with the term נִכֵּה רַגְלָיִם (II Sam. 4:4), meaning "stricken, or lame in the legs."[135] The biblical text only uses נכה רגלים in reference to Mephiboshet.[136] Ziba describes him in II Sam. 9:3b, using the same language as in II Sam. 4:4: "'There is yet a son of Jonathan's, who is crippled.'"[137]

...עוֹד בֵּן לִיהוֹנָתָן נִכֵּה רַגְלָיִם.

Other passages employ a different phrase. Second Samuel 4:4 also describes Mephiboshet as וַיִּפָּסֵחַ meaning "to become lame."[138] This *niphal* form of the root פסח

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interested in the character development, this seemed the most fruitful. For consideration of Mephiboshet based on different textual traditions, see Thomas Hentrich's chapter "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible," in *This Abled Body.*

[134] Micah is also mentioned in II Sam. 9:12, although his name there is spelled מיכא rather than מיכה.

[135] *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* vol. 5, ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1993), 691.

[136] The text uses נכה in construct form in only one other place: Isaiah 66:3, which has וּנְכֵה-רוּחַ meaning of "contrite or meek."

[137] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 470-471.

[138] See *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* vol. 6, ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1993), 723-725. Also, Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. III, trans. M. E. J Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill 1995), 947-948.

appears in the *piel* form, in II Samuel 9:13 and 19:27, where the text uses the root as an adjective meaning "limping"[139] or lame."[140] II Samuel 9:13 describes Mephiboshet's position in the court before reminding readers of his physical impairment: "And Mephibosheth dwelled in Jerusalem, for at the king's table he would always eat. And he was lame in both his feet."[141]

וּמְפִיבֹשֶׁת, יֹשֵׁב בִּירוּשָׁלִַם, כִּי עַל-שֻׁלְחַן הַמֶּלֶךְ תָּמִיד, הוּא אֹכֵל; וְהוּא פִּסֵּחַ, שְׁתֵּי רַגְלָיו.

In II Samuel 19:27, Mephiboshet describes himself in this way:"And he [Mephiboshet] said, 'My lord the king! My servant deceived me. For your servant thought, 'I'll saddle me the donkey and ride on it and go with the king,' for your servant is lame.'"[142]

וַיֹּאמַר, אֲדֹנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ עַבְדִּי רִמָּנִי: כִּי-אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ אָחְבְּשָׁה-לִּי הַחֲמוֹר וְאֶרְכַּב עָלָיְהָ, וְאֵלֵךְ אֶת-הַמֶּלֶךְ--כִּי פִּסֵּחַ, עַבְדֶּךָ.

In both of these cases, the form is used as an adjective, however these are the only verses when the biblical text uses this root in this way. Elsewhere, the text utilizes the *qattil* form as a noun, giving it the meaning "a lame person."[143] In Isaiah 35:6, we find פסח utilized in a verse that speaks to God's power over nature: "Then the cripple will leap like the deer,/and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy./ Yes, water will burst forth in the desert,/wadis flow in the wilderness;"[144]

אָז יְדַלֵּג כָּאַיָּל פִּסֵּחַ, וְתָרֹן לְשׁוֹן אִלֵּם: כִּי-נִבְקְעוּ בַמִּדְבָּר מַיִם, וּנְחָלִים בָּעֲרָבָה

[139] Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, *Lexicon*, vol. III, trans. M. E. J Richardson, 948.
[140] *Dictionary,* vol. 6, ed. David J.A. Clines, 724.
[141] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 473.
[142] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 546.
[143] *Dictionary,* vol. 6, ed. David J.A. Clines, 724.
[144] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, [1st Ed.] ed. The Anchor Bible Vol. 19 (New York: Doubleday 2000), 455.

Each phrase is set up as a dramatic reversal of the natural order. For this technique to be effective, the contrast between expectations and what the text describes has to be considerable. This usage indicates that פסח as used here indicates someone without use of their legs, as the reversal references the agility of deer. Proverbs 26:7 supports this understanding of פסח as a person without use of their legs by making this analogy: "Legs dangle from a cripple and a proverb in the mouth of dolts."[145]

דַּלְיוּ שֹׁקַיִם, מִפִּסֵּחַ; וּמָשָׁל, בְּפִי כְּסִילִים.

This text compares the intellectual limitations of a "dolt" to the limited mobility of a "cripple."[146]

In Jeremiah 31:8, again פסח is used in a context of God influencing and altering nature: "Look I will bring them/from the land of the north/And I will gather them from remote parts of the earth/among them the blind and the lame/the pregnant and woman in labor together/a great assembly shall return here."[147]

הִנְנִי מֵבִיא אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ צָפוֹן, וְקִבַּצְתִּים מִיַּרְכְּתֵי-אָרֶץ--בָּם עִוֵּר וּפִסֵּחַ, הָרָה וְיֹלֶדֶת יַחְדָּו: קָהָל גָּדוֹל, יָשׁוּבוּ הֵנָּה.

Here these groups are representative of groups who "could not have made the walk to Assyria, or… to Babylon," but with God's support, the verse says, the impossible becomes possible.[148] Here, the context is such that it is unclear whether the people referred to by פסח are incapable of walking at all, or incapable of the quantity and

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[145] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [1st Ed.] ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 18B (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 2009), 791.
[146] Fox, *Proverbs*, 794.
[147] Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, [1st Ed.] ed. The Anchor Bible Vol. 21B (New York: Doubleday 2004), 419-420.
[148] Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 424.

duration of walking that this journey would require, without God's support. In Job 29:15, Job uses פסח again to represent a group of people who have limited mobility, and offers himself as the solution to what they lack: "Eyes I became for the blind, and legs for the lame I was."[149]

עֵינַיִם הָיִיתִי, לַעִוֵּר; וְרַגְלַיִם לַפִּסֵּחַ אָנִי.

Mephiboshet expresses a need for precisely this kind of assistance in II Samuel 19:27 which he says Ziba failed to provide, leaving him helpless.

In total, the text includes five descriptions of his leg injury, leaving only two times when the text mentions him without mention of his disability (II Sam. 16:1-4 and 21:7). This repetition certainly seems suggestive, politically: as a surviving heir of the Saul line, Mephiboshet conceivably could have a claim to the throne, were it not for a physical condition which rendered him disqualified.[150] Yet, despite this injury, the text demonstrates that David still may have feared the potential ascension back to glory of the Saul line, especially because there is no explicit or apparent prohibition bars a man with this kind of injury from becoming king.[151] The fact that Mephiboshet was reinstated as a landowner lends credence to the idea that the ability of a man with a physical impairment to participate in society varied from cultic to secular contexts: therefore Mephiboshet's injury on its own might not have necessarily prevented him from becoming king.[152]

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[149] Alter, *Wisdom*, 120.
[150] Berlin and Brettler, *Study Bible*, 612.
[151] P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *II Samuel*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1984), 265.
[152] Thomas Hentrich, "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible." In *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 85.

The biblical text may contain evidence of the political threat posed by Mephiboshet to David. In Second Samuel 16, Ziba convinces David of Mephiboshet's disloyalty, which David is quick to believe, confiscating the lands he had given to Mephiboshet and bestowing them on Ziba (II Sam. 16:1-4). When Mephiboshet later attempts to clear his name, he seems unable to fully remove the doubt in David: rather than re-conferring upon Mephiboshet what he had taken away, David instead instructs Ziba and Mephiboshet to divide the property (II Sam. 19:25-31). From the text alone, it is unclear whether Mephiboshet was indeed disloyal or Ziba had falsely accused Mephiboshet; but when confronted by David, Mephiboshet quickly reminds David of his limitations and demonstrate his loyalty. Whether this loyalty is an act truly felt or a wise political maneuver to save face, Mephiboshet acknowledges his own dependence on those around him, thus neutralizing his potential as a political threat.

B. Mephiboshet's Injury in Rabbinic Texts

If indeed the Deuteronomistic historians had considered Mephiboshet a potential political threat to the Davidic monarchy, then by the time of the Talmud, this facet of his story seems to have declined in popularity, perhaps due to his successful neutralization in Tanakh by the repeated mention of his disability. In Shabbat 56b, the *stam* explains Mephiboshet's two names by illustrating Mephiboshet quarreling with God over David's safe return and the transfer of property to Ziba. Yet Rav Yehuda attributes David's belief of Ziba's slander to the eventual dissolution of the United Kingdom, perhaps a gesture towards clearing Mephiboshet's name. The text does not mention Mephiboshet's limited mobility. Mephiboshet's injury may nonetheless have played a role in either

interpretation's characterization here: the *stam* may have felt that Mephiboshet's outer imperfection indicated an inner impurity, just as Rav Yehuda may have assumed that Mephiboshet's vulnerable physical state would have cemented Mephiboshet's gratitude and loyalty to David, who returned to Mephiboshet the lands traditionally owned by Saul's family and who brought Mephiboshet to the king's own table.

C. Mephiboshet's Injury in Medieval Commentaries

Mephiboshet also receives relatively little attention in the medieval commentaries. Rashi explains that פסח שתי רגליו in II Sam. 4:4 means Mephiboshet's legs were broken, but provides no insight into his character. R. Isaiah Metrani understands נכה, also in II Sam. 4:4, to be related to beating, perhaps highlighting the threat of violence the nurse perceived, which caused their flight. Radak's analysis addresses why the first mention of Mephiboshet is in the story of Ishboshet's murder. Radak explains:

> "Why is the matter of Mephiboshet son of Jonathan also told here? In announce that, with the death of Ishboshet, there was no one fitting to inherit the kingship from the House of Saul, because Mephiboshet fell and was made lame and no sons of Saul remained, only sons of Rizpah the concubine."[153]

ומה שספר הנה גם כן עניין מפיבושת בן יהונתן, להודיע כי במות איש בשת לא נשאר לבית שאול יורש עצר וראוי למלכות, כי מפיבשת בן יהונתן נפל ונעשה נכה רגלים ולשאול לא נשאר בן כי אם בני רצפה הפילגש

Radak's conclusion is that pairing Mephiboshet's injury with the murder of the Saulide king firmly establishes David's claim, lacking any Saulide rivals.

D. Mephiboshet's Injury in Biblical Disability Studies

Recently biblical scholars have turned their attention to Mephiboshet as a biblical character closely associated with his disability. In his article "Scripture and the Disabled:

[153] Personal translation.

Redeeming Mephiboshet's Identity," Christopher D. Rouse argues that despite Mephiboshet's injury, he is "offered a place of recognition in the king's house and land" and treated as an individual in the narrative (II Sam. 9:7-13). Yet Rouse nonetheless calls him a "victim" when David gives Ziba the property that previously belonged to Mephiboshet (II Sam. 16:1-4).[154] In making Mephiboshet a victim, Rouse unintentionally relegates Mephiboshet back to being a passive participant in a narrative in which he actually plays an active role. This kind of objectification is a familiar trope for characters with disabilities, as this thinking assumes such individuals lack the complexity or the autonomy to fully engage. Rouse easily dismisses the possibility that Ziba's words implicating Mephiboshet (II Sam. 16:3) may have been true. By dismissing this, Rouse ignores the possibility that Mephiboshet may have been disloyal to the king who returned to Mephiboshet the familial lands (II Sam. 9:7), but who also keeps Mephiboshet in Jerusalem where he can be watched (II Sam. 9:13). The text supplies no conclusive evidence of treachery on the part of either Ziba or Mephiboshet, meaning Mephiboshet's words (II Sam. 19:27-29) are his only defense.[155] Rouse characterizes Ziba's speech as "crafted and ambiguous" but labels Mephiboshet's display on seeing David as "direct…[and] concise," when the scene with Mephiboshet reading much like a pageant with costume and hyperbole. This is not to say Ziba is honest and Mephiboshet the liar, but rather intended to raise the issue that it is a matter of judgment in the face of the text's terseness concerning who is villain and who tragic hero in this story. By casting

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[154] Christopher D. Rouse, "Scripture and the Disabled: Redeeming Mephiboshet's Identity," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 17 (2008), 189, 191.
[155] Ora Horn Prouser, *Esau's Blessing* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2011), 96-97.

Mephiboshet as victim, Rouse seems to fall victim himself to an understanding of Mephiboshet characterized by his limitations, rather than his abilities.

By contrast, Ora Horn Prouser closely reads the text and identifies the ambiguity in Mephiboshet's relationship with David and the lack of clear truth in the accusations both Ziba and Mephiboshet made towards each other. Prouser's reading allows for the possibility that Mephiboshet could be a groveling dependent or a savvy political operative.[156] In doing so, Prouser demonstrates an ability to consider Mephiboshet as a person who happens to have a disability, rather than assuming his limitations define him. Her reading of Second Samuel is expansive, allowing for her and her readers to imagine all the different iterations of these characters.[157]

Jeremy Schipper, who wrote an entire book on Mephiboshet, studies Mephiboshet in conversation with David, in conflict with Ziba, in light of the larger Davidic narrative, and taking into account historical attitudes towards physical impairments and expectations for kings.[158] His understanding of the multiplicity of theories regarding disability enables him to bring a nuanced understanding to the character.[159] He highlights the ambiguity of the text, raising up the ambivalence with which the Bible treats David, Mephiboshet and Ziba in their encounters, leaving none clearly in the wrong or the right. [160] He comes to the conclusion that, in fact, Mephiboshet's disability does not by definition convey any clear implications for his character, because each reader comes to

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[156] Prouser, *Essau*, 97-98.
[157] Prouser, *Essau*, 101-102.
[158] Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).
[159] Schipper, *Mephibosheth*, 16-21.
[160] Schipper, *Mephibosheth*, 49-60.

the text with different associations and assumptions regarding the interplay of physical impairment and character.[161] For this reason, Schipper argues, Mephiboshet makes a powerful case study for biblical disability studies.[162]

Part III: Jacob and Mephiboshet: Injury, Healing, and Identity

The preceding study has shown an interesting difference in how readers respond to Jacob and Mephiboshet. While the Torah does not mention Jacob's injury again after Genesis 32, commentators have spent considerably exegetical energy trying to understand Jacob's injury. In contrast, the biblical text mentions Mephiboshet's many times, but his physical impairment does not receive much consideration in the various commentaries. This difference may be due to ambiguities in Jacob's story compared to the clarity of Mephiboshet's injury. Alternatively, this difference could be attributed to the fact that Jacob's hip injury occurs at a pivotal moment when Jacob becomes Israel shortly before reuniting with his estranged brother Esau, while Mephiboshet's injury does not have this kind of interpretive potential. This response may reflect readers' desire to view Jacob as a character who transcends his injury, while Mephiboshet cannot be allowed to do so, whether for political reasons or other motivations. Not all injuries are permanently debilitating, and some physical impairments are temporary.

For these two biblical characters whose bodies reflected the physical trials each suffered, the lasting implications of these injuries on them remains unclear and open to interpretation. Their stories, and the ways in which Jews have traditionally interpreted their stories, provide examples of the many ways identity can be affected by trauma.

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[161] Schipper, *Mephibosheth*, 103.
[162] Schipper, *Mephibosheth*, 5-10.

Some people move beyond the trauma they were dealt with and do not let it dominate their self-understanding. Others struggle to move on and let their trauma define them. Some refuse to address or mention their difficulties, while others speak about them openly with great comfort or acceptance. We do not know which of these categories these two biblical characters might have fallen into, no more than we may know how the people we interact with on a daily basis relate to their own physical ability or impairment.

Moreover, as we interact with those in our communities who find themselves suffering injuries, the stories of Jacob and Mephiboshet underscore the existential questions and dilemmas such injuries raise for the individuals and for those around them. With some people, we learn to see beyond their injury, while with others this may be more challenging. Some people may be comfortable asking for help and others might not be, or they might not need assistance. Recognizing the ambiguity of each of these character's stories and the effect of their injuries, makes us more conscious that those we interact with may find themselves anywhere in that same range of possible reactions and responses; but we cannot know how they may understand or interact with their own injuries unless we let them speak to us.

Chapter 4 - Moses and Leah: A Question of Disability

The characters paired in this chapter share the weakest connection. Unlike Isaac and Samson and Jacob and Mephiboshet who all share physical limitations of a similar variety, Moses and Leah are united in the tenuousness of their claim to disability and in some of the themes which arise in the midrashic attempts to explain the disabilities attributed to each. In examining Moses and Leah, this chapter will consider what constitutes disability and why these characters are associated with disabilities despite the ambiguity with which the biblical text explains the individual attributes of each character.

Part I: Moses

A: Moses and the Biblical Text

Exodus introduces the character of Moses, first as a baby to Hebrew slaves who must hide the infant lest he fall victim to Pharaoh's decree of death to all male Hebrew babies (Ex. 2:2). Moses then appears as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2:10). When he is older, he comes upon an Egyptian slave master beating a Hebrew slave and kills the slave master (Ex. 2:12). When he realizes that his crime is known, Moses runs away and arrives in Midian, where he defends a group of women from bandits at a well (Ex. 2:14-15, 2:17). The women bring Moses to meet their father, who eventually gives Zipporah, one of his daughters, to Moses to marry (Ex. 2:21). He becomes a shepherd for his father-in-law (Ex. 3:1). The Moses who encounters God in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2) is neither slave nor prince, but a foreigner welcomed into a community in which he has

chosen to make a home. When God issues Moses with a mission to return to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh and free the Hebrew slaves (3:10), Moses declines three times on grounds of not deserving to be chosen for the task (Ex. 3:11), not knowing God's name (Ex. 3:13), and the Israelites not listening to him (Ex. 4:1). For each of these excuses, God counters with a solution.[163] In Moses' fourth and final attempt to decline God's call at the burning bush, the text reads: "And Moses said, 'Please, my Lord, no man of words am I, not at any time in the past nor now since You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued,'" (Ex. 4:10).[164]

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה, בִּי אֲדֹנָי, לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַּם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשִּׁלְשֹׁם, גַּם מֵאָז דַּבֶּרְךָ אֶל-עַבְדֶּךָ: כִּי כְבַד-פֶּה וּכְבַד לָשׁוֹן, אָנֹכִי.

The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew understands כְּבַד-פֶּה וּכְבַד לָשׁוֹן to mean that Moses was slow of speech.[165] Whether this is due to a physiological issue or not is unclear, which Robert Alter addresses in his commentary: "It seems futile to speculate… whether Moses suffered from an actual speech impediment or merely was unaccustomed to public speaking."[166] Yet futile or not, the plethora of attention devoted to this ambiguity suggests a deep curiosity and need to understand who Moses was and what he was like, as a way to understand why God chose him, despite Moses' own misgivings. In his commentary on Exodus, William H. C. Propp identifies three major interpretations of this verse: as a speech impediment, as a lack of eloquence, or, in reference specifically to "heavy of

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[163] Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), 55.
[164] Alter, *Five Books*, 327.
[165] *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. David J.A. Clines, vol. 4, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 352.
[166] Alter, *Five Books*, 327.

tongue" as a lack of proficiency in a foreign language.[167] He understands לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים to be a comment on Moses' inarticulate speech as a result of כְּבַד-פֶּה וּכְבַד לָשׁוֹן, having impaired speech.[168] Nahum M. Sarna, in his comment on this verse, recognizes the same three possibilities as Propp, but he notes that God's response to Moses' concern indicates that "prophetic eloquence is… a divine endowment" not requiring the recipient to possess any gifts independently.[169] God responds: "And the Lord said to him, 'Who gave man a mouth or who makes him mute or deaf or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? And now, go, and I Myself will be with your mouth and will instruct you what to say,'" (Ex. 4:11-12).[170]

> **יא** וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו, מִי שָׂם פֶּה לָאָדָם, אוֹ מִי-יָשׂוּם אִלֵּם, אוֹ חֵרֵשׁ אוֹ פִקֵּחַ אוֹ עִוֵּר--הֲלֹא אָנֹכִי, יְהוָה. **יב** וְעַתָּה, לֵךְ; וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם-פִּיךָ, וְהוֹרֵיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר.

By claiming responsibility for what abilities people receive, God states that any difficulty with speaking that Moses has is a result of God making Moses that way . As Propp notes, God's response would seem more appropriate in the event that Moses has a speech impediment, given God's references to other human faculties.[171]

To uncover the meaning of כְּבַד-פֶּה וּכְבַד לָשׁוֹן other phrases that utilize similar phrasing must be examined. To that end, a similar phrase appears in Ezekiel 3:5-6, where God assures Ezekiel that the people Israel to whom Ezekiel must speak are sensible and will understand what he has to say, as he will understand them:

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[167] William H. C. Propp, *Exodus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* 1st Ed. ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. 1999), 210-211.
[168] Propp, *Exodus*, 211.
[169] Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1991), 21.
[170] Alter, *Five Books*, 327.
[171] Propp, *Exodus*, 211.

> "'For you are not being sent to a people whose speech is obscure and whose language is difficult, [but] to the house of Israel; not to one of the many peoples whose speech is obscure and whose language is difficult, whose words you cannot understand - surely if I sent you to them they would listen to you,'" (Eze. 3:5-6).[172]

ה כִּי לֹא אֶל-עַם עִמְקֵי שָׂפָה, וְכִבְדֵי לָשׁוֹן--אַתָּה שָׁלוּחַ: אֶל-בֵּית, יִשְׂרָאֵל. ו לֹא אֶל-עַמִּים רַבִּים, עִמְקֵי שָׂפָה וְכִבְדֵי לָשׁוֹן, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תִשְׁמַע, דִּבְרֵיהֶם; אִם-לֹא אֲלֵיהֶם שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ, הֵמָּה יִשְׁמְעוּ אֵלֶיךָ.

Here God does not seem to describe a physical state or a physical limitation, but rather the people's language and facility with speech. The *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* confirms this understanding, explaining that עִמְקֵי שָׂפָה means "incomprehensible language."[173] This does not indicate a physical barrier to speaking. Moshe Greenberg asserts that the phrasing here of עִמְקֵי שָׂפָה, וְכִבְדֵי לָשׁוֹן "whose speech is obscure and whose language is difficult" carries a different meaning than the text in Exodus 4:10.[174] He justifies this citing Jeffry H. Tigay's article, which says that in Ezekiel 3 "'heavy' has been extended from a medical affliction which causes unintelligible speech to a metaphor for speech which is unintelligible because of its foreignness."[175] Earlier in the article, Tigay asserts that כְּבַד-פֶּה וּכְבַד לָשׁוֹן would indeed describe a medical condition, but he acknowledges that the wide semantic range of the term complicates matters.[176]

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[172] Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, [1st Ed.], ed. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 22 (New York: Doubleday 1983), 60-61.
[173] Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol.3, trans. M.E.J. Richardson, (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 849.
[174] Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 68-69.
[175] Jeffry H. Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 231, no. 231 (Oct. 1978): 58, accessed on January 25, 2018, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1356746.
[176] Tigay, "Moses' Speech," 57.

Later in the text, Moses again expresses his concerns with serving as a spokesperson: "And Moses spoke before the Lord, saying, 'Look, the Israelites did not heed me, and how will Pharaoh heed me, and I am uncircumcised of lips?'" (Ex. 6:12).[177]

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לֵאמֹר: הֵן בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֹא-שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי, וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמָעֵנִי פַּרְעֹה, וַאֲנִי עֲרַל שְׂפָתָיִם.

In Exodus 6:30, Moses repeats his concern: "And Moses said before the Lord, 'Look, I am uncircumcised of lips, and how will Pharaoh heed me?''[178] HALOT draws a connection between the Ezekiel text mentioned above and עֲרַל שְׂפָתַיִם, which it defines as "unpractised and unrefined in speech."[179] This language follows other uses of "uncircumcised" that indicate a blockage or difficulty in functioning.[180] Circumcision as a sign of the covenant is the holy, preferred state, so a lack thereof was indicative of excess that prevented ideal presentation. Robert Alter observes: "the metaphor of lack of circumcision suggests not merely incapacity of speech but a kind of ritual lack of fitness for the sacred task."[181] He adds that the usage of "uncircumcised of lips" recalls the "the Bridegroom of Blood story, in which Moses is not permitted to launch on his mission

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[177] Alter, *Five Books*, 341.
[178] Alter, *Five Books*, 344.
[179] Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*,1348.
[180] See Jer. 6:10 for a reference to "uncircumcised ears" referring to the People Israel not heeding prophetic warning and Eze. 44:7, "uncircumcised hearts" meaning "those incapable of contact with God" to refer to foreigners brought in to the Temple who are not followers of God (Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*, 886.). About the Jeremiah text, Lundbom notes that this means "their ear is closed," meaning they are unwilling to hear (Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 425). On Ezekiel 44:7, Zimmerli comments that, in this phrase, "the combination of the ritual aspect and of the inner purity of the heart is nowhere expressed so clearly as here," (Walther Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, trans. James D. Martin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983), 454.). Compared to Ezekiel 44:7, the usage of עֲרַל in Exodus 6:12 and 6:30 seems far more physical in location.
[181] Alter, *Five Books*, 341.

until an act of circumcision is performed."[182] Propp notes that, while this complaint of Moses' echoes his earlier concern, the language of circumcision used here is uniquely biblical, while "heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued" (Ex. 4:10) has parallels elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern texts.[183] Propp argues that in Exodus 6, Moses' sense of being unworthy propels him to speak up, and he draws a distinction that separates this argument from the likely medical objection of Exodus 4.[184] Tigay disagrees, arguing that the phrases are "approximately synonymous," meaning that in Exodus 6 Moses repeats his concerns from Exodus 4, rather than expressing new anxieties about his fitness to serve in the capacity for which God chose him.[185] Whatever the source of Moses' anxiety about speaking, in the end, God picked Moses, and Moses reluctantly answered the call. Lacking clear conclusions, this biblical text provides opportunity for much conjecture in the midrashic literature and rabbinic commentaries.

B: Moses and the Midrashic Literature

The midrashic literature contains a consensus that Moses had a physiological problem that affected his ability to speak. In the retelling of the story of Moses and the burning bush in Midrash Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer,[186] Moses explicitly states that his tongue is damaged, which at least clarifies the source of his difficulty: "[Moses] said to [God], 'Master of the Universe, have I not thus said to you I have no power within me, for my tongue is damaged?"[187]

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[182] Alter, *Five Books*, 341.
[183] Propp, *Exodus*, 273.
[184] Propp, *Exodus*, 273-274.
[185] Tigay, "Moses' Speech," 57.
[186] Chapter 40, *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, (New York: Om Publishing 1946), 94a-95b.
[187] Personal translation.

אמר לפניו רבון כל העולמים לא כך אמרתי לך אין בי כח שאני נפגם בלשוני...?[188]

Interestingly, this midrash pairs this complaint with a concern Moses expressed about returning to Egypt and his enemies there. While God replies to Moses' concern for his life, God does not address Moses' anxiety speaking as happens in the biblical text. Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer does not explain why Moses stammers or how he came to do so either, but other midrashic compilations fill in these gaps.

In Shemot Rabbah,[189] we find an explanation for why Moses struggles to speak and protests against God choosing him to send to Pharaoh.[190] The court magicians in Egypt, fearful of Moses' potential to overthrow Pharaoh, arrange a test of baby Moses to see whether he would reach for gold or burning embers. The magicians believed that Moses grabbing the gold would signal the future disaster Moses would bring upon the kingdom. If Moses reached for the embers, however, this would indicate Moses was safe to keep around and did not need to be killed prophylactically. During this test, the angel Gabriel redirected Moses from seizing the gold to picking up the burning embers. When the baby placed the embers in his mouth, the injury he suffered had long-term consequences: "Gabriel came and pushed his [Moses'] hand and it grasped the glowing ember and put his hand with the glowing ember into his mouth and his tongue was burnt from it and made his mouth heavy and his tongue heavy."[191]

ובא גבריאל ודחה את ידו ותפש את הגחלת והכניס ידו עם הגחלת לתוך פיו ונכוה לשונו וממנו נעשה כבד פה וכבד לשון.

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[188] Chapter 40, *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, (New York: Om Publishing 1946), 94b.
[189] Another version appears in Sefer HaYashar, Book of Exodus.
[190] Shemot Rabbah 1:31.
[191] Personal translation.

The story speaks to the need of the midrashists for Moses' injury to serve a purpose, and also traces the origin of this physical imperfection to Moses' childhood, rather than to an innate physical flaw. Here, Moses' injury saves him from an early and untimely death. The story also recalls God's reply to Moses in Exodus 4:11 that God determines who can speak and who cannot: God's sending of Gabriel both saves Moses' life and causes this injury.

Devarim Rabbah presents a different angle on Moses' difficulty speaking, offering a look at how Moses was healed. In 1:1, the midrash confirms Moses' physical problem with his mouth, but the text asserts that the act of receiving Torah healed Moses's tongue. The book of Deuteronomy provides proof of Moses' subsequent ability to deliver a great speech: "when [Moses] got the Torah, his tongue was healed and he started to speak words, from which we read the matter, that is, Deuteronomy, which Moses spoke."[192]

כֵּיוָן שֶׁזָּכָה לַתּוֹרָה נִתְרַפֵּא לְשׁוֹנוֹ וְהִתְחִיל לְדַבֵּר דְּבָרִים, מִנַּיִן, מִמַּה שֶׁקָּרִינוּ בָּעִנְיָן, אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה.

This explanation addresses the issue of how Moses fulfilled his role: partway through, his speech impairment went away.

C: Moses and Medieval Jewish Commentaries

Rashi reads Exodus 4:10 literally when he explains that Moses has a stutter, which makes speaking burdensome. In explaining the text this way, Rashi makes no value judgment on Moses; instead, he simply clarifies what he understands as the *pshat*

[192] Personal translation, Devarim Rabbah 1:1.

of the Torah text. He confirms this in his comment on Exodus 6:12, noting that "uncircumcised lips" signify an obstruction.

Ramban seems to agree with Rashi, in so far as agreeing that Exodus 4:10 Moses says he stuttered. Ramban, however, goes so far as to state that Moses uses his difficulty speaking as an excuse to get out of a task he does not want to fulfill. He points to the fact that Moses draws attention to his difficulty but does not entreat God to improve his speaking to support the idea that Moses would really rather God call on someone else. This explains why God refuses to accept Moses' excuse by reminding Moses of God's power: that Moses cannot get out of his chosen task, since the nature of his complaint is, like all things, under God's purview and power.

Sforno argues that לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי in Exodus 4:10 functions as an assertion of Moses' lack of familiarity with the etiquette involved in addressing Pharaoh. This seems a strange argument, given that Moses was adopted by a daughter of Pharaoh; but perhaps Sforno blames this lapse in Moses' memory on the many years that have passed since he was last in Egypt. Adding on to that, he reads כְּבַד-פֶּה וּכְבַד לָשׁוֹן, אָנֹכִי as indicative of a physiological imperfection.

These commentators all interpret the verses wherein Moses expresses concern about his ability to speak as indicative of a speech impediment. This may be due to the popularity of the midrash involving baby Moses burning his mouth on the glowing embers, which establishes the narrative necessity of Moses receiving this injury, as well as differentiating Moses' difficulty speaking with speech impairments that might have been present from birth and could have carried more of a stigma. These rabbinic

commentaries do not indicate a discomfort with Moses having difficulty speaking, but this does not necessarily indicate a liberal attitude towards people with such disabilities. The medieval commentators' acceptance of Moses' physical imperfection may come from a theological understanding that God demonstrates God's power in the world by choosing an imperfect human like Moses and making it possible for Moses to perform otherwise impossible tasks.

Note, however, that not all commentators agree that Moses had a mechanical problem speaking. Rashbam understands Moses' hesitation in Exodus 4:4 as a result of his lack of proficiency with Egyptian, since he fled from Egypt many years before. He cites the Ezekiel 3:5-6 text as support, a passage that lacks a contextual indication of a speech impediment. Yet, although Rashbam justifies this reading textually, his comment indicates that his interpretation may be isogesis rather than an exegetical reading, stemming not from the text, but rather from an ingrained assumption about who can be a leader and the roles in society played by people with disabilities. He asks incredulously if the man who spoke to God face to face and received Torah could have had a stutter. Rashbam expresses a kind of bias against individuals with disabilities that assumes such individuals have limited potential and ability and therefore such a person could not be capable of the feats that Torah ascribes to Moses.

Unconvinced by Rashbam's hypothesis of Moses' lack of linguistic fluency in Egyptian, Ibn Ezra calls attention to Exodus 4:11 when God responds to Moses' concern, taking credit for putting mouths on faces and making people with a variety of limitations. This rebuttal, Ibn Ezra claims, would make no sense if Moses simply forgot how to speak

Egyptian. He says that Moses' dual excuse is meant to indicate different issues. He reads כְּבַד-פֶּה as indicating difficulty with the language of his birth and כְּבַד לָשׁוֹן as indicative of the many years since he had last spoken Egyptian. Moses could not bring forth the sounds of either the language of his birth or the Egyptian language he learned, but could only speak with great difficulty. From this comment, it is unclear if Ibn Ezra harbors a discomfort with the possibility of Moses possessing a speech impediment or simply does not believe this is indicated in the text.

D: Moses and Biblical Disabilities Studies

In modern scholarship, consideration of Moses' discomfort speaking is approached from a different angle. Where the medieval rabbis attempt to determine if Moses actually had a speech impairment, some scholars today focus on the implications of God choosing someone with a speech impediment to act as spokesperson, while others continue to debate whether Moses indeed warrants being included as a character with a disability.

Some modern scholars examine why God would have chosen Moses, given Moses' speech impediment. In his article "Jewish Theological Approaches to the Human Experience of Disability: A Primer for Rabbis and Rabbinical Students," Wallace Greene strives to identify examples in Jewish tradition that establish the importance and the historic intent around creating inclusive communities.[193] Greene argues that God insists on Moses' role as leader, speech impediment and all, provides evidence that God intends

[193]Wallace Greene, "Jewish and THeological Approaches to the Human Experience of Disability: A Primer for Tabbis and Rabbinical Students," in *Jewish Perspectives on Theology and the Human Experience of Disability*, ed. Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams and William C. Gaventa (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press 2006), 14.

for people to be inclusive rather than limit individuals' opportunity to lead based on physical imperfection.[194] He urges Jewish professionals to create environments where others with limitations like Moses can grow to their full potential as leaders.

Saul M. Olyan also recognizes that God intentionally chose Moses because of his difficulty speaking, but for a very different reason. Olyan argues that choosing Moses was "an opportunity to emphasize the deity's contrasting ability and Moses' complete dependence on it."[195] Olyan notes that Moses, in describing himself as having uncircumcised lips, echoes a trope of a lack of circumcision which the biblical redactors used to be "pejorative, disabling… referring to his [Moses'] lack of eloquence."[196]

Thomas Hentrich echoes this contrast of Moses' limitation and God's power in his chapter on "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible," in *This Abled Body*.[197] Hentrich focuses on the necessity of Moses' obedience in the face of a mission from God for which he feels unqualified and which he would rather not accept. The recognition Moses shows of his oral limitation and his need for God's help is why Hentrich understands Moses to exhibit the qualities of a "hero": one who acknowledges the power he possesses comes from God.

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[194] Wallace Greene, "Jewish Theological Approaches to the Human Experience of Disability: A Primer for Rabbis and Rabbinical Students," in *Jewish Perspectives on Theology and the Human Experience of Disability*, eds. Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams and William C. Gaventa (New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2006), 14.
[195] Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10.
[196] Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 37.
[197] Thomas Hentrich, "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible." In *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 77.

Still, the question of whether Moses' explanations as to his lack of fitness to serve as God's messenger warrant the label disability remains a matter for discussion. Jeremy Schipper observes: "The book of Deuteronomy concludes by presenting Moses as having a hyper non-disabled body even at his life's end."[198] He calls attention to Deuteronomy 34:7: "And Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eye had not grown bleary and his sap had not fled."[199]

וּמֹשֶׁה, בֶּן-מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה--בְּמֹתוֹ; לֹא-כָהֲתָה עֵינוֹ, וְלֹא-נָס לֵחֹה.

This verse emphasizes that Moses has not succumbed to the natural physical decline that comes with old age, but instead remains vibrant and vigorous. Schipper understands this characterization as ideologically motivated by the Deuteronomistic historians rather than reflective of Moses' state at the end of his life.[200] He argues that this final image of Moses was emblematic of the ideal leader for the Deuteronomistic historians, who use images of disability throughout their histories as signs to readers when rulers are unfit to hold their positions.[201] This vision of Moses makes no mention of any difficulty he may have had speaking, because to admit to any physical flaw resembling disability in Moses would, for the Deuteronomistic historians, have indicated that Moses was no longer fit to lead.

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[198] Jeremy Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership: 2 Samuel 6:23 and Other Images of Disability in the Deuteronomistic HIstory." In *This Abled Body*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 104.
[199] Alter, *Five Books*, 1058-1059.
[200] Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership," 109.
[201] Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership," 112. Mephiboshet is rendered ineligible for the throne by virtue of the leg injury he sustains. Samson's loss of vision indicates the end of his ability to govern. Eli's dimming vision indicates his declining leadership, in contrast with Samuel's youth and ability to hear God's call.

By preserving Moses' vision and vitality even at the moment of his death, his perfection as a leader goes uncontested. This creates a paradigm no future leaders will be able to live up to, in addition to establishing a powerful bias against any potential leaders with physical differences. Ironically, this kind of standard may have been precisely the support Moses was looking for when he protested against God's choosing of him to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Part 2: Leah

A: Leah's Eyes and the Biblical Text

The biblical text introduces Leah, the elder daughter of Laban, several verses after Jacob has already met Rachel, Leah's younger sister (Gen. 29:10-12). Following the paradigm that the Torah established with Jacob and Esau, the text presents Rachel as the favored sister and Leah, seemingly less so (Gen. 29:16-18). Like with the brothers, the text describes the two sisters in ways intended to distinguish them; but where Jacob and Esau differ in numerous ways (Gen. 25:25-28),[202] the sisters are primarily distinguished by their physical descriptions:

> "And Laban had two daughters. The name of the elder was Leah and the name of the younger Rachel. And Leah's eyes were tender, but Rachel was comely in features and comely to look at, and Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, 'I will serve seven years for Rachel your younger daughter,'" (Gen. 29:16-18).[203]

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[202] Jacob and Esau are distinguished, one from the other, with regard to birth order, skin tone, hair quantity, name, personality, household sphere, and parental preference: "And the first one came out ruddy, like a hair mantle all over, and they called his name Esau. Then his brother came out, his hand grasping Esau's heel, and they called his name Jacob… Esau was a man skilled in hunting, a man of the field, and Jacob was a simple man, a dweller in tents. And Isaac loved Esau for the game that he brought him, but Rebekah loved Jacob," (Gen. 25:25-28). (Alter, *Five Books*, 130-131.)

[203] Alter, *Five Books*, 154.

טז וּלְלָבָן, שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת: שֵׁם הַגְּדֹלָה לֵאָה, וְשֵׁם הַקְּטַנָּה רָחֵל. יז וְעֵינֵי לֵאָה, רַכּוֹת; וְרָחֵל, הָיְתָה, יְפַת-תֹּאַר, וִיפַת מַרְאֶה. יח וַיֶּאֱהַב יַעֲקֹב, אֶת-רָחֵל; וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶעֱבָדְךָ שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים, בְּרָחֵל בִּתְּךָ, הַקְּטַנָּה.

Alter translates רַכּוֹת here as tender, noting that ר-ך is "an antonym of 'hard.'"[204] He writes that translations that use "dullness or a lusterless quality" have no parallels elsewhere in the biblical text, though he admits the impossibility of concluding decisively in favor of רַכּוֹת as indicative of "some sort of impairment" or as Leah's "one asset of appearance."[205] Leah's claim to disability hinges on the meaning of רַכּוֹת and the condition of Leah's eyes, both of which prove to be ambiguous. As Alter identified, the meaning of רַכּוֹת is a matter of some scholarly debate.

HALOT translates רַכּוֹת in Gen. 29:17 as weak, with a sense of "tender or sensitive," as opposed to "having poor vision," which weak might otherwise suggest.[206] *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* expands the semantic range of ר-ך to mean "tender, soft, delicate, weak."[207] Several times the Tanakh uses the term in relation to young animals or children, in which context, the sense seems to be "tender," when applied to vulnerable creatures not capable of being independent.[208] Citing Genesis 33:13 as an example of ר-ך carrying a similar meaning to Gen. 29:17, HALOT notes that the usage here suggests young and weak:[209] "And he [Jacob] said, 'My lord knows that the children

[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*,1230.
[207] Clines, *Dictionary*, vol. 7, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2010), 486.
[208] See Gen. 18:7 for use in reference to a calf, and Gen 33:13, and 1 Chron. 22:5 for references to children.
[209] Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*,1230.

are tender, and the nursing sheep and cattle are my burden, and if they are whipped onward a single day, all the flocks will die.'"[210]

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, אֲדֹנִי יֹדֵעַ כִּי-הַיְלָדִים רַכִּים, וְהַצֹּאן וְהַבָּקָר, עָלוֹת עָלָי; וּדְפָקוּם יוֹם אֶחָד, וָמֵתוּ כָּל-הַצֹּאן.

The implication of this verse is that the age of the children, parallel to the young livestock, contributes to their weakness, but no such clear explanation can be offered for Leah's eyes.[211]

HALOT draws a distinction between the prior use and in Genesis 18:7, where the text reads, "And to the herd Abraham ran and fetched a tender and goodly calf and gave it to the lad, who hurried to prepare it."[212]

וְאֶל-הַבָּקָר, רָץ אַבְרָהָם; וַיִּקַּח בֶּן-בָּקָר רַךְ וָטוֹב, וַיִּתֵּן אֶל-הַנַּעַר, וַיְמַהֵר, לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתוֹ.

Here, the meaning is tender and soft,[213] seemingly in a physical sense, where the prior verse is an internal characteristic. Both uses, however, deal with the young, whether human or animal in nature. Such is not the case with Leah.

Yet not all uses of ר-ך are commenting on age, as HALOT considers Gen. 29:17's use of רַכּוֹת to be similar to II Sam. 3:39 as well,[214] when, after learning of the murder of Abner, David condemns Joab's violence in contrast to his own tenderness of heart: "'And

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[210] Alter, *Five Books*, 185.
[211] Amy Kalmanofsky, in her book *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible*, questions the semantic range of רַכּוֹת, reading the usage in Genesis 33:13 as indicating a physical condition. (Amy Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2014), 34, note 18.
[212] Alter, *Five Books*, 86.
[213] Koehler and Baumgartner, Lexicon,1230.
[214] Koehler and Baumgartner, Lexicon,1230.

I am gentle, and just anointed king, and these sons of Zeruiah are too hard for me. May the Lord pay back the evildoer according to his evil!"[215]

וְאָנֹכִי הַיּוֹם רַךְ וּמָשׁוּחַ מֶלֶךְ, וְהָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה בְּנֵי צְרוּיָה קָשִׁים מִמֶּנִּי: יְשַׁלֵּם יְהוָה לְעֹשֵׂה הָרָעָה, כְּרָעָתוֹ.

David contrasts between his own soft nature and the "'hard' sons of Zeruiah," painting a picture of himself not as physically weak or young but less cruel.[216]

In all these cases, "weak" carries no obvious implication of disability, a consistent semantic limitation throughout usage of ר-ך or ר-כ-ך. Sarna recognizes this distinction in meaning by explaining רַכּוֹת as "weak," means "lacking in luster" as opposed to "with poor sight."[217] *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* also translates ר-ך as "weak" in Gen. 29:17[218] as does *The Jewish Study Bible*,[219] but neither clarifies whether this is an assessment of vision or aesthetic appearance.

Yet, unconvinced by a translation of "weak," Tikva Frymer Kensky, in her article on Leah in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament,* offers "soft (lovely) eyes" rather than "weak," arguing that negative associations for the term may be due to the influence of Jacob's preference for Leah and an assumption that this may be grounded in an imperfection in Leah.[220] She notes that Leah's name means

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[215] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 446.
[216] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 446.
[217] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1989), 204.
[218] Andrea L. Weiss and Tamara Cohn Eskenazi. *The Torah : A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood 2008), 163.
[219] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible* [2nd Ed.] (Oxford: Oxford University Press and Jewish Publication Society, 2014), 55.
[220]Tikva Frymer Kensky, "Leah" in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/deuterocanonical Books, and the*

"cow," or possibly "strength," which she connects to the ambiguity around Leah's eyes, describing them as "what we might call 'cow eyes.'"[221]

A translation of ר-ך as "weak" seems more difficult to justify, yet many translations use "weak." What need are these translators responding to? The biblical text may be limiting comments on Leah's appearance to her eyes being רַכּוֹת while describing Rachel as "comely in features and comely to look at,"[222] to shield Leah from explicitly being labeled ugly. Olyan identifies this description as one of a number the biblical text uses to suggest "qualities constituting human ugliness."[223] Rather than translating the ambiguity of רַכּוֹת to "weak" and unfairly tarnishing Leah if "tender" or "soft" could be applicable, is the ambiguity of the word choice and mention only of her eyes instead meant to shield her? The reference solely to Leah's eyes could perhaps be a sanitization to save readers from the harsh reality that one of the matriarchs was ugly. Olyan notes that ugliness, while not a disability, is nonetheless linked to the concept of physical defects.[224]

However, "weak" is not the only, or even the most likely, meaning for רַכּוֹת. Highlighting the text's contrast of Leah with Rachel, Norman Cohen suggests that רַכּוֹת can be better understood as "soft" or "tender" rather than weak: "In this light, Rachel was outwardly beautiful, but her sister may have been more sensitive and kind - tender of

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New Testament ed. Carol L. Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross Shepard Kraemer(Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2000), 108.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Alter, *Five Books,* 154.
[223] Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York, Cambridge University Press 2008), 20.
[224] Ibid, 19-20.

spirit."[225] This reading casts each sister in light of her best quality, but leaves Leah lacking any suggestion of disability.

B: Leah's Eyes and Rabbinic Literature

Despite the lack of definitive support for defining רַכּוֹת as weak, in the midrashic literature, "weak" seems the definition of choice. Bereishit Rabbah 70:16's treatment of Leah's eyes begins by recounting that Rabbi Yochanan understood Leah's eyes to originally have been soft and tender, but that they became רַכּוֹת because she cried that she was expected to marry Esau and prayed that she not surrender to the destiny of evil Esau. [226] Rav Huna said that her behavior averted the decree that Leah marry Esau and instead God determined that she marry before her sister. This midrash explains why the sisters seem physically so mismatched and what necessitated tricking Jacob into first marrying Leah. Rabbi Yochanan's comment assumes that רַכּוֹת reflects an alteration in the eyes' condition due to tears, but he does not detail whether there was a loss of functionality or if the change was purely cosmetic.

Midrash Tanchuma reiterates the blaming of Leah's eyes on her tears about marrying Esau. In Vayeitzei 12, the midrash explores why Leah was hated: "Another word: Why was Leah hated? Not for being uglier than Rachel, in fact she was as pretty as Rachel, as it says 'Laban had two daughters' (Gen. 29:16), equal in being pleasing, in beauty and in stature":

ד"א למה היתה שנואה לא שהיתה כעורה מרחל, אלא שהיתה יפה כרחל, שנאמר וללבן שתי בנות

[225] Norman J. Cohen, "Two That Are One--Sibling Rivalry in Genesis." *Judaism* 32, no. 3 (1983), 339.
[226] J. Theodor, *Bereschit Rabba*, ed. Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books 1965). 70:5-7, 10.

(**<u>בראשית כט טז</u>**), שוות בנוי וביופי ובזקיפה...

Rather, Tanchuma explains that the description of her eyes is due to her excessive crying upon learning that, as the eldest daughter of Laban, she was intended to marry Esau, the eldest son of Rebecca. Her crying saved her from marrying Esau, but did affect her eyes, making them רַכּוֹת.

A similar story is recounted in Bava Batra 123a, which elaborates on the effects of the crying and describes Leah's eyelashes falling out.[227] Such a result would have had a cosmetic effect on Leah's appearance, and also likely an effect on her eyes' ability to prevent particles from entering her eyes. While this does not describe a condition that would obviously merit categorization as a disability, a word that tends to carry significant association with limitations, it certainly could have been an inconvenience for the sufferer in question.

<u>C: Leah's Eyes and Medieval Commentaries</u>

For the *mefarshim*, opinions on how to understand the description of Leah's eyes range across the spectrum from negative to positive and points in between.[228] Rashi echoes the story about Leah's tears earning her the description "weak eyes" but he does not speculate on her appearance in other respects. Gersonides agrees with the reason for the condition of Leah's eyes, but goes further. He explains that Jacob chooses to marry Rachel instead of Leah because of Leah's weak and teary eyes, believing that Rachel

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[227] *The Book of Legends* ed. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, translated by William G. Braude translates this phrase as "her eyelids seemed to disappear" (p47).

[228] Menachem Cohen, *Mikraot G'dolot HaKeter - Bereishit* vol. 2 (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar Ilan 1999) 32-35.

would be better able to have healthy and whole children. This interpretation is the one that assumes the widest-reaching medical implications for the description רַכּוֹת. Interestingly, Gersonides does not mention that the belief he ascribes to Jacob turns out to be false: Leah has many healthy children, while Rachel struggles to conceive and ultimately dies in childbirth (Gen. 29:31-35, 30:17-23, 35:17-19).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Rashbam takes the position that רַכּוֹת means "pleasing." He explains that because her eyes were lovely, Jacob did not examine her body for beauty, thus ensuring that he was marrying the right sister. He cites Ta'anit 24a, which explains that, in the event a bride has lovely eyes, no one need examine her body, while if her eyes are "bleary" טרוטות she must be examined. In supplying this answer, Rashbam explains a puzzling element of the story: how Laban was able to switch the sisters without Jacob noticing.

Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor agrees that רַכּוֹת is not a negative description. He goes further than Rashbam, saying that Leah was no less beautiful than Rachel, only that her eyes were רַכּוֹת, which here seems to carry a sense to "delicate" or "sensitive." The sensitivity of Leah's eyes made it difficult for her to walk against the wind, presumably because the wind would blow small particles into her eyes and irritate them. He furthermore explains that, because of her condition, Leah did not tend the flock, and hence did not meet Jacob first. This comment addresses the question of why Laban sent his younger, rather than his older daughter to the well.

Not all the medieval commentators took such binary readings of Leah and her eyes. Radak takes a composite position, explaining that Leah was pretty, but her eyes

were weak and teary, while Rachel was flawless. In his reading, he leaves open the possibility that it is for this reason that Jacob prefers Rachel.

Ibn Ezra comments on the meaning of רַכּוֹת yet offers no clarity when he says רַכּוֹת should be understood as it is normally, without stating the normal reading. He then proceeds to jeer: "Why were they? So that they thought that God's thoughts were their thoughts and that all beings who were created were worthy of being equal.[229]

> ...למה היו כן בעבור שחשבו שמחשבות השם כמחשבותיהם וכל הנבראים ראויות צורתן להיות שוות.

He questions and undermines much of the meaning-making venture that others have engaged in in an attempt to make sense of this somewhat obtuse description. His comment permits readers to accept that they might not understand the text, though he does not help clarify what the text means.

D: Leah and Biblical Disabilities Studies

For reasons that may now seem apparent, Leah is rarely treated in biblical disability studies literature. Mentions of her are brief and few in number. Abrams does not focus on Leah as a character with a disability in the section where she is mentioned in *Judaism and Disability*. Instead, Leah is presented as a rather ironic plot device, used to create a narrative where Jacob, who took advantage of his father's poor vision, now must wed a woman with poor vision, which he does without noticing which of Laban's

[229] He also makes a point to especially insult a commentator who claims that רַכּוֹת is a scribal error and that the text should read that her eyes were long (ארוכות). This may be a reference to Bava Batra 123a, where R. Elazar puns on ארוכות with regard to the long-lasting gifts her descendants receive of priesthood, levitical service, and kingship.

daughters he marries.[230] Abrams' focus on Jacob, who he has no disability at this time, rather than on Leah, who she describes as having "poor eyes," seems emblematic of Leah as a subject for scholarly investigation in the field of biblical disability studies. Characters who attract more attention than Leah surround her, leaving Leah unseen, despite the descriptions of her eyes as רַכּוֹת.

The pattern holds true when Saul Olyan only briefly discusses Leah, first as a counterpoint to Rachel in a section on beauty. Description of eyes in biblical text is usually positive, as Olyan says, "David's eyes were...emblematic of his attractiveness...The eyes of the female love in Song of Songs 4:1 are also mentioned as evidence of her beauty…"[231] Olyan believes the description of Leah's eyes is negative, presented in contrast with Rachel. In translating רַכּוֹת as "weak," he associates Leah's one described physical attribute with ugliness.[232] He returns to Leah shortly thereafter in a section on ugliness where Leah is addressed as an example of a character whose eyes the Torah describes in a negative way.[233] For Olyan, Leah's weak eyes mark her not as a character with a vision impairment but rather a character whose physical flaw sets her apart.

Ultimately, Leah's eyes become chameleon-like in their potential to be interpreted in accordance with readers' desires. While "weak" is a quality that is traditionally viewed as a negative, the potential to understand Leah's weak eyes as soft rather than flawed, as

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[230] Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 85.
[231] Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 17.
[232] Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 17.
[233] Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 18.

gentle rather than dull, is a reminder that a person's physical condition is separate from the limitations society may place on that person.

Part III: Moses and Leah: Ending at the Beginning, Considering Disability

Leah and Moses were among the first characters I chose to study for this thesis, yet an in-depth exploration of their stories raised doubts about their suitability for inclusion in this project. The biblical descriptions that potentially qualify each character as possessing a disability remain ambiguous, thus challenging the initial assumptions about these characters as "disabled." Moses and Leah, therefore, serve as reminders against assumption-making and warnings of the powerful and near-permanent nature of a reputation, once made.

Moses clearly articulates anxiety and misgiving about assuming a role as God's spokesperson to Pharaoh and leader to the Children of Israel. Leah, by contrast, never personally addresses the feature that distinguishes her from her sister. In both cases, the language remains unclear, providing scholars the opportunity to invent or explain how and why Moses and Leah are the way the Torah depicts them. With Tanakh, we cannot ask the text or the characters to explain themselves, and so, in the absence of official explanations, we create our own. Moses' story grows to include an anecdote where he burns his tongue and mouth as a child, in a test that could result in his death. The tears Leah cried at the prospect of marrying Esau, according to the commentators, alter her appearance, but save her from a marriage to someone she is depicted as despising. With the midrashim explaining Moses' mouth injury and Leah's damaged eyes, the stories convey a sense that Moses and Leah benefit as a result of these damaging events,

compared to the fates that otherwise awaited them: death for baby Moses and marriage to Esau for Leah. Yet this is not a message or sentiment either character ever explicitly voices.

The close association of Moses and Leah with disability, though deeply related to later interpretation rather than stemming primarily from the biblical text, influenced the decision to include these characters in this project. In our lives, we often analyze and offer judgment on those around us. Like the commentators, we rely on what we know or observe about other people, without possessing the full story; but unlike the commentators, we are not dealing with characters in a biblical drama. The stories we tell about others can come to be more powerfully associated with a person than the evidence we see of their lives. The assumptions we make about people tend to persist unless we exert effort to learn more; and learning more can reinforce or undermine what we "knew" before.

Moses and Leah challenge us to examine what we know and how we know about the people we interact with in our lives, whether or not we observe or consider them to possess a disability. They challenge us to reject commentating and the external application of meaning in favor of genuine inquiry and acknowledgment of the voices of individuals and the meaning they make out of their own unique circumstances. They challenge us to ask questions about what disability is and to consider who has the right to claim or bestow such an identity.

Chapter 5 - Moving Forwards: Thinking about Disability in Life and Text

When I began this project, I hoped that I would develop a greater understanding for what "disability" means and what having a disability entails. In working on this project, however, what emerged was a real sense of how broad a category "disability" is. I struggled to define "disability" and was unable to find a generally-accepted definition; even federal, state, and local laws protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities do not agree on what a disability is.[234] Finding language for specific disabilities also proved to be challenging. In researching for this project, I found myself confronting my own insensitive, vague or insufficient terminology. For example, the National Center on Disability and Journalism has a disability language style guide, which recommends against the use of "lame," but offers no preferred alternative.[235]

Biblical Hebrew is similarly confounding in its lack of specificity and insufficient level of detail necessary to ensure a modern understanding of characters' conditions. The biblical text, perhaps by virtue of its terseness and frequent ambiguity, seems to carry the lightest or fewest assumptions about the characters I studied and their physical differences. I encountered two main challenges in my close readings of the biblical text and its subsequent interpretive tradition. In reading the extra-biblical texts, I needed to develop an awareness of when and how readers brought their own historical context and attitudes towards disabilities to how they interpreted characters with disabilities.

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[234] Dennis A. Lalli, "A Comparison of the Definition of "Disability" in the Americans With Disabilities Act, The New York State Human Rights Law, and The New York City Human Rights Law," Kauff McGuire & Margolis LLP, accessed on January 26, 2018, https://www.kmm.com/articles-38.html.

[235] Lily Altavena, et. al, "Disability Language Style Guide," National Center on Disability and Journalism, accessed on January 26, 2018, http://ncdj.org/style-guide/.

When I began the project, I expected to see attitudes towards people with disabilities evolve over time as I looked at the different material. I did not expect that modern interpretation would sometimes express more significant biases than seemed present in older material. Yet, modern biblical disability scholars are engaged in their work because of the prevalence of assumptions that modern society makes about the roles individuals with disabilities can fill. As a result of this project, I am now far more aware of how people make assumptions about others with physical differences.

With textual characters, readers make meaning for characters who cannot decide for themselves the significance of their experiences.The midrashists' and commentators' need to explain why Isaac's eyes dimmed or Moses was uncomfortable serving as a spokesperson fascinated me. Historically the classical Jewish commentators attempted to paint biblical protagonists as being more righteous and admirable and biblical antagonists as more evil or treacherous than the biblical text might indicate. This intent may have influenced how commentators interpreted characters with disabilities. For example, the rabbis reinforced a negative characterization of Esau and made Leah more admirable through the midrashim about her eyes. They describe her copious tears at the thought of being forced to marry Esau, a character traditionally vilified in the biblical text, and used this emotional reaction to explain why her eyes are described as רכות, "tender." On the other hand, Isaac's preference for Esau over Jacob, the eponymous patriarch of the Jewish people, fully justifies Rebecca and Jacob's deception of Isaac, whose own reputation is negatively affected in rabbinic literature because of his desire to bless Esau.

Because readers of the biblical text often are familiar with the stories and characters, they may approach the text with preconceived notions about who the characters are and what happens to them; these prior expectations act as a barrier to investigating purely what is contained within the text. In speaking to people about my project, I found that many had understandings of the biblical characters I studied that were not based in the biblical text and were in fact interpretations that they had absorbed and integrated without realizing. The terseness of the biblical text allows for a diversity of interpretations to develop out of the text, but this also allows readers to read into the text what they want to see in it, whether or not there is strong textual evidence supporting it.

I was deeply unsettled by the impulse to justify why a character deserved their physical difference, as happened particularly with Isaac, Samson, Jacob. This trope of justification reinforced for me the importance of being a critical reader: quoting a famous rabbi is all well and good, but if there is no recognition of the problematic messages our tradition contains, we will miss a valuable opportunity to continue to build upon that tradition. The midrashic material reflects a need to justify or explain the physical conditions of characters when those conditions represented deviations from what was expected. With characters who have disabilities, this tendency to bring biases to the text may be stronger because of the societal assumptions that exist about people with disabilities: that a person with a disability "suffers" from it. I find myself uncomfortable with the idea that someone can decide on the meaning in another person's circumstances, whatever they may be. In the same way that Job rejected his friends' attempts to explain

and justify his suffering (Job 13:1-13), I object to the idea that suffering, whether in text or in life, must be explained or understood.

In considering the roles that we see characters with disabilities play in our sacred texts, we need to ask who do we not see and why, and then we need to ask those same questions in our communities. We cannot end with seeing how Tanakh and the textual tradition address the figures within the narrative who have disabilities. Instead, we must study these texts to see how Judaism has traditionally treated and viewed individuals with disabilities, and then use that learning to propel us into efforts to better fully acknowledge the diversity of lived experiences of people in our communities with disabilities.

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