

Armies of Misfits: Mobility Disabilities and Activism in the Biblical Studies Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for the disabled body as a site of resistance and for the biblical studies classroom as one venue to mobilise towards world-changing activism. After reviewing a range of models from disability studies (the medical, social/minority, religious and political/relational models) this article advocates for what the authors call “misfitting”. Using select biblical stories that feature characters with mobility disabilities and that also demonstrate discriminatory attitudes toward these characters, namely 2 Samuel 5:6-8 and Mark 2:1-12, misfitting is illustrated.

KEYWORDS

Disability; Activism; Misfitting; 2 Samuel 5: 6–8; Mark 2: 1–12; Feminist Disability Theory

Sometimes activism begins with strong purpose, sometimes inadvertently or accidentally; sometimes in a grand gesture and sometimes in a simple need. Alison Kafer, a wheel chair user, enrolled in a class at a local seminary as a complement to her course of graduate study. During a break in the middle of class, after which she was scheduled to deliver a presentation, Kafer was in dire need of a bathroom. Zipping across the campus, rolling in and out of every building, she desperately sought an accessible bathroom. There were none. She could not go home and make it back in time for her presentation; she could not hold it until after class. Faced with not one single accessible toilet on the seminary campus, Kafer found a dark corner in the grass and released her torrent of pee.

The dark and isolated campus space that she found was the Bible meditation garden. In an additional irony, the words inscribed on the wall before her as she pissed were from the prophet Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream.” Emboldened by her own anger and the shared outrage of her professor and classmates (to whom she relayed her predicament), Kafer wrote a letter to the president of the seminary requesting immediate construction of an accessible bathroom. Disappointingly but perhaps not surprisingly, the president refused to build a new and accessible bathroom, claiming it was too expensive. Acquiring the moniker “the bathroom girl” by supportive students who also petitioned the administration on her behalf, Kafer continued peeing in the meditation garden, complaining in the halls, and ultimately threatening to take the president’s

lack of support for people with disabilities to the press. “Bingo,” Kafer proclaims. “Construction began on the most beautiful accessible bathroom you ever did see.”¹

Kafer understands her “very body as a site of resistance”² even as she simply goes about her day. In this case, her mundane need to urinate, matched with one of the strongest appeals to social justice in the entire biblical corpus, became a call for full inclusion on a seminary campus. Perhaps not always as dramatically as peeing before the mighty words of Amos, the biblical studies classroom can be a site of activism around disability issues, including a place where advocacy for accessibility is fostered, and negative stereotypes and harmful attitudes challenged. We both teach religious studies at small, liberal arts colleges in the United States. Neither campus is fully accessible to people with mobility disabilities; neither campus is free from prejudicial attitudes about people with disabilities. Using select biblical stories that feature characters with mobility disabilities and that also demonstrate discriminatory attitudes toward these characters, not only heightens awareness of these issues in the biblical world but also in the world of the student reader. In this essay, we will focus on 2 Samuel 5:6-8 and Mark 2:1-12, both of which reveal ideologies of disability through stories of mobility disability. More specifically, both passages offer parallel accounts of exclusion at the literal and figurative levels. Exploring the biblical texts of 2 Samuel 5:6-8 and Mark 2:1-12 demonstrates the complexity of the biblical witness on disability; teaching these texts in the classroom can be a powerful way to raise awareness and motivate action.

Such activist work begins at the simple level of content. As a collection of texts written over a period that spans more than 1000 years, there are few issues about which the Bible speaks in a single voice. As a collection of texts written by people who were geographically distant (from most readers) and culturally different, the Bible’s perspectives are often unexpected and even strange. Students quickly discover that their assumptions about “what the Bible says” are, more often than not, wrong. The process of de-familiarization continues beyond reading becoming more acute at the level of interpretation. A single passage can have almost an infinite number of possible meanings, demonstrated by examining the history of interpretation in faith communities, academia, and popular culture. Even among people who share the same basic positionality—college-age students attending small liberal arts colleges on the eastern seaboard of the United States, for example—understandings can be sharply divergent, influenced by different identities and experiences. Students are quickly disabused of any notion of the Bible as a firmly fixed guidepost. Such understandings are different from how the Bible has been presented to them by authority figures—parents, pastors, priests, politicians. Students realize that they can question, even reject, what others have told them about the Bible; they have the power to read and interpret for themselves. By exposing students to the content of the Bible while underscoring the ways in which the Bible is not a

¹ Alison Kafer, “Letting Justice Flow,” in *That Takes Ovaries! Bold Feminists and Their Brazen Acts* (ed. Rivka Solomon; New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002), 130.

² Kafer, “Letting Justice Flow,” 128.

single, coherent document, students come to understand the agency of the reader³ and thereby take responsibility for their own interpretations and applications.

Agency is the ground out of which activism grows. More specifically, disability activism and scholarship begins with the radical notion that the disabled body is fertile ground for reflecting on and theorizing about power and productivity, resistance and revelation, belonging and exclusion, as well as teaching and learning. As disability studies emerged as a critical field of academic inquiry, different models for understanding and categorizing disability experiences surfaced. The first section of this essay will explore disability theory, especially the emergence of the political/relational model and the concept of “misfitting”; the second and third sections will take the political/relational model to 2 Samuel 5:6-8 and Mark 2:1-12 to show how mobility disabilities are used in the biblical text to establish borders but also to transgress boundaries.

Material Encounters: Theorizing the Disabled Body

One of the earliest models of disability is the medical model, which situates disability in the lack or failure of particular individual bodies. As the name suggests, the medical model is discursively grounded in medical language and practice, following a protocol of identification of pathology (disability), implementation of treatment, and elimination of initial pathology or cure. For the medical model, eradication of disability is always the goal, even though not often achieved. Even before the medical model was articulated in scholarly discourse as a way of understanding disability, a religious model attempted to offer an explanation for the presence of disability. The religious explanation also identified disability as an individual flaw, but in this case, disability signified personal moral failure or sin. Although preceding the medical model chronologically, the religious model was not articulated as a model until the emergence of disability studies as an academic field.⁴ The religious model is similar to the medical model in that it situates disability as tragedy. It also prioritizes eradication of disability, but it adds a layer to the medical model concerning the causes and potential cures for disability. For the religious model, sin or karma are often offered as causes of disability, and repentance, a more robust faith, or intentional good karma (good actions) are necessary pathways for the elimination of the disability. The religious model intermingles with the medical model, but insists that some type of spiritual reckoning must be a significant component of the cure.

³ For a trenchant critique of the myth of textual agency (the notion that the Bible “speaks” and we just have to “listen”) see Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1-3.

⁴ See Marno Retief and Rantoa Simon Letšosa, “Models of Disability: A Brief Overview,” *Hervormde teologiese studies* 74 (2018): 1-8 for a review of models as they emerged in disabilities studies, especially page 2 for the religious model. See also Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, “Beyond Models: Some Tentative Taoist Contributions to Disability Studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30 (2010), 16.

The social model, also called the minority model of disability, offers an alternative framework for considering disability. In contrast to the medical and religious models, the social model starts with the physical impairment as a neutral descriptor. The disability results, in large part, from unjust social structures and barriers. For example, a blind person is physically impaired because she cannot see, but she is disabled when reasonable accommodations are not made to ensure her equal and full access to printed material in school or at work. The social model shifts the onus from curing the individual flawed body (as in the medical model) to addressing systemic issues of discrimination, lack of access, and injustice.⁵ While the social model expands the scope of what it means to be disabled, it also has its limitations. Some disability scholars note that the social model tends to gloss over the very real physical challenges of living with an impairment.⁶ Alexa Schriempf highlights this tendency when she writes, “The social model, in focusing on the social construction of disability, has amputated disabled (especially women’s) bodies from their impairments and their biological and social needs.”⁷ No amount of accommodation can mitigate, for example, extreme physical pain or fatigue, which may prevent full participation. The danger of the social model is that, through a laser-like focus on the social construction of disability, embodied experience is inadvertently minimized or dismissed outright as irrelevant.

In what she refers to as a “friendly departure” from the social model of disability, feminist queer disability theorist Alison Kafer proposes a hybrid political/relational model of disability. Intersectional in nature, the political/relational model firmly plants disability in the realm of the political and emphasizes a desire for coalition building and collective imagining. For Kafer, “to say that something is ‘political’ in this sense means that it is implicated in relations of power and those relations, their assumptions, and their effects are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate.”⁸ The political/relational model simultaneously respects the specificity of critical theoretical frameworks while also calling for a relational political activism, which includes disability as an equally informed site of subjective and critical knowledge production.⁹

⁵ For more explanation of the three models of disability as articulated in disability studies, see Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis* (eds. Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), xiii-xv.

⁶ For an early critique of the social model see Jenny Morris, *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* (London: The Women’s Press, Ltd., 1991), 10; see also Jackie Leach Scully, *Disability Bioethics: Moral Bodies, Moral Difference* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); and Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2008).

⁷ Alexa, Schriempf, “(Re)fusing the Amputated Body: An Interactionist Bridge for Feminism and Disability.” *Hypatia* 16 (2001), 60.

⁸ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 9.

⁹ In a related way, Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper have articulated the cultural model, which also theorizes disability in a way that takes the materiality of the body into account. See Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, “Disability Studies and the Bible,” in *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications* (eds. Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster

Feminist disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reflects Kafer's political/relational model when she defines disability as one form of human variation, no more or less problematic than any other form of variation.¹⁰ Garland-Thomson describes disability as the encounter between "flesh and the material world."¹¹ For Garland-Thomson, it is the actual encounter that determines the extent to which an impaired body is disabled or not. By focusing on the encounter between body and world, Garland-Thomson remains attentive to both the embodied experience of physical impairment as well as the ways in which social environments and constructions produce or eliminate disabling conditions.

Elaborating on the theoretical shifts introduced in materialist feminism, Garland-Thomson offers a consideration "of how the particularities of embodiment interact with the environment in the broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects," and proposes the critical terms "misfit" or "misfitting" as a new way for thinking about disability.¹² For Garland-Thomson, "Fitting and misfitting denote an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction."¹³ It is the "dynamic encounter between flesh and world."¹⁴ When two things come together in harmony, there is a fit, and when they come together in discord, there is a misfit. Citing the example of trying to put a square peg in a round hole, Garland-Thomson argues that the problem with a misfit is not with the inherent nature of the two things; rather it is in their juxtaposition, or in the "awkward attempt to put them together."¹⁵

Fitting and misfitting are value laden. Certain bodies conform to the shape of their environments while other bodies do not. When spatial and temporal realities shift, however, so does the fit, and when the fit shifts, so do the meanings and consequences of the fit. In this way, Garland-Thomson argues, misfits are not fixed, but inherently unstable because as environments change, or as bodies move in and out of different environments and situations, the fit also changes. To fit, then, is to fill up correctly the space or to be suitable for a particular situation. To misfit, is not to belong, to stand out, or to fill the requirements of the space or environment inappropriately.

John Knox, 2013), 21-37. As Junior and Schipper point out, disability is produced by a "complex variety of cultural factors" that include medical, material, and social realities (Junior and Schipper, "Disability Studies and the Bible," 23). Since biblical texts are cultural products, and not bodies to be diagnosed or social systems to be assessed, the cultural model is frequently employed in biblical scholarship and has informed our readings in this essay.

¹⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30 (2005), 1558-1587.

¹¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26 (2011), 592.

¹² Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 592.

¹³ Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 592.

¹⁴ Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 592.

¹⁵ Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 593.

Although always value laden, misfitting is not a negative or limited epistemological stance; rather it produces subjective knowledge that enables, indeed propels political awareness and action. On the one hand, misfitting unearths sites of exclusion and inaccessibility, revealing where and how bodies that do not neatly conform to the expected status quo of the environment are at best relegated to the margins, and at worst left out entirely. On the other hand, misfitting aids in creating strategies for accommodating the widest range of bodies for the greatest number of fits (bodies here are not limited to disabled bodies, but include all non-normative bodies; i.e. women, ethnic and racial minorities, trans and other non-heteronormative bodies). As Garland-Thomson suggests, "...the individual and collective experience of misfitting can produce the subjugated knowledge, outsider/insider standpoint, or privileged epistemic state from which one could launch a liberatory identity politics of the kind suggested by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) or [Linda] Alcoff (2006)."¹⁶ In this way, misfitting weds the theoretical with the practical experience of bodies encountering the material world.

When the political/relational model of disability intersects with biblical texts, the biblical studies classroom becomes a powerful site of activism. One of the most radical lessons for students encountering biblical texts in an academic setting is the contention that they are not required to accept the interpretations thrust upon them by religious leaders, parents, or other people of authority. Empowering students to take up and read for themselves is a political act for it relocates the power of scripture. Given the extent that the Bible is employed (sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly) in political discourse and how it then undergirds public policy, reading and interpreting for oneself can have real-world implications. Without this knowledge, one is vulnerable to spiritual and political manipulation as those in power (in religious institutions, in politics, in families) wield the biblical text to suit their own needs, masking the choices they are making behind a façade of "what the Bible says." Embracing their own agency as readers and thus interpreters allows students to put into practice the type of reading informed by Kafer's political/relational model of disability and Garland-Thomson's theoretical conception of misfitting. In particular, reading biblical texts and stories that reference people with disabilities and/or rely on disability metaphors through the framework of the political/relational model and misfitting encourages students to think about how these texts are, again in Kafer's words, "implicated in relations of power and those relations, their assumptions, and their effects are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate."¹⁷

¹⁶ Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 601. Garland-Thomson is referencing Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 9.

An Army of Misfits: 2 Samuel 5:6-8

Biblical scholar Jeremy Schipper has noted that the book of 2 Samuel, the part of the Deuteronomistic history that chronicles David's reign from the death of Saul to near the end of his own life, has an unusual concentration of images of disability, especially in its opening chapters. In his analysis, these images "participate in a larger rhetorical program that supports the solidification of David's power and the demise of Saul's house."¹⁸ Such rhetorical function is embodied in the corps of blind and lame Jebusites who defend the city of Jerusalem against the Israelite onslaught in 2 Samuel 5. In defending their city, the Jebusites boast, "You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back" (NRSV; 2 Sam 5:6).¹⁹ David is not deterred but instead orders an attack specifically against "the lame and the blind," characterized as those whom he "hates" (2 Sam 5:8). Readers may have assumed that the Jebusites were speaking with metaphorical bravado, taunting the Israelite army and impugning their prowess by implying that they are so weak that even people with disabilities can defeat them. However, the next verse suggests that there really is a martial unit of blind and lame soldiers who appear to be on top of the walls of Jerusalem.

Typically, readers continue past this image through the climax and to the denouement of the pericope; we, however, want to pause here to regard the scene. There are two armed bodies, faced off against each other. The basic image is easily recognizable and yet here there is an element exceedingly strange: one of those groups does not fit the typical conceptualization of an armed unit of men, because it is comprised of people with visual and mobility disabilities. Such soldiers reconfigure martial power, disrupting conventional notions of violent masculine strength, positioning this kind of masculinity in non-normative bodies. One need not imagine that such soldiers are disadvantaged. Based on Kafer's political/relational model and Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting, which seek to de-center the non-disabled body as the normative body against which all other bodies are compared, a body either "fits" or "misfits" depending on the particular situation. Different environments accommodate different bodies to greater or lesser degrees, and the fit is always in flux. As Garland-Thomson notes, "Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow."²⁰

¹⁸ Jeremy Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership: 2 Samuel 6:23 and Other Images of Disability in the Deuteronomistic History," in *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (eds. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007), 107.

¹⁹ P. Kyle McCarter notes, "These very difficult verses [6-8] contain obscure references that have exercised the ingenuity of interpreters since ancient times." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1984), 137. Verse 6 is particularly vexing and, based on the witness of 4QSam^a, McCarter suggests translating the boast as "'You shall not come in here!' (For the blind and the lame had incited them, saying, 'David shall not come in here!')." McCarter, *II Samuel*, 135. In this case, the fighters themselves are not disabled but instead are encouraged by a particularly bellicose group of disabled Jebusites.

²⁰ Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 597.

What is the purpose of the lame and the blind on the walls? Are the Jebusites a people of radical inclusivity, integrating disabled units into their standing army, recognizing the power of these bodies in ways that even contemporary nations fail to do? Are they soldiers who have been wounded in the field of battle and, instead of being discharged with the ancient Jebusite equivalent of a Purple Heart, they are assembled into this Special Forces unit? Or are they cultic personnel, enlisted to defend the walls? Are the Jebusites using the disabled soldiers as some kind of magical border, thinking that David's army will treat them differently, hesitate to touch or strike?²¹ In the classroom, these questions provoke, each one challenging expectations about soldiers, war, masculinity, bodies, power, belief. How does one read the juxtaposition between the Jebusite army of the "lame and the blind" and the Israelite army of more typically abled men? In the "dynamic encounter between flesh and world,"²² how do the two armies fit? How do they misfit?

Any way these questions are answered, the results of the martial clash are the same: the Israelites win the battle and take Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:7). David's army does not hesitate to strike down the Jebusite men guarding the walls and they seemingly do so without much difficulty. The blind and the lame Jebusites lose the battle, but not uniquely since the other able-bodied Jebusite soldiers are also not able to defeat the Israelite army. In defense and in defeat, the disabled Jebusite body persists as the marker of opposition. Once guarding access to the house, the blind and the lame are permanently excluded from the house with their overthrow: "Therefore it is said, 'The blind and the lame shall not come into the house'" (2 Sam 5:8). On the walls, they patrol the national/ethnic boundary between Jebusite and Israelite; once defeated, they still mark the boundary even as it breaks down and is reconfigured outside of the city. The movement of the disabled bodies mark "shifts in status"²³ as the positions of insiders and outsiders are reversed and power over Jerusalem moves from Jebusite into Israelite hands.

The story of David's conquest of Jerusalem has wider implications for the spaces disabled bodies are permitted to inhabit, not just the disabled among the Jebusites but also, presumably, the disabled among the Israelites. Most interpreters understand "the house" in verse 8 to refer to the temple.²⁴ There are several passages that limit temple access for priests who have a range of physical variation (Lev 21:16-24 enumerates such conditions as blindness, lameness, facial mutilations, limbs of uneven length, dwarfism). The priests are still able to partake in the temple sacrifices but are not able to perform them. Many interpreters

²¹ For a brief review of some of the scholarship on this special Jebusite unit, especially the idea that they constitute a magical border, see Thomas Hentrich, "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible" in *This Abled Body*, 81-82. Hentrich argues that the Israelite soldiers may have been worried about contracting impurity through touching the disabled men (82). See also McCarter, *II Samuel*, 138.

²² Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 592.

²³ Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership," 110.

²⁴ Dissenting voices include Anthony R. Ceresko who contends that the house in question is David's palace. "The Identity of 'the Blind and the Lame' (*'iwwēr ûpissēah*) in 2 Samuel 5:8b," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 23-30. See also Jeremy Schipper, "Reconsidering the Imagery of Disability in 2 Samuel 5:8b," *CBQ* 67 (2005): 422-434.

read 2 Sam 5:8 as extending the priestly exclusions to all Israelites. For example, Saul Olyan argues that the closest counterpart for the proscription in 2 Samuel is a verse in Deuteronomy that excludes not just priests but all men “whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off” (Deut 23:1). Olyan concludes that, at the very least, 2 Samuel excludes all people with visual and mobility disabilities from the temple precinct just like Deuteronomy excludes all men with damaged genitalia. Further, he argues, “the blind and the lame” may function as a synecdoche where the phrase represents the whole range of differently abled bodies. In this case, the verse from 2 Samuel may extend exclusions to all worshipers with “defects” as defined by Leviticus 21.²⁵

For students, barring people with disabilities, whether priests or all Israelites, from the temple is unjust. In the classroom, we can explore differing cultural presuppositions that may lie behind such prohibitions. The important biblical concepts of ritual impurity and the interconnections between holiness and wholeness are foreign to 21st century Americans. Approaching God in the ancient Near East is a potentially dangerous act because God’s holiness is enormously powerful. Sending a disabled priest into the sanctuary would be akin to sending a disabled firefighter into a burning building. To be a firefighter, one’s body must conform to certain specifications not even required of the average body, especially in terms of height, strength, and fitness level. A burning building is a dangerous place and the body tasked with running into one needs to be extraordinary. Otherwise, the fire could consume; not because of any malice on the part of the fire but simply because that is the nature of fire. Such is the nature of God’s holiness and hence the extraordinary physical requirements that the priesthood (at least) must meet.

Even so, students immediately and intuitively understand the injustice. In his larger study of disability in the Bible, Olyan writes that regardless of the underlying ideological reasons for such exclusions, “a marginalizing and stigmatizing discourse would lie behind the proscription of blind and lame worshippers from the Jerusalem temple sphere.”²⁶ The Bible is wrong about excluding people with disabilities from certain spaces, especially wrong in excluding them from religious spaces, which have additional moral obligations to model justice and inclusion, from our 21st century perspective. Realizing that parts of the Bible can be morally wrong in our context is quite empowering for students. If wrong here, where else?

Critique of the Bible is not enough; ultimately, the critique needs to be turned to current issues and contemporary practices. Activism is about changing the world one inhabits, not about critiquing the world of the past. Once there is a shared assessment of biblical mandates that exclude certain kinds of bodies from temple worship, the students need to look up from their texts and at each other. Are there students with mobility

²⁵ Saul M. Olyan, “‘Anyone Blind or Lame Shall Not Enter the House’: On the Interpretation of 2 Samuel 5:8b,” *CBQ* 60 (1998), 225.

²⁶ Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 32.

disabilities in the classroom right now? At Albright College, a Methodist-affiliated liberal arts college, I (Jennifer) generally teach my courses in the classrooms in the basement of the Chapel. If we are sitting in these classrooms, no body has a mobility disability.

No divine mandate excludes people with mobility disabilities, whether students or parents or grandparents or speakers or members of the larger community, from the Chapel. The barriers are not spiritual and ritual; rather, the barriers are architectural. Built in 1959-1960, the Merner-Pfeiffer-Klein Memorial Chapel was erected long before such landmark legislation as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Sets of external and internal stairs lead into the sanctuary; steps lead up to the balcony; steps lead up to the raised stage in the front; steps lead down to the classrooms and offices in the basement; steps lead down to the bathrooms; in the bathrooms, steps lead down to the sinks and stalls. Since its initial construction, two alterations provide access to the sanctuary space (an outside ramp and an inside lift) but accessibility improvements have gone no further. Students and faculty with mobility disabilities—whether permanent or temporary—require alternative classroom and office spaces. When public events are held in the Chapel, a cadre of personnel staff drive golf carts to assist anyone with a mobility disability, transporting them to different buildings to use accessible bathrooms across campus. Certain organizations and events simply exclude participation from people with mobility disabilities altogether.

The reasons behind and the ideologies that support the exclusions of the biblical temple and the Albright College Chapel differ markedly; and yet, the practical results are largely the same. What do contemporary ethics that affirm the justice of inclusion matter if they are not matched with the actions needed to assure that inclusion happens? So what if we can read and critique the Bible if we do so in a space nearly as inaccessible as the one proclaimed in the pages of the biblical text?

A Passage for Misfits: Mark 2:1-12

Students find a very different scenario in the gospels. Mobility disabilities are also used rhetorically, but here they are associated with sinfulness²⁷ and become sites to demonstrate Jesus's power, his power to heal and his power to forgive sins. In the gospel of Mark especially, "bodily wholeness and faith in Jesus are intimately connected. In many ways it is a text that implicitly and explicitly casts persons with disabilities out of the kingdom of God—implicitly in the sense that everyone who encounters God in Jesus is healed, and explicitly in passages that use the terms 'sickness' and 'sin' interchangeably."²⁸

²⁷ It is important to explain to students that impurity in the Hebrew Bible is a ritual and not a moral category, so it cannot be equated with sinfulness.

²⁸ Candida Moss, "Mark and Matthew," in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (eds. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong; Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 284.

Mark's healing stories begin with the story of the paralytic in Capernaum (Mark 2:1-12; cf Matt 9:2-8, Lk 5:17-26), which exemplifies the implicit and explicit ways people with disabilities are excluded. Jesus is at home, but the house is crowded, so crowded that the friends of the paralytic cannot get him in to see Jesus. Consequently, "they removed the roof above him [Jesus]; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay" (Mark 2:4). Commensurate with other miracle stories in the gospels, the faith of the person in need of healing is emphasized (and also the faith of the person's friends). Because of this faith, declares Jesus, the man's sins are forgiven. When such a declaration is questioned, Jesus explicitly links the forgiveness of sins to the healing of the mobility disability: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?'" (Mark 2:9).²⁹ The story ends with the amazement of the crowds and praise of God.

Students are less quick to note any injustice here. Jesus is healing the man, what could be wrong with that? Doesn't everyone want to be healed? For able-bodied students (and some students with disabilities), questioning the desirability of healing is unthinkable. Students identify with the amazed crowds and readily accept the messages of joy and hope in the paralytic's miraculous ability to take up his mat and walk. Unwittingly, the students buy into interpretations that reinforce the medical and religious models of disability, which prioritize complete eradication of all bodily forms of disability and ill health, and thus reinforce the linkages between sin, disability, and inadequate faith.³⁰ They may know consciously and rationally that people do not have disabilities because they are sinful or lack sufficient faith in God; however, these models have shaped their attitudes and thinking in deep and often unacknowledged ways.

At this point, one can use 2 Samuel 5's link between disability and ritual exclusion, which is unjust from the student's perspective, as a lever to apply and pry open the ideology of the healing narratives. The underlying logic in the two stories is much the same and may even be connected. In both cases, one must have a whole body in the normative sense in order to enter into the presence of God, whether that place of communion be the terrestrial temple

²⁹ The time delay between Jesus pronouncing forgiveness and the healing of the man's legs is sometimes understood as Jesus severing the link between sin and disability, not linking them as other scholars read the story, and as we read it here. For this alternative interpretation, see Hentrich, "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible," 86-87; and David F. Watson, "Luke-Acts" in *The Bible and Disability*, 310-311.

³⁰ Scholars have suggested a number of different sins responsible for the man's paralysis, as well as different ways of understanding the link between sin and illness. For a brief review, see Dietmar Neufeld, "Sins and Forgiveness: Release and Status Reinstatement of the Paralytic in Mark 2:12," in *Social Sciences and Biblical Translation* (ed. Dietmar Neufeld; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007), 52. Whereas most of the scholarship on this passage assumes a medical/religious model of disability, Neufeld proposes a social model and argues that Jesus is reintegrating the paralyzed man back into his community through his healing. Whereas the shift to the social model is helpful, Neufeld's analysis is laden with negative assumptions about the shameful of paralysis in the first century, even speculating that the man may have been thrown out of his house because his illness brought shame to his father (58-59, 64).

or the eschatological kingdom of Heaven. As the lame and the blind were excluded from the temple precincts, they are now excluded from the presence of Jesus.

In the classroom, after a critique of the medical and religious models, we introduce other models for understanding disability. How does reading Mark 2 through the lens of the political/relational model and with Garland-Thomson's concept of the misfit change our interpretation of the pericope? At the outset of the story, the paralytic man attempting to enter through the door into the house is like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole: an obvious misfit.³¹ His body does not "fit" the space, literally and metaphorically rendering him an outsider to the presence and the power of Jesus. Yet, he and his friends are determined to have access to Jesus and the space he inhabits. They dig through the roof, fully penetrating the once impermeable boundary marking insiders and outsiders (Mark 2:4). Like with 2 Samuel 5, readers tend to continue past this part of the story to get to the climactic moment, in this case the healing; again, we want to pause here to regard the scene. Four people climb up onto the roof of the house, bringing their paralytic friend up on the roof with them; they break through the roof and then lower him down into the building. Their entrance must have been surprising and dramatic: materials from the roof (possibly dirt) must have fallen in, on top of Jesus; and then, as everyone looked up, a paralytic man lying on a mat descends. In this way, he insinuates his disabled misfit body into the space made holy by the presence of Jesus.

As Garland-Thomson reminds us, misfitting arises not with the inherent nature of the two items (in this case the paralytic man and the crowded doorway), but in the "awkward attempt to put them together."³² Here, a political/relational reading of Mark 2 disrupts previously held assumptions about the "problem" that needs to be solved in the story. Perhaps there is actually nothing wrong with, lacking in, or sinful about a paralytic body. Perhaps the problem lies within the encounter between flesh and environment. The man does long to fit; but does this mean that he longs to be healed, or that he longs to get into the house and be among the people listening to Jesus? Why is the only solution for redressing the misfit that occurs in this story (and others like it) to "fix" the disabled body?

There are multiple ways of interpreting the story, and one possible interpretation is to understand the act of digging through the roof as the radical climax. The paralytic man and his friends change the environment by creating an unconventional egress, a hole in the roof so that he can get into the house, thus accommodating flesh by changing the architecture rather than the body. Such re-construction is a political and relational act that insists on inclusion and full access. It shifts the focus of the misfitting away from the "problem" of the disabled body and toward the "problem" with how the body encounters the environment. What if the story stopped there? What if upon seeing the paralytic man descend into the house Jesus said: welcome, we will make room for you, you are enough, your faith is enough, and you fit as you are?

³¹ Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 592-593.

³² Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 593.

If I (Darla) do my job well, after reading 2 Samuel 5 and Mark 5 together, students understand that each of these stories reveals something about physical barriers to access and inclusion. Redressing ableism, however, is about more than architectural modifications; it also involves challenging deeper attitudes and presuppositions about disability. Every three years I have been teaching a class called Jesus and Mary Magdalene in Literature and Film. In this class we read canonical and non-canonical gospels, screen twentieth and twenty-first century movies about Jesus, and read fictional stories about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. As we compare and contrast biblical and contemporary popular cultural portrayals of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, I encourage students to think about plot structure, character development, lighting, camera angles, costumes, and set design. Inevitably, a student gathers her courage and asks me: “Dr. Schumm, how do you know what is on the screen?”

Why this question? I am blind. The majority of the students know this when they sign up for the class, and I openly discuss it in the first session to ensure that everyone is aware of my disability. Nevertheless, most of them have not wondered about the logistics of a blind professor teaching a class where films are primary texts. What confronts them in this class is their cognitive dissonance between what they assume they know about being blind, and the embodied challenge to their assumptions standing at the lectern. Like the paralytic man in Mark 5, my body does not fit the particular environment, although in this case because of expectations and not architecture. My entrance into the classroom is neither dramatic nor surprising; yet my ability to discuss visual aspects of a movie always catches students off guard. Like Kafer, I understand my “very body as a site of resistance”³³—resistance to assumptions that blind people do not “watch” or enjoy movies; that blind people cannot discuss visual images; that blind people do not, or cannot earn PhD’s; that to be disabled means often not fitting (belonging) in particular environments such as crowded houses or academic institutions.

To be disabled and simply showing up in unexpected ways in unexpected places challenges ableist attitudes and beliefs. The paralytic man was not satisfied to remain outside just because the house was crowded and he could not get in through the door. I am not satisfied to limit the types of texts I use in the classroom just because I cannot see. The encounter between flesh and world is rarely convenient or comfortable; rather it is often messy and requires creativity and chutzpah. The political/relational model is a call to attend to both the practical as well as the attitudinal barriers unmasked through misfitting.

Dynamic Encounters: From the Classroom to the World

In 1964, Timothy Nugent and a small group of other disabled students went out into the night armed with sledgehammers. Frustrated at the slow response of the University of Illinois to their demands for an accessible campus, the students demolished a number of “high priority”

³³ Kafer, “Letting Justice Flow,” 128.

curbs to force the university to rebuild them with ramps.”³⁴ Critique is a powerful form of activism; but critique united with reform transforms the world. The disabilities activism that led to the historic Rehabilitation Acts (and other disabilities legislative acts) began on college campuses as disabled students, especially students with mobility disabilities, arrived on campus only to be met with one obstacle after another. Forming grassroots activist groups to change the architecture and the attitudes of their campuses, they continued their work after they received their diplomas and stepped out (or, in many cases, rolled out) into the wider society.³⁵ From the classroom, to the campus, to the world... activism ripples outward, expanding circles of justice and inclusion. Armies of misfits creating new passages—standing on walls, digging through roofs, dismantling barriers, pissing in Bible meditation gardens, or sledge-hammering sidewalks—demanding action and changing the world.

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³⁴ Lindsey Patterson, “Points of Access: Rehabilitation Centers, Summer Camps, and Student Life in the Making of Disability Activism, 1960-1973,” *Journal of Social History* 46 (2012), 477.

³⁵ Patterson, “Points of Access,” 474.

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