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Sin and Sign: Reading Disability in the Gospels

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SIN AND SIGN

READING DISABILITY IN THE GOSPELS

SUBMITTED TO LAURA NASRALLAH
AND MICHAL BETH DINKLER
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
REL 3999 STM THESIS

BY
HELENA L. MARTIN
MAY 20, 2022

For my father
Raymond J. Martin

Thank you for your insight, loving support,
and generosity in reading thousands of pages of my work.

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INTRODUCTION*

When teenager Becky Tyler reflects on her relationship with God, her experience of disability comes to the fore. “When I was about 12 years old, I felt God didn’t love me as much as other people.”¹ Tyler has quadriplegic cerebral palsy and communicates using eye-gaze technology. In the scriptures that define her religious tradition, she could not find anyone who uses a wheelchair like her. Perhaps more importantly, the disabled people she did find in the Bible receive healings. So, she concluded, “They are not like me.”

Disabled characters float in and out of New Testament passages; they disappear as quickly as they appear, having fulfilled their narrative purpose. Consequently, interpreters who preach and teach these texts often turn their stories—and their bodies—into props rather than people, objects rather than subjects. As Nancy Eiesland observes in her field-founding work *The Disabled God*, disability in Christian biblical interpretation is not a simple fact “but shot through with theological significance.”² All too often in biblical interpretation, disabilities are understood as a metaphor for shortcoming, a sign of something greater, the only important aspect of someone’s identity, or proof of sinfulness. The man with the withered hand (Matt 12:9-14), the ten men with leprosy (Luke 17:11-19), the man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3)—these characters are hypervisible in interpretation. They are exempla of human brokenness in search of divine healing.

* I am grateful to Laura Nasrallah and Michal Beth Dinkler for their support and feedback throughout my research, thinking, and writing processes herein. This thesis could never have come into existence without them. Any errors that remain are my own.

¹ Tyler’s words are reported by Damon Rose, “Stop Trying to ‘heal’ Me,” *BBC News*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>.

² Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 69.

Contributing to such interpretations, the New Testament texts themselves only mention disabilities when they drive the plot. For a character seeking Jesus' healing, the impaired condition of their body is, appropriately enough, included in the story. But what about other characters who have (unmentioned) impaired vision, missing limbs, or chronic pain? New Testament texts tend to note impairments only when they serve a rhetorical purpose. Narratively irrelevant disabilities are erased, relegated to the silences of the biblical record.

The texts' invisibilization of impairment shapes readers' imaginations; we envisage the unmarked bodies in the texts as normate. *Normate* is a term originating in critical disability theory that resists the use of words like "normal" or "typical" to describe unmarked bodies. A word like *normal* implies an objective standard that transcends time and context. By contrast, *normate* reminds the reader that context constructs our expectations of bodies. Attention to the construction of the normate can help readers attend to the vagaries of embodiment and disrupt ableist proclivities in their interpretations. The normate embodies the expectations that a culture collectively constructs with its expectations, assumptions, and standards. This term opens the door to "analyses beyond the simple dichotomies of male/female, white/black, straight/gay, or able-bodied/disabled."³ What makes a body "normal" is subjective. In the absence of the text marking a character as disabled, the reader usually fills in the gap with the normate body.⁴ In this way,

³ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8.

⁴ I prefer the word "nondisabled" to refer to bodies not experiencing disability. This is in contrast to "abled" or "temporarily able-bodied" (TAB). "Able" implies a permanent state of non-disability, and while TAB explicitly names the temporary nature of ability, it emphasizes *physical* impairment, to the exclusion of mental and intellectual impairment. "Nondisabled" leaves space for all types of impairment. Perhaps most importantly, it also subtly centers disability: the person who is non-disabled is lacking something (i.e. disability) rather than the disabled person lacking something (i.e. ability). This small but meaningful shift supports the reframing this thesis suggests.

interpreter and text work together to create ableist interpretations, which alienate disabled people like Becky Tyler from their tradition's sacred texts.

Aim and Methods

In this thesis, I challenge two ableist ways that New Testament interpreters read disability: as sin and as sign. Where disability is read as an indicator of sin, the impairment is understood as a punishment for the character's sinfulness. And where disability is read as sign, it signifies something other than itself, for example: reducing the impairment to a plot device. Sin and sign are not the only two ways disability is read in biblical texts, nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, these are two points of entry for examining and challenging the ways biblical interpretation can harmfully misunderstand disability.

Biblical interpretation has long suffered from such misinterpretations. Heidi Marx-Wolf and Kristi Upson-Saia assert that, too often:

scholars treat illness and impairments as fictions more or less untethered to lived experience, neglecting the relationship between literary representations of sick and impaired individuals and the everyday lives and experiences of doctors, healers, patients, the sick, disabled, and dying in antiquity.⁵

As an invisibly disabled person myself, and as a sister to a woman with cerebral palsy, I reject readings of scripture that claim to be untethered from lived experience. Every reading of scripture emerges from an embodied person, whether that body approximates the culture's normate or not. I therefore seek constructive moves that interpreters can make with respect to disability, even if the most productive interpretation is to condemn the biblical passage.

⁵ Heidi Marx-Wolf and Kristi Upson-Saia, "The State of the Question: Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in Late Antiquity," *JLA* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 271. Emphasis added.

Throughout this work, my inquiry attempts to prioritize the wellbeing of actual disabled people. Echoing Wolf and Upson-Saia, biblical scholar Isaac Soon notes that NT interpretation of disabled characters “often eclipses the actual lived experiences of people with disabilities.”⁶ In doing so, biblical interpreters perpetuate harm, however unintentionally. Rabbi Julia Watts Belser expresses a similar concern that people interpreting scripture (in her case, Torah) apart from the interests and voices of real people. Disability-informed scriptural interpretation requires, to borrow her language, the disruption of canon.⁷ By definition, she says, canon values text over people.

I agree with Belser that clinging too tightly to canon can establish the “objective” interpretation of text as more important than lived realities. Still, I focus here on canonical New Testament texts, rather than the many extracanonical sources that depict disability. It is the canonical texts that are taught with authority every week in churches around the world. These texts are not being taught well. Therefore, my disruption of canon comes not from drawing on other early Christian texts, but from reading NT narratives as informed by modern disabled stories.⁸ My disability-informed interpretations, created in light of lived experiences, address Soon’s concern that NT scholarship has thus far ignored such realities. This challenges the primacy of canon.

⁶ Isaac T. Soon, “Disability and New Testament Studies: Reflections, Trajectories, and Possibilities,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 25, no. 4 (2021): 379.

⁷ Julia Watts Belser, “Drawing Torah from Troubling Texts: Gender, Disability, and Jewish Feminist Ethics,” *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 6, no. 2 (2020): 146, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jjewiethi.6.2.0140>.

⁸ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder caution against the individualism that comes from the focus on first-person narratives of disability. See: David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, “Introduction: Disability Studies and the Double Bind of Representation,” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 9–11. However, by bringing in the voices of many disabled people here, I hope to share their stories as snapshots with which the biblical texts can be read in conversation and can destabilize the ableist readings that have predominated.

I begin by outlining the parameters of my hermeneutic in Reading Disability. I introduce some of the problems with “reading” bodies in the New Testament and suggest methodological solutions, which I apply to the following sections.

Then, in Disability as Sin, my close reading of the healing in Mark 2:1-12 shows how interpreters often automatically conflate disability and sin, despite narrative reasons to distinguish them. I put this pericope in conversation with insights from other NT passages that defy the predominant disability-as-sinfulness narrative. I also think about the relationship between healing and forgiveness and how to interpret healings responsibly from a disability standpoint.

Finally, in Disability as Sign, I present a disability-informed interpretation of the man who receives his sight in John 9.⁹ I show how taking his blindness literally reveals the fullness of the man’s character. I also recognize that the text itself instrumentalizes this man’s disability as narrative prosthesis. I conclude by applying Eiesland’s idea of resymbolization to suggest constructive ways of re-reading blindness and sight in this pericope.

Biblical interpretation that harms disabled people harms *anyone* with a body. Whether we were born with a disability or live long enough to acquire one, everyone lives with cultural understandings of embodiedness. And everyone falls short of our culture’s normates. In my interpretive contexts, too much of our constructed normate has been shaped by harmful teaching about the Bible, healing, and disability. Critical disability theory applied to biblical interpretation can help to reveal some of those problems and give tools to more fully—and more faithfully—interpret the texts.

⁹ Throughout this thesis, I refer to this character as “the man who receives his sight” (τοῦ ἀναβλέψαντος, John 9:18), even though he is often called “the man born blind” (ἄνθρωπον τυφλὸν ἐκ γενετῆς, John 9:1). The change is an attempt to highlight the primary characteristic of his character, not a desire to avoid language of “blindness.” For more on the power of language and disability, see the Reading Disability subsection below.

I cannot offer the authoritative “disabled perspective” on New Testament interpretation; such a thing does not exist. Rather, my hope is to model affirming new readings of familiar stories. New readings can help faithful disabled people make sense of the Bible in light of their own experiences. In the first comprehensive volume on disability in the Bible, *The Bible and Disability*, editor Sarah Melcher concludes her introduction: “We editors hope that this volume will encourage other scholars to pursue this cross-disciplinary approach to biblical literature, for there is much more to be discovered!”¹⁰ In my re-readings of these passages, I take up that invitation, hoping to further the development of disability-informed interpretation of the New Testament.

¹⁰ Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, eds., *The Bible and Disability*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Baylor University Press, 2017), 28.

I. READING DISABILITY

The physically disabled body becomes a repository
for social anxieties about such troubling concerns
as vulnerability, control, and identity.¹¹
– Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

Introduction to Reading Disability

Haben Girma is the first Deafblind person to graduate from Harvard Law School. Her writing about working with guide dogs challenges the independence many of us imagine bodies to require. Up through college, she used a white cane to navigate the world. But, she writes, “My heart ached for a travel partner whose eyes and ears would share more of the world I navigated.”¹² Girma’s dogs are now not so much her *guides* as extensions of her. They are her eyes and ears, their movements communicating complex safety information to her that was illegible with the cane. “Now,” she writes, “we wander as one.”¹³

Bodies are not as boundaried as the modern imagination likes to assume. Rather, our cultures and contexts *construct* our ideas of the body. Lennard Davis writes, “The body is never a single physical thing so much as a series of attitudes toward it.”¹⁴ The modern, Western thought-world teaches us that bodies are pseudo-machines, which respond predictably to stimuli. They are discrete from one another. They occupy definable categories, like sex or race. Bodies are

¹¹ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 6.

¹² Haben Girma, “Guide Dogs Don’t Lead Blind People. We Wander as One.,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 2019, sec. Opinion, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/guide-dogs-dont-lead-blind-people-we-wander-as-one/2019/08/07/0be20cf2-b545-11e9-951e-de024209545d_story.html.

¹³ Girma.

¹⁴ Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 22.

comprised of interrelated systems (e.g. digestive, circulatory, respiratory) and are vulnerable to the failure of those systems, either through internal disfunction or external invasion. By this construct, a “healthy body” is one whose systems are all operating correctly and at full capacity. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “Since scholars cannot stand outside of interpretive frameworks available in our society and time, we ‘make sense’ out of texts and life” from the thought-worlds in which we find ourselves.¹⁵ Interpreters reading from this context carry this construct of embodiment, health, and illness when we encounter bodies in the New Testament.

The milieu in which these NT were composed and transmitted constructed bodies differently. In first-century Greco-Roman medical traditions, bodies are not boundaried, but permeable; not mechanical, but mutable. And disease is not always earthly, but often divinely sent.¹⁶ These are bodies that are vulnerable to imbalance and penetration. They are comprised of humoral elements, usually delineated as yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm. And the mind is as much a part of the body as the foot. A “healthy” body is one whose humors are balanced in correct proportions, and a balanced “male” body is healthier than a balanced “female” body. People recording, transmitting, and hearing the texts of the New Testament in their first- and second-century contexts were imagining bodies from within this thought-world.

The gap between these thought-worlds presents a potential problem for biblical interpretation. Interpreting the texts requires not only translation from an ancient language into a modern one but also “translation” between contexts. Candida Moss, in a chapter on disability in

¹⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Gender, Status, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 16.

¹⁶ Laura M. Zucconi, *Ancient Medicine: From Mesopotamia to Rome* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 206. There are multiple schools of thought regarding medicine in antiquity.

the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, writes that her goal is to “try to understand these accounts in their own historical context without anachronistically supplying modern ableist notions of the texts.”¹⁷ But, I argue, disability-informed interpretation cannot be a subtractive process in which we try to remove our own ableist assumptions. Rather, readers need to *add* tools to dislodge the ableism embedded in their cultural conditioning—and to identify ableism that may be inherent in the text. As Sontag sought to deprive illness of meaning *Illness as Metaphor*, so part of my project here is to deprive disability of the meaning that has been imputed to it for so long.¹⁸ Attending to the constructs of bodies in Mediterranean antiquity can challenge our definition of the body. This helps us begin to correct interpretations that do violence in contemporary Christianities.

Critical disability theory describes models of disability, which help to theorize bodies—both marked and unmarked—across contexts. Disability seems like an obvious category until we try to define its boundaries. The models of disability answer the (perhaps surprising) question: “what is the thing that disables?” Disability may or may not equal impairment, depending on the model. A culture’s model of disability is interrelated with its idea of what constitutes a body. For example, modern Western medicine explains the origin of illness as pathogen or disfunction, while first- and second-century Greco-Roman medicine attributes it to humoral imbalance. Even within the realm of medicine, then, the answer to the question “what is the thing that disables?” varies based on context. It is true that the modern category of “disability” would have been unintelligible in the ancient world. But disability theory reveals how bodies are constructed in the ancient

¹⁷ Candida R. Moss, “Mark and Matthew,” in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, ed. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 276.

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

thought-worlds from which we inherit the biblical texts—and how bodies are constructed in our own contexts, as well.

Models of Disability

Most people today define disability using the *medical model of disability*. In this model, the “thing that disables” is an ongoing deficit, as diagnosable by a medical system. This model presumes that there is a way that bodies *should* work, and bodies that fall short of that standard are deemed disabled. For example, in the medical model, a paralyzed person using a wheelchair is disabled because they “should” be able to walk unassisted but cannot. There are several limitations to conceiving of disability in this way: (1) the person does not get to name for themselves whether or not they experience their body as disabled; (2) it centers the “problem” of disability in the body-mind of the marginalized person and therefore (3) places the onus for inclusion onto the disabled person; and (4) it requires validation from a largely inaccessible medical system.¹⁹

A major innovation of disability studies, then, has been the description of the *social model of disability*. Here, the “thing that disables” is society’s expectations and the accompanying systemic barriers that exclude people whose bodies fall short of the normate. This model reveals how *societies* dictate the way bodies “should” work. In the social model, a paralyzed person using a wheelchair is “disabled” not by her paralysis but because society expects her to ascend stairs to

¹⁹ In 2017, the WHO found that half of the global population had inadequate access to healthcare, which includes diagnostic and treatment services for any number of disabilities. (The more recent statistics are drastically skewed by COVID-19’s impact on global healthcare systems.) See: World Health Organization, “World Bank and WHO: Half the World Lacks Access to Essential Health Services, 100 Million Still Pushed into Extreme Poverty Because of Health Expenses,” *World Health Organization Newsroom*, December 13, 2017, <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-12-2017-world-bank-and-who-half-the-world-lacks-access-to-essential-health-services-100-million-still-pushed-into-extreme-poverty-because-of-health-expenses>.

access buildings. If society were fully accessible, she would still have her wheelchair but would not be disabled. Society, not her body, is the problem. This model distinguishes between *impairment*, a fact of someone's body as usually defined by medicine, and *disability*, a societally-constructed exclusion of the person based on their impairment. The social model of disability solves several problems of the medical model. First, it locates the "problem" of disability outside of the body of a marginalized person, thereby requiring society to participate in their inclusion. Additionally, the solution is accessibility for all, not a cure for the individual's impairment (which may not be possible, accessible, or desirable). Finally, it allows for positive identification with one's impairment as an important part of identity.

The social model of disability does have shortcomings, though. It *requires* an assumption that disability be a positive aspect of someone's identity that they would never want to erase. But some people are disabled by an impairment that, regardless of societal reform, will continue to be disabling. For example, chronic pain may prevent someone from living the life they desire, regardless of societal accommodations. They may embrace *being disabled* as a defining part of their identity while still desiring a cure for that impairment. The other limit of the social model is that it does not account for disabled people whose impairments are mostly manageable (e.g. by medication) and therefore invisible to social systems entirely. As a disabled person who is excluded by the social model for both these reasons, I am particularly sensitive to its shortcomings.

Other models of disability modify the social model. Another common model is the *minority model of disability*, which Eiesland uses in *The Disabled God*. The minority model identifies disabled people as a minoritized group like any other. Writing in the wake of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), Eiesland writes of the power of a unified political group comprised of anyone who identifies with it. To pass the ADA, people with all different abilities and disabilities

had to work together to effect change. Embracing “disabled” as a commonly held identity empowered them to seek acceptance in a society long closed to them. Although I do not use the minority model here, I adopt from it the assumption that disability can be a constructive, embraced part of someone’s identity.

More recently, Creamer offers the *limits model of disability*, which asserts that to be human is to have limitations. Limits, she says, should be understood as “an unsurprising characteristic of human nature.”²⁰ The limits model avoids Davis’ concern about most disability models: that the disabled person is considered “damaged while the observer is undamaged.”²¹ All humans, Creamer’s model highlights, live with limits. However, this is not a milquetoast plea that, “We’re all disabled somehow!” Creamer’s model notes that some limits, like chronic pain, are unacceptable to the person who has them, regardless of whether or not society accepts them as normate. Her model also allows for the real harm perpetrated against people with certain limits and not others. Contexts define which limits are “acceptable” and which are not (i.e. disabling). Writer and wheelchair user Amy Kenny notes, for example, that glasses are an aid that society accepts as unremarkable. They are correctives to a physical impairment, “Yet I have never learned of anyone with glasses targeted for curative prayers or shaming calls to repentance.”²² The limits model recognizes that certain limits are expected in a given normate—while others are not.

²⁰ Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 94.

²¹ Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995), 14, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb02823>.

²² Amy Kenny, “Celebrating the Wheelchair: An Excerpt from My Body Is Not a Prayer Request,” *Earth & Altar Magazine*, May 2022, <https://earthandaltarmag.com/posts/s5kkmek60uxwrx28bxkymtcdemz3s5>.

With all this in mind, I use the limits model of disability in this thesis. I adopt the social model's emphasis on social construction of the normate. But I also acknowledge that some impairments are limiting regardless of society's inclusivity. The limits model allows us to theorize bodies across different contexts *and* offers space for disabled people to have ambivalence toward their impairments. A critical analysis of our understanding of disability destabilizes some of our assumptions about the bodies we encounter in scripture. And it opens the door to interpretation that does not assume that an impaired body is nothing more than a problem that needs to be fixed.

Disability Terminology

An important guiding principle for my writing is that “disability” is not an inherently negative word. Instead, it is one way to describe how someone moves through the world, and for many disabled people today, it is an important aspect of identity. Belser summarizes this sentiment: “Disability is a vital part of how I know myself, how I have come to know my world. It is central to my embodied sensibility, my politics, my passions. Strip away disability, and you strip away a depth of my identity, a source of who I am.”²³ To emphasize the positive, identity-forming aspect of disability, I mostly use adjective-first language in this thesis (e.g. “disabled person”). Occasionally, I also use person-first language (e.g. “person with a disability”), either for clarity or fluidity of prose. Both are acceptable or not, depending on a disabled person's preference and context. On the other hand, substantivizing an adjective into a noun (e.g. the NRSV's “the

²³ Julia Watts Belser, “Violence, Disability, and the Politics of Healing: The Inaugural Nancy Eiesland Endowment Lecture,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 19, no. 3 (2015): 181.

paralytic” or “invalids”) is largely considered unacceptable in disability culture.²⁴ Euphemisms, too, are to be avoided because they try to smooth over the speaker’s discomfort with disability. That is, patronizing words like “special needs,” “differently abled,” and “handicapable” try to avoid the word “disabled,” as if the word itself is an insult. But many people are disabled, and noting as much is not in itself offensive. At the same time, language is always evolving. Soon we will have even better ways of expressing the complicated intermix of identity and impairment, and my words here may become outdated or even distasteful. I am using the clearest and most affirming language to which I have access at this time.

As I have shown, the social model of disability distinguishes between impairment (e.g. paralysis) and disability (e.g. exclusion from accessing a building due to stairs). However, since I am using the limits model, I want to avoid drawing a clear boundary between impairment and disability. I therefore use impairment and disability interchangeably in a way that is deliberately equivocal.

Interpreting the Texts

My motivation for this inquiry is addressing the harm that biblical interpretation has inflicted on disabled individuals and communities. My purpose is to foreground the negative consequences of reading disability as sin or sign and, where possible, offer openings for reinterpreting these texts.

²⁴ There is a notable exception to this rule. Some disabled people have reclaimed substantivized adjectives as a political statement. Some autistic people, for example, use “autistic” as a noun more than an adjective. Doing so declares the importance of the disability to their self-understanding while also taking back language that has been used to harm and dehumanize them. Using substantivized adjectives is intentionally confrontational and can only be done by someone within the group to whom they refer, so I avoid this usage, even as I recognize its power. For more on the language of autism, see: Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 9–10.

Hector Avalos suggests a “rejectionist” approach to the Bible and disability, in which his aim is “not to recontextualize, but to repudiate” the texts whose interpretations have harmed disabled people.²⁵ He adopts this approach because, as he puts it, “No ancient text should be used to set any sort of norms today, regardless of whether it has positive or negative views of disability.”²⁶ And yet, week by week, Christians around the world read and interpret the Bible in individual devotions and in community. As long as people *are* using these texts to shape norms, it is biblical scholars’ responsibility to help them do so conscientiously. In contrast to Avalos, Amos Yong places the blame for ableist biblical interpretations on interpreters only. His aim is “to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion not necessarily to the biblical text but to our own traditions of interpretation that have taught us how to read it.”²⁷ And while I agree with him that it is essential to disentangle the text from how it has been received, I disagree that biblical texts will emerge blameless from such an analysis. Being a sacred text does not exempt harmful passages from being rejected as such.

I therefore locate myself somewhere between Avalos’ rejectionist approach and Yong’s rejection of it. Moss asserts, and I agree, that it is important to show how “the Bible does not unequivocally endorse ableism.”²⁸ Some harmful interpretations come not from the text itself but from ableist preconceptions, as Yong claims. Contextualizing with tools like the limits model of disability can reveal that it is we, not the text, who are being ableist. But at the same time, there is

²⁵ Hector Avalos, “Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism as Emerging Approaches in Disability Studies,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34 (2007): 91.

²⁶ Avalos, 100.

²⁷ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 8.

²⁸ Moss, “Mark and Matthew,” 277. Indeed, the Bible is not univocal on nearly any topic.

no need to force a liberative reading where none exists. As Julia Watts Belser points out: when we rush to “rescue the text,” we reinscribe “the power of text as the true arbiter of worth and value.”²⁹

I inhabit the space between a presupposition that biblical texts *must* have something liberative to offer and an outright rejection of the Bible for its ability to harm disabled people. This orientation toward the biblical texts is possible thanks to the insights of womanist interpretive methods. Renita Weems writes that womanist scholars tend to view their work as accountable *not* to the academy but to “grassroots African American women, women struggling for voice and representation.”³⁰ Similarly, my work needs to be accountable to real disabled people struggling for their own voice and representation: in the academy, in churches, and in society. In this thesis, the “true arbiter of worth and value” is the experiences and dignity of disabled people.

Reading Bodies

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that “all representations [of disability] have social and political consequences.”³¹ For instance, when David Buehler describes the disabled people approaching Jesus as “a sad, ragtag parade,”³² he is presumably echoing back the representations of disability he has consumed from his culture. A hospital chaplain and ethics lecturer at

²⁹ Belser, “Drawing Torah,” 144. Belser is writing about Torah and early rabbinic literature, but her insights are applicable to the New Testament and other early Christian writings, as well.

³⁰ Renita J. Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible,” in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 45.

³¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 75.

³² David A. Buehler, “Forgiveness for the Paralyzed,” in *Health and Healing In the Bible*, Participant Book, Living Faith Series (Philadelphia: Parish Life Press, 1985), 21.

Providence College, Buehler wrote a short tract about *Health and Healing in the Bible*, published in 1985. He uses distancing and dehumanizing language throughout: “the crippled and the blind... the people with dead skin and lifeless muscles.”³³ Disabled people, his culture has taught him, are passive, distasteful, and pathetic. They are not like the people who will be reading his book, whom he assumes do not belong to this group. But Buehler’s attitude toward disabled people is hardly unique to him. His language simply echoes the ethical and aesthetic judgments he has been taught to carry. Western culture has so often represented disability as something to escape or avoid. This representation affects how disabled bodies are “read” in some biblical passages. Nonetheless, the forces of meaning-making work in the opposite direction, as well: biblical interpretive history has shaped some cultural understandings of the body and disability.

New Testament interpreters sometimes “read” bodies because the text itself invites this. In storytelling, including in the Bible, disability tends to be morally coded or appears only as a narrative or rhetorical device. Then, the impairment contributes not as much to the depiction of the disabled character as to the story as a whole. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder coined the incisive phrase *narrative prosthesis* to critique how “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch on which literary narratives lean.”³⁴ The gospels and Acts almost always use disability as narrative prosthesis. Disabled recipients of healing are undeveloped characters, most disappearing as soon as their healing is complete. Chad Hartsock writes, “They are usually little

³³ Buehler, 21.

³⁴ David T. Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 17.

more than nameless, faceless recipients of the healing power of Christ.”³⁵ With little dialogue or action to interpret, readers focus on their bodies as sites of meaning.

Physiognomy is another way of “reading” bodies—those of a character in a text or even those of actual people. It is the reading of exterior, visible bodies for information about the interior, invisible parts of a person. In the ancient Mediterranean, physiognomy was an art, taught by experts and philosophers. Often the judgments were based on observations from the natural world, especially animals. For example, Ps-Aristotle makes the following observation in the third century BCE: “Soft hair shows timidity and stiff hair courage... For the deer, the hare and sheep are the most timid of all animals and have the softest hair; the lion and wild boar are the bravest and have very stiff hair” (Arist., *Phgn.* 806b10 [Hett]).³⁶ From that observation, he concludes that *people* with soft hair must be timid, and those with coarse hair are strong.

It is easy to see how, with these origins, physiognomies were also employed in early twentieth-century racist rhetoric as proving the supremacy of the “white” race. Indeed, physiognomic justification of racism easily dates back to the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. At that time, Hippocrates described the many peoples and their corresponding temperaments, shaped as they were by their environments. Inhabitants of Asia were “gentler in character” (ἡμερώτεροι τὰ ἥθεα) than their European counterparts, since their seasons did not greatly vacillate toward heat or toward cold (οὐ μεγάλας τὰς μεταβολὰς ποιούμεναι οὔτε ἐπὶ τὸ θερμὸν οὔτε ἐπὶ τὸ ψυχρόν, Hippocrates, *Aer.* XVI).³⁷ Hippocrates goes on to describe why the temperate weather and lack of

³⁵ Chad Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterization*, vol. 94, Biblical Interpretation Series (Boston: Brill, 2008), 128.

³⁶ Throughout, I use the Oxford Classical Dictionary’s Abbreviations List (4th edition).

³⁷ These are my own renderings of the Greek, as found in Hippocrates, *Hippocrates*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, vol. I, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).

seasonal fluctuation makes the constitutions of people from Asia inferior.³⁸ Thus, physiognomy has been used not only interpersonally to read the bodies of individuals, but also ethnographically to make judgments about entire groups of people.

Ancient physiognomy was squarely within the realms of medicine and philosophy; a clear differentiation between these τέχναι would be unintelligible to ancient medical texts. It is therefore no surprise that the word φυσιογνωμονέω first appears in the Hippocratic corpus: *Epid.* II.5.1. And before the word itself, the *practice* of physiognomy reaches back in Greek literature to Homer or earlier. Hartsock observes, “The notion that one’s physical features say something about one’s inner character is an idea that far predates any attempt to outline systematically those characteristics” in, for example, physiognomic handbooks.³⁹ Later, first-century authors need not quote Ps-Aristotle or Hippocrates to invoke physiognomy; it is embedded in their thought-worlds and those of their readers. And given this embeddedness, it is no surprise that ancient narratives would be written and interpreted in light of physiognomy.

And although today, most would decry the ability to make such judgments from observing someone’s body, physiognomic reasoning persists.⁴⁰ An example is the assumption that a fat person must be lazy or slovenly—a conclusion drawn only from looking at them.⁴¹ The bodies that

³⁸ His conclusions do not bode well for inhabitants of southern California either.

³⁹ Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts*, 94:9.

⁴⁰ I use “physiognomic reasoning” to distinguish from “physiognomy.” Physiognomy is reading bodies through a formal application of a τέχνη in antiquity. By contrast, my term physiognomic reasoning indicates how bodies can be read; it is an application of biases learned implicitly from one’s culture. In my definition, Ps-Aristotle is engaging in physiognomy when “reading” the hair of the people he encounters. But a modern person “reading” the body of a fat person is engaging physiognomic reasoning.

⁴¹ I use the term “fat” rather than a euphemism like “overweight” in solidarity with the fat justice movement. For a comprehensive discussion of the term “fat” in the context of fat justice, see Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020). In it, fat justice activist Aubrey

are susceptible to physiognomy, then, are those that are “marked” by their deviation from the normate. Bodies marked by gender, race, impairment, scars, fatness, etc. elicit the desire for an explanation for their difference.⁴² Mitchell and Snyder write that “disability inaugurates an explanatory opportunity that the unmarked body eludes by virtue of its physical anonymity.”⁴³ In other words, those inhabiting bodies close to a culture’s normate are unlikely to have their bodies read as texts. The same is true for biblical characters. Throughout interpretive history, readers consistently malign the man Jesus heals at the Bethesda fountain in John 5. He is presumed lazy, ungrateful, ignorant. His body evinces these characteristics for interpreters, even where the text itself is neutral in its characterization.⁴⁴ Readers need to take care with the ways they (perhaps unconsciously) read characters’ bodies in their interpretations.

Disability in the Silences

When Elizabeth Stuart writes that “disabled people are everywhere and nowhere” in Christian scripture, she is referring to the ways disabled characters enter and leave the story with little development.⁴⁵ But she is correct in another way, too: people we would today understand as

Gordon writes that “fat” is “a neutral descriptor” and that fat activists like her seek to “reclaim the term as an objective adjective to describe our bodies, like tall or short” (p. 8).

⁴² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “What is Staring?,” *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13–59.

⁴³ Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” 24.

⁴⁴ See: Helena L. Martin, “In Defense of the Disabled Man at the Bethesda Fountain (John 5:1–15),” *Biblical Interpretation* 30, no. 2 (2022): 246–64.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Stuart, “Disruptive Bodies: Disability, Embodiment and Sexuality,” in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*, ed. Lisa Isherwood, Studies in Theology and Sexuality 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 169.

disabled *were* everywhere in the ancient world, but their impairments only appear in the biblical record when the impairment is immediately relevant.

The erasure of marginalized people in biblical interpretation is hardly confined to disability. Womanist biblical scholar Wil Gafney writes that “modern scholarly tools” have been used “to whitewash the ancient world.”⁴⁶ White scholars have, for example, erased Ziporah’s African heritage, trying to define and redefine “Midian” as non-Black, light-skinned, Asiatic. For generations of biblical scholars, “none of the African peoples of Scripture are black, not the Egyptians, not the Nubians nor their Midianite kin.”⁴⁷

Likewise, biblical interpretation has often erased disability from the ancient world. Soon summarizes: “Not only is disability often overlooked in New Testament texts apart from retrospective diagnosis, but it is frequently assumed that the key figures and founders of the Jesus movement, including Jesus himself, were able-bodied people.”⁴⁸ Modern people read unmarked bodies according to modern normates. Blind theologian John Hull, for example, assumes that the authors of the Bible were not visually impaired. He writes, “It is not surprising that the Bible was written by sighted people. However, blind readers of the Bible need to be aware of this fact.”⁴⁹ He wants his reader to understand that, if they feel estranged from the Bible due to its language around blindness, they have every right to feel that way. In that sense, he is right.

⁴⁶ Wil Gafney, “A Womanist Midrash on Ziporah,” in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 136.

⁴⁷ Gafney, 136.

⁴⁸ Soon, “Disability and New Testament Studies,” 380.

⁴⁹ John M. Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person’s Conversations with the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 67.

However, unmentioned impairment does not equal nonexistent impairment. Contrary to Hull's claim, compromised vision was prevalent in the ancient world due to poor nutrition, contaminated water, injury, etc. Consequently, many "writers" in antiquity were dictating to scribes. Nicholas Horsfall describes a system of scribes and readers in ancient Rome: enslaved people acted as scribes for "writers" who could not see well enough to write themselves.⁵⁰ Hull's claim that "the Bible was written by sighted people" assumes a false sighted/blind binary. In order to empower blind people alienated by the Bible, a more accurate statement would be: *Historically, writers and interpreters of the Bible have been largely unconcerned with issues of disability.* That correction acknowledges the utter lack of disability-informed composition and interpretation of the Bible without erasing potential impairments of both writers and interpreters.

In the ancient world, "Illness and disability were everyday realities that needed to be made sense of in a religious context."⁵¹ In fact, the most statistically common body in the ancient world was likely impaired by modern standards. Nicole Kelly writes about how common disability was:

The pervasiveness of malnutrition, disease, and interbreeding... suggests that many infants may have been born with congenital abnormalities. Postnatally acquired deformities were even more common. Many people were disfigured by bacterial diseases and the like; even something as minor as a broken arm or leg was likely to result in permanent deformity or disability.⁵²

Given the prevalence of disability in the ancient world, we can assume all sorts of disabilities exist in the silences of the literary record. The limits model of disability is instructive here. Extremely poor eyesight that today would be an unacceptable limitation (i.e. a disability) was so common as

⁵⁰ Nicholas Horsfall, "Rome without Spectacles," *Greece & Rome* 42, no. 1 (April 1995): 49–56.

⁵¹ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 42.

⁵² Nicole Kelley, "Deformity and Disability in Greece and Rome," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, *Semeia Studies* 55 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 31.

to become accepted within the boundaries of the normate, and therefore often unmentioned.⁵³ Models of disability help explain why some of these disabilities-by-modern-standards are absent in the text, even though they were common in the world.

Remembering the disabilities hidden in the texts' silences is one more tool to push against the poison of normative readings in biblical interpretation. The assumption "that 'normal' perspectives are central and have theological purity" has led the field astray for too long, excluding marginalized voices and prioritizing texts over people.⁵⁴ Some readers do not understand their bodies to be marked by gender (because they are cisgender and male), sexuality (because they are heterosexual), or race (because they are white). They assume their interpretation is similarly unmarked. But, of course, heterosexuality *is* a sexuality, and whiteness *is* a race. Inhabiting a normate body does not imbue the power to interpret the Bible objectively. Michal Beth Dinkler summarizes, "In biblical studies, there is no *one*, objective, positionless point from which to discern meaning. Such a position never existed."⁵⁵

Conclusion to Reading Disability

The construction of bodies is context-dependent, and this is an important point of departure for disability hermeneutics. I have shown how disability theory, especially the limits model of

⁵³ Remember that *normate* does not mean *ideal* and by definition includes limits. A modern example would be the inability run a marathon: perhaps ideally, a modern person could run a marathon, but the inability to do so is well within our constructed normates. My inability run a marathon does not make me disabled in this context because it is an acceptable limit.)

⁵⁴ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 69.

⁵⁵ Michal Beth Dinkler, *Literary Theory and the New Testament*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 33. Emphasis original.

disability, offers methods for understanding bodies across time and cultures. I also introduced the concepts of narrative prosthesis and physiognomy, which I will critique in the sections to come. Finally, I noted some of the parameters around my hermeneutic, including a note about disability in between the lines of a text. Now, I apply these methodologies to constructively read disability where it seems attributed to sin.

II. DISABILITY AS SIN

πῶς δύναται ἄνθρωπος ἁμαρτωλὸς τοιαῦτα σημεῖα ποιεῖν;
John 9:16

Introduction to Disability as Sin

The Rev. Mary Stainton, a disabled minister in the United Church of Christ, writes about the mental agony she sees in patients whose acquired disability has increased their limitations. She hears them worry that “their new limits [are] God’s punishment for their sins... The unavoidable pain of grief over the losses they are experiencing is compounded by the painful sense that they have been abandoned by a God they did their best to serve.”⁵⁶ The adjustment required after limits changing is complicated by the theology of disability they have been taught. Suffering, including and especially bodily limitations, must be punishment for shortcomings and sin.⁵⁷

These are the consequences, at least in part, of ableist interpretation of the NT’s healing narratives. Partly, Stainton’s patients may come to this conclusion from the stories that explicitly associate healing with faith. After several healings, Jesus indicates that the person’s faith was the agent or occasion for their healing. “Θυγάτηρ, ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε” (Mark 5:34). “ἀναστὰς πορεύου· ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε” (Luke 17:19). By implication, if a disabled person like Stainton’s patients wants healing but does not receive it, their faith must be lacking.

⁵⁶ Mary Stainton, “Healing Stories: Critiquing Old and Creating New,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 1, no. 4 (1994): 66–67.

⁵⁷ One important aspect of disability’s assumed association with sin is the question of demon possession and exorcism in the gospels and Acts. For the purposes of this thesis, I am putting aside this question. Demon possession as etiology of disabilities—especially mental illness and autism—has particularly troubling consequences in the modern church. The confines of this short thesis do not permit the thorough treatment this topic deserves. For a short but nuanced discussion of this question, see: Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 46–53.

Contributing even more to the understanding of impairment as punishment are the passages wherein Jesus explicitly mentions sin in the context of a healing. Eiesland writes, “These passages have frequently been cited as proof that disability is a sign of moral imperfection or divine retribution for sin.”⁵⁸ In the synoptics, Matt 9:1-8 // Mark 2:1-12 // Luke 5:17-26, four people bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. Before healing the man, Jesus says, “Child, your sins are forgiven (ἀφίενται σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι)” (Mark 2:5).⁵⁹ Jesus’ apparent association of sin with impairment comes in John 5 when, after healing the man at the Bethesda fountain, he says, “No longer sin, so that nothing worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). In each of the gospels, then, from Jesus’ mouth comes what seems like a causal connection between sin and disability.⁶⁰

Given the apparent scriptural basis for associating disability with sinfulness, Christian teachings doing the same should not be surprising. *The Interpreter’s Bible* draws this connection in its commentary on John 9: “Any doctor will tell us that this very case of blindness from birth is sometimes the direct results of the father’s or the mother’s misdemeanors.”⁶¹ Ironically, Jesus explicitly rejects such a causal relationship in that same pericope. As another example, Pieter Craffert is a biblical scholar at the University of South Africa. In his book *Illness and Healing in the Biblical World: Perspectives on Biblical Care*, he teaches, “Forgiveness is appropriate and

⁵⁸ Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 71.

⁵⁹ All New Testament translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁶⁰ There is no story in Acts where sin is verbally mentioned alongside a healing. Paul’s temporary blindness and healing (Acts 9:1-19) could be read as punishment for healing and reward for repentance, respectively. But the characteristics of this story are so different from the shared characteristics of those in the gospels that it deserves its own treatment.

⁶¹ Wilbert F. Howard and Arthur John Gossip, “The Gospel According to St. John,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 26th ed., vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 612.

effective *in cases where the illness is caused by sins.*"⁶² His claim is unambiguous: for Craffert, sin sometimes causes illness.

These examples are forty and twenty years old, respectively. And in some ways, the bold confidence with which these commentators proclaim that sin causes disability has fallen out of fashion. But after centuries of grappling with this question, these interpretations are not so easily undone. The consequences of this thinking are still evident in the stories that disabled people tell about their encounters with Christians. But do all (or any) NT texts truly present disability and sin with the certainty proclaimed by these interpreters? Or does that equivalence come from readers' ableist biases? In section III, Disability as Sign, I examine how text and reader work in concert to create ableist interpretations. But here, I show that the texts are *not* portraying sin as the cause of disability in the gospel healing narratives usually thought to be doing so.

In this section, I begin my revision of this physiognomic reasoning by examining NT exempla wherein disability is an *antidote* to sin, or even prophylaxis. Then I turn to a close reading of Mark 2:1-12 and the narrative disconnect it employs between forgiveness and healing. I will show that NT texts in these cases, rather than affirming a link between sin and disability, actually go to lengths to do the opposite. The physiognomic reasoning that shapes interpreters' ideas about disability is similarly shaping their readings of these stories by reinforcing their assumption that a disabled body is implicit proof of an impaired soul. Finally, I consider the ways *healing as imperative* has contributed to ableist interpretations—and offer a disability-informed perspective on healing, based in part on my reading of Mark 2.

⁶² Pieter F. Craffert, *Illness and Healing in the Biblical World: Perspectives on Health Care* (Pretoria: Biblia Publishers, 1999), 98. Emphasis added.

Disability as Antidote, Prophylaxis

Not only do NT texts *not* associate sin and disability as closely as is often assumed, as I will show, but in some cases they say the very opposite. A disability-positive premise subverts the usual physiognomic reasoning, defamiliarizing well-known texts. Indeed, in some cases, the text puts impairment forward as an antidote to—or even a prophylaxis for—sin.

Disability in biblical texts has so often been read through a lens of narrative prosthesis or physiognomy. Eiesland writes, “The persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God.”⁶³ The impairment is either present in the story to drive the plot forward or to indicate something about the state of the disabled person’s soul. Much modern disability interpretation attempts to familiarize impairment so readers do not automatically reduce it to narrative prosthesis or physiognomy. Susan Sontag explains that the purpose of her book *Illness as Metaphor* was “not to confer meaning, which is the traditional purpose of literary endeavor, but to deprive something of meaning.”⁶⁴ I call this a familiarizing hermeneutic: *Look, disabled people are like anyone else! Impairment can be a neutral fact about someone’s body like their height or how well their skin tans in the sun.* Such familiarization will be my primary interpretive strategy in *Disability as Sign*.

However, a *defamiliarizing* disability hermeneutic can be instructive, as well. By highlighting the particularities of embodied diversity, disability theory can defamiliarize the biblical text. Moss is particularly skilled in this strategy, finding several NT examples where disability is the solution to sin, rather than proof of it. One example: she shows how a certain

⁶³ Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 71.

⁶⁴ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors*, 102.

impairment is helpful in following Jesus' instruction in Matthew 6:2-4. Proprioception is the coordination between brain and nerve endings that allows most people to close their eyes and touch their nose, or to sit down without looking at the chair. People with atypical proprioception have trouble locating their bodies in space. To locate their hand, for example, they use their eyes rather than the nerve endings in their fingers, hands, and arms. When Jesus says, "When you are doing charity, do not let your left [hand] know what your right [hand] is doing" (Matt 6:3), people without proprioception actually have an advantage. By definition, their left hand does not "know" what their right hand is doing. The disability makes following this instruction easy and even inevitable.⁶⁵ What is usually thought to be a limit, in this instance, gives what Moss calls a "moral advantage."⁶⁶

A more discomfiting example comes from Moss' interpretation of Mark 9:42-48. Here, Jesus instructs his disciples, "If your hand should cause you to stumble, cut it off! It's better for you to enter into life deformed (κυλλὸν) than, having two hands, to go to Gehenna" (Mark 9:43). This instruction is almost universally interpreted as figurative. Jesus must be speaking in metaphor; he would not endorse self-mutilation, right? But Moss encourages readers to consider statements about the body literally, including Jesus' teachings about therapeutic amputation. For modern readers, especially those in high-income contexts like much of the United States, amputation is a horrifying but abstract idea—if anything, a last resort. Although amputation was, of course, gruesome and undesirable in Jesus' time, it was a common therapeutic measure. Living without a limb was preferable to dying from an infection in that limb.

⁶⁵ Jesus' teaching here is metaphorical, whereas atypical proprioception is literal. But if metaphorical language about disability can be harmful to disabled people (e.g. the metaphor of blindness meaning ignorance), then perhaps the same can be affirming, as well.

⁶⁶ Moss, "Mark and Matthew," 281. Applying the limits model to Moss' ideas is my addition; her chapter mostly uses the social model of disability.

Even taken literally, Jesus is not privileging impairment here as he does in Matt 6:2-4; in fact, this rhetoric is the reverse. The Markan “author harnesses the negativity associated with disability in order to bring home to his audience the imperiled state in which they find themselves.”⁶⁷ Being disabled is bad, this teaching allows, but your soul is more valuable than inhabiting a normate body. But given the complexity of disabled peoples’ attitudes towards our own bodies, the aim of disability hermeneutics should not always be to find a disability-positive spin on the text. In this teaching from Jesus, acquired impairment has a prophylactic function against sin. And that subverts the expectation that disability and sin operate in unison in NT texts.

In a nearby pericope, I notice another example where a similar hermeneutic is useful. The letter from James teaches, “The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body” (Jas 3:6 NRSVue). Perhaps, like atypical proprioception with respect to Matt 6:3, here aphasia (the clinical inability to speak) has a moral advantage.

As is to be expected from a collection of texts written and transmitted over two centuries, the New Testament does not speak with one voice about disability being an indication of sin. Teachings in the NT show a variety of attitudes toward, and anxieties about, impairment and the normate body. Next, I turn to the example most used to prove that sin and disability *are* integrally linked in Mark 2:1-12.

Sin in Mark 2:1-12

When word gets out that Jesus has returned to Capernaum, crowds mob the house where he is staying (Mark 2:1-2). Four people bring a paralyzed man to Jesus but cannot reach him because of

⁶⁷ Moss, 293–94.

the density of the crowd, so they dig through the ceiling of the home and lower the man inside (vv. 3-4). Jesus sees their faith and tells the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven (v. 5). When the scribes hear this, they accuse him of blasphemy amongst themselves, but Jesus rebukes them, asking a rhetorical question about whether healing is easier than proclaiming forgiveness (vv. 6-9). Then, so that they can see Jesus' authority, he tells the paralyzed man to get up, take his bed, and go home (vv. 10-11). The man does so, and the crowd is amazed (v. 12).

An overwhelming number of interpreters read this story, which also appears in Matthew 9:1-8 and Luke 5:17-26, as affirming sin's ability to cause impairment. In an 18th century commentary on the Matthean parallel, John Gill writes that the impairment could only have been caused by sin. Gill writes that Jesus first proclaimed the man's forgiveness "to show, that sin was the cause of the disease... for, 'there are no chastisements without sin',⁶⁸ as the Jews say; and that the cause being removed, the effects would cease."⁶⁹ Gill's commentary is in the public domain and therefore one of the most comprehensive free biblical commentaries available when searching online. (It is, for example, the *newer* of the two free commentaries searchable on biblestudytools.com; the more recent commentaries are available only to paid members of that site.) Two centuries of interpretation have addressed this question since Gill. But Gill's conflation of sin and disability is accessible to all while disability-positive interpretations of this passage sit in expensive books and behind paywalls.

⁶⁸ Here, Gill may be referring to Don Yizhaq Abarbanel's commentary on Isaiah 53, which says, "Know and believe that all this proceeds only from Israel's sin and the guilt of his own soul: there are no chastisements without iniquity." Adolf Neubauer, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters: Translations*, by S. R. Driver and A. Neubauer, vol. 2 (J. Parker, 1877), 182.

⁶⁹ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament, in Three Volumes*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (London: printed for the author and sold by Aaron Ward, at the King's-Arms in Little-Britain, 1746), 79, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=29002&tabID=T001&docId=CW119039192&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

As Gill alludes, historical understandings of sin causing disability contribute to the association between impairment and punishment in the Mark 2 story. In Exodus, for example, God says, “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation” (Exod 20:5 NRSVue). The *Jewish Annotated New Testament* affirms that illness can be divine punishment in the Hebrew Bible, identifying Miriam’s skin disease (Num 12:9-10) as an example.⁷⁰ And *The Interpreter’s Bible* says, “Rabbinical teaching dwelt upon the O.T. warning that the sins of the parents bore heavily on their descendants.”⁷¹ The link between disability and divine punishment can be found in Greek and Roman literature, as well. Garland summarizes Greek attitudes toward infants born disabled: “a deformed infant signified a type of divine displeasure that had been originally incurred by its parents.”⁷² However, my disability-informed reading of the man lowered through the ceiling will show that healing and forgiveness are not as strongly linked in the text as it may first appear.

Defamiliarizing the Characters

Eiesland observes that Mark 2:1-12 “has often been interpreted as a story of heroic helpers and a crippled sinner.”⁷³ A first step in defamiliarizing the story is to scrutinize the characterization of these five people who are encountering Jesus in the story.

⁷⁰ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 186.

⁷¹ Howard and Gossip, “John,” 612. Notably, in the examples they cite from the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach, the texts do not specify that the divine reproach is any kind of physical malady. They also cite Exod. 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:18; and Deut 5:9.

⁷² Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 16.

⁷³ Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 71.

First, I offer a closer examination of the figure of the “crippled sinner” himself. He is often ignored. Interpretations gloss over him, as if he is part of the furniture he lies on, in order to focus on the action of the friends carrying him. The text says that Jesus proclaims the man’s forgiveness after “seeing their faith” (Mark 2:5). But whose faith does Jesus perceive: that of all five of them, or just that of his friends? One of the authors of *The Interpreter’s Bible* ignores the man entirely. He extols the friends and overlooks the man who is the center of this story: “There is also a deep impressiveness about the sympathy and the faith of these four men... What a role it has been in history—the bearers!”⁷⁴ Ableist assumptions about disability and passivity have led many to read this man as an object being acted upon by his friends and then by Jesus. In contrast, the other author of *The Interpreter’s Bible* allows for the man’s participation in his own healing, “It is the faith of the four friends that is rewarded; but presumably the man himself had faith too—perhaps urging his friends to bring him.”⁷⁵

Anna Rebecca Solevåg offers a challenge to the usual reading of the paralyzed man as passive or even invisible. The word Mark uses to describe him is παραλυτικός. The words that would usually be expected in this context are παραλελυμένος, the perfect passive participle of παραλύω, or the vaguer χωλός (usually translated “lame”). The latter is used throughout NT healing narratives to describe general mobility impairment. The participle of παραλύω is a more specific medical term appearing in Aristotle, the Hippocratic corpus, and Galen. But as Rebecca Solevåg notes, παραλυτικός “does not occur in the Greek literary corpus outside of early Christian

⁷⁴ Frederick C. Grant and Halford E. Luccock, “The Gospel According to St. Mark,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 26th ed., vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 669.

⁷⁵ Grant and Luccock, 670.

usage that derives from these Matthean and Markan passages.”⁷⁶ She hypothesizes that the label “may point toward an impairment that was recently acquired, painful, and perhaps more serious than the general designation *χωλός* would imply.”⁷⁷ We might therefore imagine that the man became paralyzed in an accident or in battle, as opposed to being born with a clubfoot or a limp.

She also notes that, in instructing the man to return home (v. 11), Jesus is acknowledging that this man has a home to return to.⁷⁸ (The same is not the case for the man at the Bethesda fountain in John 5, for example.) This man is perhaps not the pathetic beggars many commentaries assume him to be.

The four people accompanying the paralyzed man—Eiesland’s “heroic helpers”—deserve a second look, as well. Many read the story as four friends carrying the man to his healing. But Solevåg wonders if it is safer to assume that the people carrying him are enslaved. Given that friendship in antiquity was “based on equality... It seems unlikely, therefore, that friends would carry a fellow free male, as this was typically a task for slaves.”⁷⁹ If this is a man with enough wealth to have a home and to hold slaves, even after acquiring this immobilizing disability, then he is not the helpless “invalid” that physiognomic reasoning might seduce us into concluding.⁸⁰ Reading the story and trying to put that reasoning aside reveals a different characterization than is commonly proposed.

⁷⁶ Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts*, Early Christianity and Its Literature 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 34.

⁷⁷ Solevåg, 35.

⁷⁸ σοὶ λέγω, ἔγειρε ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ ὑπάγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου.

⁷⁹ Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body*, 36–37.

⁸⁰ Here is an example of how being marginalized in one way (paralysis) does not preclude the ability to oppress others (enslaving people). Solevåg’s observation shows that more work is to be done on interpreting the four helpers in this passage.

Jesus' In-sight

Another way physiognomic reasoning shows up in interpretations of this passage is the understanding of *Jesus'* actions herein. Before the man can say a word, Jesus knows he needs to be forgiven. If interpreters met the man, they would instinctively “read” his body, so they assume Jesus is doing the same. After all, the disciples “read” the body of the man who receives his sight in John 9; their question is not, “*Did* this man sin?” but, “*How* did someone sin for him to be born so badly disabled?” Many interpreters of Mark 2 are as sure that his paralysis is punishment as the disciples are there. They come upon this paralyzed man, and his disabled body tells them all they need to know about the needs of his soul.

But Mark's Jesus does not need to engage in physiognomic reasoning to see into someone's internal landscape. Two other times in the short Mark 2 healing story, he comes to understand something interior about someone without them saying a word. First, in verse 5, he “sees” (ἰδὼν) the faith of the group. And in verse 8, he “knows in his spirit” (ἐπιγινούσ... τῷ πνεύματι αὐτοῦ) that the scribes think he is blaspheming. Mark's Jesus can conceivably, therefore, look at the paralyzed man and know his need for forgiveness, not judging by the man's body but by perceiving in his own spirit. Dinkler notes the prominent theme in Jewish literature that “what one says in/to one's soul conditions and reflects one's relationship with God.”⁸¹ Jesus' divine in-sight in this story thus also reinforces his connection to God. And it is the very opposite of physiognomic reasoning: he does not need to “read” the man's body; he is able to “read” the man's heart.

Jesus proclaims forgiveness of this man's sins because he can perceive that forgiveness is the man's greatest need. He looks past the man's paralysis at first because that is the less acute

⁸¹ Michal Beth Dinkler, “‘The Thoughts of Many Hearts Shall Be Revealed’: Listening in on Lukan Interior Monologues,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 382.

issue. Physical disability is an expected limit in this thought-world. But this paralyzed man in particular, Jesus determines with his in-sight, is primarily in need of forgiveness.

“What’s Easier?”

Perhaps the clearest argument against reading sin and disability together in this passage comes from the narrative structure of Mark 2:1-12. After forgiving the man, Jesus asks the authorities an enigmatic question: “What’s easier: to say to the paralyzed person, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, and lift your bed, and walk?’” (Mark 2:9).⁸² The three synoptic versions include this question; Mark 2:9-11 are the verses least changed in Matthew and Luke’s redactions of the story. Pauline Otieno voices the common understanding of Jesus’ question: “The implication of this comment is that it was necessary first to get the sin out of the way before the disability could be healed.”⁸³ Writing from a Kenyan context, Otieno is concerned about the stigma that gets attached to disabled people and their families when sin and disability are conflated. She is similarly concerned about Jesus’ words in John 5:14: “See, you have become well. No longer sin (μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε), so that nothing worse may happen to you.” In both cases, Otieno, like many interpreters, assume that Jesus is teaching that the impairment was caused by sin.

When Jesus compares the two statements—“your sins are forgiven” and “get up... and walk”—he is contrasting two things he positions as different from one another. But interpreters see Jesus as drawing an *association*, not a comparison. *The Interpreter’s Bible* says, “We know

⁸² τί ἐστὶν εὐκοπώτερον, εἰπεῖν τῷ παραλυτικῷ· ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἀμαρτίαι, ἢ εἰπεῖν· ἔγειρε καὶ ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει;

⁸³ Pauline A. Otieno, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Disability: Implications on the Rights of Persons with Disability in Kenya,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2009), <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/988/1164>.

that there is a relationship between some forms of sin and physical calamity, and between mental states and functional paralysis. At any rate Jesus goes to the deeper level of evil first—‘Thy sins are forgiven.’”⁸⁴ They assume the man’s disability *must have* been caused by sin. They justify this reading by pointing out that Jesus begins the encounter with forgiveness, but it is really eisegesis from physiognomic reasoning and ableist cultural assumptions. Here is a helpless disabled man, people assume, whose friends are so desperate for his healing that they carry him and cut through a roof. If Jesus mentions forgiveness before healing him, some grave sin must have caused his impairment.

Another source of the assumption is the opacity of Jesus’ rhetorical question. Almost certainly, Jesus is *not* asking which words are easier to *speak*. The two options both begin with εἰπεῖν—“is it easier to say this, or to say that?”—but the words in verse 9 are not a tongue twister. Rather, when he asks “what’s easier?” he means “is it easier to proclaim forgiveness or to heal someone?” Still, this is a strange question, given that the scribes and the crowd in attendance can neither forgive sins *nor* make a paralyzed man walk.

As I read it, Jesus implies that healing is easier to accomplish than forgiveness. “In proclaiming forgiveness, I have already done the harder of the two things,” he seems to say. However, his problem in the story, then, is that forgiveness does not have immediately visible results. He has proclaimed this man’s sins forgiven, but the scribes do not believe him. “Who’s able to forgive sins, except God alone?” they ask among themselves (Mark 2:7). They think Jesus is speaking against God—blaspheming—because he is claiming to do something he is *unable* to do. How can he prove to them that he is able to pronounce God’s forgiveness? He needs to do

⁸⁴ Grant and Luccock, “Mark,” 670.

something visible, and luckily, this man is paralyzed; Jesus can heal him so that they “might know that the son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth” (v. 10). Therefore, when Jesus says, “Get up” (v. 11), it is the easier thing to do, but at least the results will be visible to onlookers. Thus, in Jesus’ words, healing and forgiveness are undoubtedly two different things.

The forgiveness and healing are even more distinct if we focus instead on the order of events in the plot. Jesus proclaims the man’s sins forgiven (v. 5), then turns away from him for a brief altercation with the scribes (vv. 6-10). Only in response to their objections does he return to the man and heal him (v. 11). Imagine, by contrast, if the scribes were not present for this interaction. The man’s friends lower him into the house, and Jesus proclaims his sins forgiven. Does Jesus also heal his paralysis? Apparently not, since he seems to only do so in response to the grumbling of the scribes. The forgiveness and the healing are very clearly two distinct acts.

Note that, even though my reading decouples the healing from the forgiveness, Jesus still instrumentalizes this man in the story. He offers healing not primarily to benefit the man but to demonstrate Jesus’ own authority to the scribes. Here, we see an example of the problem of disability (or its absence) as a sign of something greater than itself; the man’s healing becomes a sign of Jesus’ power (see the next section, Disability as Sign). But my analysis at least decouples what is so problematically assumed to be natural pairs: sin and disability, forgiveness and healing.

Healing as Imperative, Healing as Restoration

Healing with respect to disability can be complicated. Many disabled people desire healing, full or partial, for our impairments. But many others have mixed feelings, or even reject healing altogether. Damon Rose, a blind journalist, gives voice to the ambivalence many feel: “My visual impairment, along with the things I’ve come to love and cherish as a result of having it, is so bound

up with my identity, I would feel a bit weird if I were to suddenly not be blind. That said, I think on balance it would be quite handy being able to see.”⁸⁵ The limits model of disability and other insights from disability theory can help us disentangle our ableism and create disability-informed readings of healing stories like Mark 2:1-12.

The problem is not healing on its own but healing *as imperative*. Disability activists worry about the identity erasure that can come with “cure,” especially compulsory cure. Eli Clare writes, “At the center of cure lies eradication and the many kinds of violence that accompany it.”⁸⁶ Belser agrees, writing that healing *as imperative* “assumes that ‘able’ bodies and minds are so obviously and naturally desirable that everyone should have them, that everyone should want them, that there is, in fact, no other dignified way to live.”⁸⁷ In contrast, Belser describes the thrill of her wheelchair and its interplay with her body. Whereas outsiders sometimes see limitation in her chair, she experiences liberation: “This is how the Holy moves through me, in the intricate interplay of muscle and spin, the exhilarating physicality of body and wheel.”⁸⁸ She says that she experiences an imposed desire for healing as a denial of her experience of God.

To break open some of our assumptions about healing in the NT, it can be instructive to imagine the people whom Jesus is *not* depicted as having healed. Physical trauma was common at the time, but the gospels do not tell stories of Jesus regrowing limbs, healing broken bones, or

⁸⁵ Rose, “Stop Trying to ‘heal’ Me.”

⁸⁶ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 26. Clare uses the language of “cure,” as opposed to “healing.” These words have different connotations, too complex to detail here. I default to the language of “healing” because of its emphasis on process rather than result, wholeness rather than conformity to a medical norm. Regardless, “healing as imperative” does the same violence as “cure as imperative.”

⁸⁷ Belser, “Violence, Disability, and the Politics of Healing,” 178.

⁸⁸ Belser, 183.

closing wounds.⁸⁹ “The replacement of whole body parts might seem especially miraculous but no more surprising, in an ancient context, than the healing of the notoriously difficult-to-treat ailments of paralysis and congenital blindness.”⁹⁰ There were also little people (that is, people with dwarfism) and people with Down Syndrome, but the gospels do not record him changing these kinds of genetic disabilities. And he does not alter any “deformities” that do not cause impairment.⁹¹ Why do Jesus and the apostles heal some bodies, but not others?

The NT healings are different from what would have been expected of other healers of the time. Private, in-home healings like that of Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt 8:14–15 // Mark 1:29–31 // Luke 4:38–39) would have been available only to the wealthy. Other “medical services were available in the temples of Asclepius, but the care was rarely professional and presumed a donation (fee) would be paid. Nor were cases that appeared hopeless welcome, as a death inside the temple constituted a ritual impurity.”⁹² Jesus and the apostles, in contrast, “healed” even people who had already died (e.g. John 11:38-44 and Acts 20:7-12), and they never charged a fee. In some cases, medicine had no cure for the impairment, as is likely the case for the bent-over woman in Luke 13:10-17. In others, physicians had tried and failed to treat the problem, as with the woman suffering from bleeding who touches Jesus’ cloak in Mark 5:25-34. People with missing limbs

⁸⁹ I owe this insight to Craffert, *Illness and Healing*, 93. The exception to this rule is Jesus healing the enslaved man sometimes called Malchus, whose ear is cut off in Matt 26:51 // Mark 14:47 // Luke 22:51 // John 18:10-11.

⁹⁰ Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 64.

⁹¹ For example, polydactyly [having more than five fingers or toes on a hand or foot] likely did not cause impairment and was an acceptable “limit.” This is an example of a “deformity” that would have been prevalent but that Jesus is not reported to have healed. For more on deformity vs. disability, see: Kelley, “Deformity and Disability,” 34.

⁹² Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 35.

would have had access to prosthetics. People with open wounds could seek a cure from physicians. But the people Jesus and his apostles heal are often those who have no other recourse.

In this, the New Testament rhetorically positions Jesus and the apostles not as magicians or physicians, but as divine healers. The healings transcend medical cure; the narratives imply that the healers are also reuniting people with their communities and/or restoring them to participation in religious life. To be disabled often meant ostracization. Robert Garland writes that in the ancient world, as now, “Whatever does not conform to the norms of the dominant group tends to be treated either with suspicion, terror and contempt, or alternatively with an unhealthy blend of amusement, fascination and embarrassment.”⁹³ When Jesus sees the bent-over woman in the synagogue, he calls her over to the group with whom he is sitting; she has rejoined the synagogue community, and her first act upon being healed is to praise God (Luke 13:13). When he heals the man with leprosy in Matt 8:1-4, Jesus immediately sends him to the priests so he can be declared ritually clean and offer a sacrifice in the temple. And after Jesus heals the man at the Bethesda fountain, the narrative next finds the man in the temple, having been empowered to worship according to his tradition for possibly the first time (John 5:14).

Stainton sees the same restoration happening with the paralyzed man in Mark 2. She asserts that he experiences a kind of healing before even encountering Jesus. She writes, “He saw his friends sweat and struggle to find access for him.” Stainton values this aspect of the story, “For I know the healing of friends’ devotion.”⁹⁴ His healing begins on his way to Jesus. These healings

⁹³ Garland, *Eye of the Beholder*, 178.

⁹⁴ Stainton, “Healing Stories,” 69.

therefore the story of people being restored to something beyond the normative body; they are restored to wholeness.

Conclusion to Disability as Sin

By removing the assumption that disability must be evidence of sin, I have shown the diversity of New Testament texts on this topic. Some even offer impairment as antidote to sin. In my close reading of Mark 2:1-12, I defamiliarized the characters to shed new light on the well-known story. I then examined Jesus' seeming link between sin and impairment to show that no such link exists in the discourse of the texts. My above primer on healing in disability culture will be informative as I pivot now from disability as *sin* to disability as *sign*.

III. DISABILITY AS SIGN

γὰρ γνωστὸν σημεῖον γέγονεν δι' αὐτῶν.
Acts 4:16

ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ἴδητε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε.
John 4:48

Introduction to Disability as Sign

Damon Rose tells the all-too-common story of being constantly approached by Christians who are trying to heal him. “While they may be well-intentioned, these encounters often leave me feeling judged as faulty and in need of repair.”⁹⁵ As a wheelchair user, Amy Kenny, too, frequently endures the prayers of strangers. She writes, “They always approach me with the same paternalistic confidence, eager to rid me of my wheelchair or cane. On repeat, they applaud the stories where Jesus healed a disabled outcast like me.”⁹⁶ The most visible disability representation in the New Testament is disabled people encountering Jesus for healing. But harmfully interpreting these stories teaches Christians to treat disabled people as passive objects to be acted upon, rather than as active agents in their own lives.

Belser writes that, in Christian traditions, “the healing of people with disabilities has often been used as a vivid *symbol and sign* of the liberation and redemption of all humanity.”⁹⁷ Disability in New Testament interpretation usually represents something greater than the impairment itself.

⁹⁵ Rose, “Stop Trying to ‘heal’ Me.”

⁹⁶ Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 2.

⁹⁷ Belser, “Violence, Disability, and the Politics of Healing,” 178. Emphasis added.

In Acts, for example, the Jewish council wonders among themselves what to do with Peter and John, who heal a disabled man in Jesus' name. "For through them, *a notable sign has come to be*, visible to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it" (Acts 4:16b). The healing is such a powerful sign that even the apostles' opponents have to accept it as proof of God's favor. All the while, the man who receives the healing is a narrative afterthought, his role in the story fulfilled once his body has been acted upon. Willie Jennings writes that this healed man "is now a sign of the man resurrected from the dead, the author of life itself."⁹⁸ The man has lost his individuality entirely, having been subsumed into a sign of Christ—an exalted identity, to be sure, but not one he can call his own.

In this section, I examine the "sign" that is the man who receives his sight in John 9. After looking at the imagery of blindness, dark, and light in the Gospel of John, I inspect the gospel's depiction of this man. By putting aside the metaphor of blindness, instead embracing his blindness as part of his lived experience, I show how John paints a picture of a fierce and thoughtful disciple. Still, the text uses the man's blindness as narrative prosthesis, leaning its story on his disability. After examining the problems that come from the narrative prosthesis, I take up Eiesland's suggestion to reimagine disability in the Christian tradition: creative resymbolization. Reading from a disability-positive perspective, I find new symbols in the discourse: God in darkness, blindness as an asset, and sight as sin.

⁹⁸ William James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 43.

The Sign in John 9

The ninth chapter of John is famous for the disciples' opening question: "Teacher, who sinned—this one or his parents—that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). This story of a man receiving his sight begins with a short discourse on sin, so it may seem more natural to begin reading John 9 in the context of disability as *sin*, rather than disability as *sign*. And yet, the majority of the chapter is consumed not by questions of the man's sinfulness but by questions of what larger truth his healing indicates. The standard interpretation says, "The cure of the man's blindness was symbolic of the giving of spiritual vision to those conscious of their spiritual blindness, who are therefore willing to be healed."⁹⁹ The healing signifies to the audience that Jesus really is who he says he is: "φῶς... τοῦ κόσμου" (John 9:5).

The pericope begins when Jesus leaves the temple after an altercation with religious authorities over his identity.¹⁰⁰ He comes upon a man who has been blind since birth (John 9:1). When his disciples ask Jesus who sinned so that the man was born blind, Jesus says neither sinned, then gives a somewhat puzzling teaching about being the light of the world (vv. 2-5). After making mud and rubbing it on the man's eyes, Jesus tells him to go wash, and the man returns able to see (vv. 6-7). The narrative pivots to following the healed man—Jesus does not return to the story until verse 35—who explains himself first to the crowd (vv. 8-12) and then to the authorities (vv. 13-17). When the authorities cannot believe him, they call on his parents, who redirect them back to

⁹⁹ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, ed. A. H. McNeile, vol. I, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner, 1929), 339.

¹⁰⁰ I resist using the word "Pharisees" to refer to the group of characters whom the Gospel of John positions as Jesus' opposition. I recognize the difficulty of using this word, as a Christian, in a world still marked by rampant antisemitism. And if I want to show the power of language in adjusting my words around disability, I should do the same with regard to other marginalized groups. So, I inherit the word in direct quotes and in my translation but use "authorities" in my own writing. For Ἰουδαῖοι, I transliterate it without translating.

the man (vv. 18-26). The authorities want him to call Jesus a sinner, but he says that Jesus' very ability to heal proves he is not (vv. 27-34). After finding out that "τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου" (v. 35) is Jesus, the man prostrates himself and professes his belief (vv. 35-38). Jesus then offers a short teaching about sight and blindness (v. 39). The authorities overhear this teaching and say they are not blind, to which Jesus responds that their affirmation of sight shows that they are still in sin (vv. 40-41).

The Imagery of Blindness

The same story could not be recounted about a man born paralyzed or a man with dropsy. Receiving "sight" symbolizes receiving *insight*. This metaphor has been common throughout the centuries. Laura Zucconi writes that, in Second Temple and early rabbinic medicine, diseases of eyesight "often [carry] a theological message rather than a purely clinical one."¹⁰¹ Interpreting this pericope apart from the valences blindness would have evoked for the Johannine author and their readers misses a primary literary element. Blindness as a metaphor for ignorance drives the narrative arc of the chapter.

Metaphors about blindness as ignorance abound even within the relatively small canon of the Hebrew Bible and the NT. In Isaiah, God says, "Israel's sentinels are blind, they are all without knowledge" (Isaiah 56:10a NRSVue). Jesus calls the authorities "blind" as an insult to their wisdom five times within ten verses in his diatribe in Matthew 23. And Paul, criticizing the Jews in the Roman *ekklesiai*, asks if they are sure they are "a guide of blind people, a light of those who

¹⁰¹ Zucconi, *Ancient Medicine*, 349.

are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children” (Romans 2:19b-20a). In these examples and more, blindness represents lack of knowledge, insight, or understanding.

Blindness also plays into an important motif in the Fourth Gospel: that of darkness versus light. The gospel opens by portraying the coming of the λόγος as the coming of light into the world: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it” (John 1:5). The Johannine author puts these words in Jesus’ mouth several times, as well. Jesus teaches his disciples, “I am the light of the world; the one who listens to me will not walk in the darkness” (John 8:12). And later, harkening back to the language at the opening of the gospel, Jesus instructs, “Walk while you have the light in order that darkness not overtake you. The one walking in darkness does not know where they are going” (John 12:35).

Given the repeating imagery of darkness and light, it is fitting that one of the only two Johannine healings is a blind man receiving his sight. Raymond Brown’s summary of the pericope equates blindness with darkness: “This is a story of how a man who sat in darkness was brought to see the light, not only physically but spiritually.”¹⁰² The man receives his sight and comes increasingly into the “light” of understanding Jesus’ identity. Jesus highlights the metaphor of blindness and sight at the end of the chapter: “I came into the world for the purpose of judgment, so that those who don’t see might see—and those who see might become blind” (John 9:39). In this way, the author artfully weaves the metaphor of blindness into the dark/light motif to highlight their theological purpose: to bring the reader to belief.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, First Edition, vol. 1, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 377.

¹⁰³ εἶπεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πρὸς αὐτόν· ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ἴδητε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε.

The man's increasing insight contrasts him with one of his literary foils, the religious authorities, who willfully tread into greater spiritual darkness (or "blindness") throughout the story. B. Vincent Muderhwa observes, "The formerly blind man triumphs over darkness, and contrasts, so to speak, with the Pharisees who misguidedly follow the way of darkness and reject God's self-revelation."¹⁰⁴ The man's famous proclamation, "One thing I know: I was blind. I now see" (John 9:25b), has meaning on both literal and metaphorical levels. The line's immortalization in the hymn "Amazing Grace" has retained the metaphor, of course; singers refer to former "blindness" as ignorance or distance from God. Given the strength of the metaphor in the discourse, by the end of John 9, the reader almost pities the absolute ignorance of the authorities. Their question to Jesus, dripping with irony, "But we're not blind, are we?" (v. 40b), shows they are ignoring their own human limits. They have entirely missed the point of the metaphor.

Hartsock writes that "an ancient audience would not only think of blindness on the literal level—lacking eyesight—but that an audience would also likely think in metaphorical terms, that is, lacking *spiritual* vision."¹⁰⁵ Problems arise when interpreters follow suit and equate blindness with ignorance and sight with knowledge. Blindness as a metaphor for ignorance contributes to assumptions about blind *people* being pitiable, helpless, or—worse—suffering from divine punishment. Crucially, though, I am not suggesting that readers completely ignore the imagery of blindness, darkness, sight, and light in John 9. Readers should explore the light/dark imagery as part of any attempts at a disability interpretation. Likewise, to ignore the metaphor of blindness

¹⁰⁴ B. Vincent Muderhwa, "The Blind Man of John 9 as a Paradigmatic Figure of the Disciple in the Fourth Gospel," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (March 16, 2012): 9. Note that this article adopts the casual antisemitism of the Johannine text, referring to Judaism as darkness and conflating ancient and modern Judaism.

¹⁰⁵ Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts*, 94:53. Emphasis original.

misses the purpose of disability-informed interpretation. The goal is to find constructive ways to understand the man's blindness, not to overlook it altogether. Since critical disability theory reveals the potential harm of reading his blindness as metaphor, interpreters should read this aspect of the story with care.

Much interpretation of the characterization in John 9 relies on the state of the man's vision, as if his blindness is all a reader needs to know about him. But the man who receives his sight is a well-developed character whose nuances are often ignored in favor of reading his blindness as a metaphor. The overreliance on his blindness forestalls reading him as fully human. Adhering to a metaphorical understanding of blindness reinscribes the problem that the text creates. Then, both text *and* interpreter imbue the impairment with too much meaning; it comes to define the character entirely. Ableist assumptions narrow our interpretations in the same way that they reduce real people to stereotypes. These interpretations erase potential for more complex insight into the character and potential meanings in the story.

Character Development in John 9

The Gospel of John depicts the man who receives his sight as one of its most well-developed characters. This gospel recounts fewer stories than the synoptics, giving more detail to each. Thus its two healings—the man at the Bethesda fountain (John 5) and the man who receives his sight (John 9)—comprise John's representation of all the healings in Jesus' earthly ministry. Because these stories are longer and the disabled characters more developed compared with synoptic healing stories, John's depictions of healing lend themselves to careful examination.

Already in interpretation, the man who receives his sight is frequently read as a model disciple. When he proclaims faith in Jesus (John 9:38), he fulfills the explicit purpose of this

gospel: to witness to Jesus “in order that all might believe” (John 1:7). Most often, he is contrasted with the man Jesus heals by the Bethesda fountain (John 5:1-15). For example, Brown writes that the John 5 man is “very different from the clever blind man whom Jesus heals in ch. ix.”¹⁰⁶ Brown goes on to excoriate the former, with the man at the fountain all the more “naïve,” “unimaginative,” and “obtuse” in contrast with the man who receives his sight.¹⁰⁷ Interpreters often display an instinctual reaction to interpret disabled characters negatively like this. But remarkably, the man who receives his sight in John 9 is widely understood as a paragon of good discipleship.¹⁰⁸

The beginning of chapter 9 looks like almost any other healing in the New Testament: Jesus and his disciples come upon a disabled person and treat him like an object. Jesus heals the man after proclaiming, “It’s necessary for us to do the works of the one who sent me while it’s day... As long as I’m in the world, I’m the light of the world” (John 9:4a, 5). Healing the man in the context of this announcement reduces him to a sign of Jesus’ identity: as one being sent by God and as the “light” of the world. And indeed, the character would only ever be a sign if the story stopped here, as it would in a shorter synoptic depiction of a similar event. It seems like he will be yet one more example of narrative prosthesis, a nameless character whose body Jesus acts upon without his express consent.

But as the story continues, the man displays boldness and self-possession. He proclaims his identity to his doubting neighbors (v. 9), tells and re-tells the story of his healing (vv. 11, 15,

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *John*, 1:209.

¹⁰⁷ Brown, 1:209.

¹⁰⁸ I attribute this, at least in part, to the hierarchy of disabilities that society finds acceptable. In general, blindness (especially blindness without visible changes to the person’s eyes) like the man in John 9 is more societally acceptable than paralysis like the man in John 5. See: Kim Sauder, “Fighting My Internalization of the Hierarchy of Disability,” *Crippled Scholar* (blog), August 23, 2015, <https://crippledscholar.com/2015/08/23/fighting-my-internalization-of-the-hierarchy-of-disability/>.

25, 27, 30) and rebukes the authorities (v. 27). In the end, he refuses to say what the authorities want him to say: that Jesus is a sinner. He gets the last word in his own story when he falls to Jesus' feet and says, "I believe, sir" (v. 37). The depiction of his choice to follow Jesus is overall much more nuanced than, for example, the stories of the named disciples. Whereas the synoptics show the disciples following Jesus without much reason, the Johannine author shows the man who receives his sight becoming a disciple after a much more complex process of coming to belief.

My disability-informed literary analysis of John 9 shows that the man is not only a good disciple but is also a complex character. Such an approach takes his blindness into account as a primary aspect of his life experience and does not reduce it to metaphor. In short, I suggest that we take his blindness literally—not as a sign of something else, like sinfulness or ignorance. The limits model assumes limitation as unsurprising in human life and enables an interpretation of the man that is much better developed. He subverts the negative stereotypes of a disabled character, displaying fierceness where readers might expect helplessness, thoughtfulness where readers might expect passivity. Many readers attribute these positive traits to his newfound sight, but this is not necessarily the case. Instead, these qualities come from the man himself, shaped as he is by his life-long experience of disability. In the end, these characteristics—not the fact of his being healed—makes him the ideal disciple by Johannine standards.

Fierceness

This man is fierce: the opposite of a blind character's expected helplessness. Hartsock catalogues the (negative) *topos* of the blind character in ancient Mediterranean literature. He summarizes: "blindness is viewed as a pitiable negative condition marked by helplessness and dependence upon others; blindness can be punishment from the gods or from other people; and

blindness can mean ignorance and/or spiritual blindness.”¹⁰⁹ Hartsock finds that the man in John 9 fits the *topos* “in that he is pitied and helpless.”¹¹⁰ The text itself, however, does not depict the man as either. The disciples may pity him when they first encounter him and ask “who sinned?” but Jesus quickly diverts them from that logic. The neighbors who recognize him ask what happened but do not evidently pity him, then or before. And the authorities, after he challenges them, display dislike, but pity is not apparent. I therefore disagree with Hartsock that the man who receives his sight fits the *topos*.¹¹¹ In fact, I find the depiction of this man to display the opposite of helplessness.

The man’s fierceness becomes increasingly visible throughout the story. In his analysis of the man as a paradigmatic figure of the disciple, Muderhwa calls him “audacious.”¹¹² Kenny calls him “feisty.”¹¹³ At first, his character appears somewhat meek or even passive. Within the narrative, the man is afforded no agency before Jesus heals him. Jesus does not ask for his permission or speak to him at all before making mud and smearing it on the man’s eyes. Only after the man washes in the swimming bath of Siloam and returns sighted does he speak his first words in the story: “I am” (John 9:8b).

¹⁰⁹ Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts*, 94:104.

¹¹⁰ Hartsock, 94:148.

¹¹¹ Lisa Trentin’s findings support my reading that the man’s blindness alone did not necessarily cause others in this story to pity him. Due to its prevalence, visual impairment in Roman society “did not have the same (negative) connotation as other physical (and most often congenital) deformities.” Lisa Trentin, “Exploring Visual Impairment in Ancient Rome,” in *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies A Capite Ad Calcem*, ed. Christian Laes, C.F. Goodey, and M. Lynn Rose, Mnemosyne, Supplements: History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity 356 (Boston: Brill, 2013), 108.

¹¹² Muderhwa, “The Blind Man of John 9,” 4.

¹¹³ Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, 5.

Then the crowd leads him to the authorities, and he speaks plainly. Some of the authorities say that Jesus is not from God because he violates the Sabbath, while others say that a sinner could not perform such a sign (v. 16). When they ask the man what he thinks, he affirms that Jesus is a prophet (v. 17). In response to this proclamation, the authorities reject his claim that he was healed and turn instead to his parents.

His parents are his other literary foils; their timidity highlights their son's fierceness. When the authorities confront them, they admit only the bare facts and then redirect the authorities to their son. The text says, "His parents said these things because they feared the *Ioudaioi*. For already the *Ioudaioi* made an agreement that if someone confessed the messiah, they'd be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22). The passage implies that the parents understand that their son has encountered the messiah but are too afraid to say so. Louise Gosbell hypothesizes that the parents are quite distant from their son at this time, thus their reluctance to answer on his behalf.¹¹⁴ But perhaps instead, knowing his temperament, they are confident he will be able to speak for himself.

When the authorities consult him for a second time, the man's self-possession comes into full view. They want him to call Jesus a sinner, but he refuses to say so: "Whether he's a sinner, I don't know. One thing I know: I was blind. I now see" (v. 25). When they ask again how Jesus opened his eyes, the man brazenly says, "I told you already, but you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear again? You don't want to become his disciples, do you?" (v. 27).¹¹⁵ This last question

¹¹⁴ Louise A. Gosbell, *The Poor, the Crippled, the Blind, and the Lame: Physical and Sensory Disability in the Gospels of the New Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2 (Heidelberg, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 319.

¹¹⁵ εἶπον ὑμῖν ἤδη καὶ οὐκ ἠκούσατε· τί πάλιν θέλετε ἀκούειν; μὴ καὶ ὑμεῖς θέλετε αὐτοῦ μαθηταὶ γενέσθαι;

is asked with μή, expecting a negative answer—a rhetorical flourish that subtly insults them.

Finally, when they rebuke him, he responds with a short speech that directly contradicts them:

In this is something marvelous: you don't know where he's from, but he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if someone is a God-fearer and does God's will, this is the one God hears. Through the ages, it's unheard of that anyone has opened the eyes of someone born blind. If this man weren't from God, he couldn't do anything (vv. 30-33).¹¹⁶

Here he is, a man the disciples presumed to be a sinner based on the “sign” of his blindness, teaching the very people who should be instructing him.

I recount his words in full here because they are so remarkable. In the first place, this is the longest recorded speech by a person Jesus heals. As I have noted, most people Jesus heals in the gospels disappear after their healing, often without another word. Even the man in the longer story in John 5 speaks very few words in his pericope. More importantly, no one else in the gospels speaks this brazenly to authorities—that is, no one but Jesus. It is not until Acts, after the Holy Spirit has descended upon them, that Peter and the other apostles gain the ability to speak the truth so impudently.

I read this speech as flowing from a man's lifelong experience of disability. As a man born blind, he is used to being dismissed, to fighting to have his voice heard. He is not surprised when the authorities misunderstand the miracle. Even though he himself is only just coming to understand, he is able to teach the religious authorities what this sign means. His fierceness, even in the face of threat from the authorities, places him above Jesus' other disciples at this point in the Johannine narrative.

¹¹⁶ “ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ τὸ θαυμαστόν ἐστιν, ὅτι ὑμεῖς οὐκ οἴδατε πόθεν ἐστίν, καὶ ἤνοιξέν μου τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς. οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀμαρτωλῶν ὁ θεὸς οὐκ ἀκούει, ἀλλ' ἐάν τις θεοσεβῆς ἦ καὶ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ ποιῇ τούτου ἀκούει. ἐκ τοῦ αἰῶνος οὐκ ἠκούσθη ὅτι ἠνέφξέν τις ὀφθαλμούς τυφλοῦ γεγεννημένου· εἰ μὴ ἦν οὗτος παρὰ θεοῦ, οὐκ ἠδύνατο ποιεῖν οὐδέν.”

Thoughtfulness

Perhaps most importantly in a Johannine context, the man is thoughtful in response to the revelation of Jesus' power and identity. When he is first healed, the man explains to his neighbors what happened: "The man called Jesus made mud (πηλὸν ἐποίησεν) and smeared it (ἐπέχρισέν) on my eyes" (John 9:11a). But when they take him to the authorities, and they ask him the same question, he says, "He put mud on my eyes. And I washed, and I see." (v. 15).¹¹⁷ The man does not mention to the authorities that Jesus *made* the mud, nor that he *smeared* it. Since it is the Sabbath when Jesus heals him (v. 14), it is likely that the man is being attentive to his audience, and even trying to protect Jesus with his revised language. He does not want to emphasize for the authorities that Jesus violated the Sabbath by making mud.¹¹⁸ His careful thoughtfulness here shows his attention to the power people have over one another, possibly an insight gained from his experience living as a blind beggar. It also shows he is not dependent on others, despite what the blindness *topos* would lead readers to expect. He can think and speak for himself.

Later, Jesus asks if he believes in the Son of Man, and the healed man, in his usual direct style, asks who that is (vv. 35-36). When Jesus says it is him, the man proclaims his belief and falls to Jesus' feet to worship (vv. 37-38). Later in John, the purpose of the Fourth Gospel is repeated: "so that you [plural] may believe that Jesus is Messiah, Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Because the man comes to believe in Jesus in response to a sign, and because he accepts Jesus' identity, the man is a model Johannine disciple.

¹¹⁷ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· πηλὸν ἐπέθηκέν μου ἐπὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς καὶ ἐνιψάμην καὶ βλέπω.

¹¹⁸ The Talmud passage often cited for this claim, albeit anachronistically, is from 108b.10: "With regard to placing wine inside the eye on Shabbat, it is prohibited because it heals; on the eye, it is permitted. And one of them said: Bland saliva, saliva from one who has not eaten since waking, even placing it on the eye on Shabbat is prohibited because it is commonly used as medicine." See Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, ed., "Shabbat 108b," in *Koren Talmud Bavli*, Noé, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.108b>.

In the Fourth Gospel, the sign usually precedes its explanation.¹¹⁹ In chapter 5, Jesus heals the man at the Bethesda fountain and then, in response to the grumbling of the authorities, he teaches them in a lengthy discourse. Usually, the one to offer the theological explanation is Jesus. But in John 9, the healed man himself explains the meaning of the sign to the authorities: “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if someone is a God-fearer and does God’s will, this is the one God hears” (John 9:31-32). His logic is so sound that they can offer no response except to throw him out (v. 34). He therefore displays not only the fieriness of Jesus (and later the apostles) in response to the religious authorities but also the *insight* of Jesus and, in Acts, the apostles.

When interpreters reduce the man to a sign rather than a well-rounded character deserving of close reading like Didymus Thomas or Martha, they preclude the interpretive possibilities I have suggested above. This man offers a radical model for discipleship, according to the Johannine ideal, that rejects the twisted values of the world in favor of recognizing Jesus as God. Ableist assumptions about disability preclude this deeper part of the story.

Blindness as Narrative Prosthesis

Even with the positive depiction of the man who receives his sight, the text still poses a problem for disability-positive interpretation. Jennifer Koosed and Darla Schumm write that, in the Fourth Gospel, “Never is the [impairment] simply an expression of the various possibilities inherent in the human body. Never is the condition an accident. And never is the condition seen as a positive

¹¹⁹ “This is the usual practice in this Gospel: to always join to the teaching of Christ some appropriate visible action, so that what is invisible can be made known through the visible.” Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, ed. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher, vol. 4, Aquinas Scripture Series (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980), 281.

gift of God.”¹²⁰ In this case, the Gospel of John instrumentalizes the man by using his blindness as narrative prosthesis.

Mitchell and Snyder describe a four-stage pattern in which a deviance from the normate (often a disability) serves as a prosthetic for the plot.¹²¹ (1) First, the disability is introduced: “And passing on his way, he saw a man who’d been blind since birth” (John 9:1). (2) Next, the narrative justifies its own existence by seeking an origin of, or explanation for, the disability: “And his disciples asked him: ‘Teacher, who sinned—this one or his parents—that he was born blind?’” (v. 2). (3) Then, the narrative centers the disability in the story: in vv. 3-5, Jesus centers the man’s blindness by assigning theological significance to it. (4) Finally, the remainder of the plot narrates the correction or erasure of the disability: vv. 6-41 show not only the restoration of his sight but also the beginnings of his integration into his community.¹²² When stories cling to this structure, they preclude disability as a significant aspect of identity and imply that the erasure of disability is the only acceptable resolution of a plot. If limits are an expected aspect of human life, then every kind of story should be able to be told about people with various limitations, even if they have limits that the context considers disability.

¹²⁰ Jennifer L. Koosed and Darla Schumm, “Out of the Darkness: Examining the Rhetoric of Blindness in the Gospel of John,” in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 80.

¹²¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 53.

¹²² This pattern is so familiar that it may seem inescapable. What other disability story is there to tell? Consider the simple but powerful story Haben Girma tells about how she had to learn self-advocacy. Girma tells the story of her struggle to access the cafeteria during college. She could not see the menu to read it, and it was too loud in the cafeteria to have a classmate read it to her. She tells of learning to advocate for herself, despite the many barriers presented to her by the system. Here, there is no concern about the origin or meaning of her Deafblindness, nor is its eradication the driver of the plot. All kinds of stories about disability are possible, but only a very few are commonly told. See: Haben Girma, “The Courage to Fight for Chocolate Cake,” *National Federation of the Blind*, Special Issue on Advocacy edition, sec. Future Reflections, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/fr/fr32/2/fr320211.htm>.

Not only does the disability provide the premise of the story and drive its plot, but Jesus problematically describes the man's blindness in terms of divine pedagogy. Even though Jesus teaches the disciples that sin did not cause the blindness, he still immediately attributes a higher meaning to the blindness. He says, "Neither he sinned nor his parents, but rather in order that the works of God be made known in him" (John 9:3).¹²³ The man was born blind, Jesus seems to say, so that God's power could be shown when Jesus heals him. In identifying a purpose for the blindness at all, Jesus is playing into the understanding of disability as sign. The blindness had to be there so that Jesus could remove it to reveal God's power.

If Jesus is saying that the man was born blind *so that* God's works could be made known, that reduces his life to a handy illustration. The decades he lives before he encounters Jesus count for nothing. Jaime Clark-Soles asks pointedly, "Does the God who sent Jesus into the world that he loved so much... cause congenital blindness so that he might show off by curing the problem God caused?"¹²⁴ Similarly, as a blind theologian, Hull curtly summarizes, "The man has been born blind in order to provide a sort of photo opportunity for Jesus."¹²⁵

However, perhaps this is not the only possible reading of Jesus' statement. Kenny reads it in the opposite way: that his blindness itself, not the restoration of sight, is the thing that displays

¹²³ Jaime Clark-Soles asserts that the purpose statement is not as clear as it seems in the NRSV. Given the ambiguities of punctuation in ancient manuscripts, she punctuates the text thus: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; [he was born blind]. In order that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." (Jaime Clark-Soles, "John, First-Third John, and Revelation," in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, ed. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 347.) She says that this punctuation shows Jesus sidestepping the question of fault altogether, instead seeing the man's blindness as a simple fact. If Jesus is indeed drawing attention to the man's personhood, rather than his blindness, that could be notable from a disability perspective.

¹²⁴ Clark-Soles, 347.

¹²⁵ Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness*, 49.

God's power. In her estimation, the man's blindness reveals the ableism of Jesus' disciples. She writes, "What a powerful, subversive statement: disability helps reveal the Light of the World to people who think of themselves as holier than disabled people."¹²⁶ I am not entirely convinced by this reading, though. It seems more likely, given the context of the rest of the gospel, that Jesus intends his miracle, not the man's blindness, as the sign. At the same time, the open-ended phrasing of Jesus' words makes space for Kenny's reading. Her reading prioritizes lived experience over text. Shaped as she is by living in a disabled body in a culture that fears, loathes, and seeks to correct disability, Kenny reads the text in it a way it is "not meant to be read" in order to make meaning out of it.¹²⁷

Resymbolization

Readers who perceive disabled bodies as problems will employ a hermeneutic that affects how they see actual disabled people in the world. They assume disability must have a greater meaning, so they read it as a sign of something else, or as an indication of sinfulness. They assume disability must be something the person wants erased, so they read expecting that as the only acceptable resolution of the narrative. Mary Elise Lowe suggests: "New symbols need to be imagined so that theological claims regarding God, humans, bodies, and reconciliation are used not to exclude but rather to invite all persons to recognize themselves as created in God's image."¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, 6.

¹²⁷ Weems, "Re-Reading for Liberation," 51.

¹²⁸ Mary Elise Lowe, "Rabbi, Who Sinned? Disability Theologies and Sin," *Dialog* 51, no. 3 (September 2012): 185.

In *The Disabled God*, Eiesland resymbolizes the risen Jesus as disabled. Her resymbolization is a way of deconstructing the symbolic meanings that have dominated in interpretive history, remaking them as “liberatory for the marginalized group and unsettling for the dominant group.”¹²⁹ When Eiesland considers the resurrected Jesus, she sees a disabled person, his body impaired by the wounds in its hands, feet, and side. To her, Jesus’ disability “suggests a human-God who not only knows injustice and experiences the contingency of human life, but also reconceives perfection as unself-pitying, painstaking survival.”¹³⁰ It is helpful to remember that Eiesland is using the minority model of disability. With this resymbolization, disabled Jesus becomes part of her marginalized group. Resymbolizing God into her minoritized group is a powerful subversion of expectations and a strategy that many marginalized groups have used. She is doing disability *theology*, but I argue that her resymbolization suggestion can benefit a disability-informed biblical interpretation, as well.

In the healing narratives, the erasure of disability is a sign of divine power. The logical implication, then, is that the presence of disability signifies divine absence—or, at least, divine not-yet-ness. But I suggest that reading against the grain of the usual John 9 interpretation offers at least three opportunities for resymbolization: (1) darkness as a place to find God, (2) blindness as a potential asset, and (3) sight as a sign of sin.

God in Darkness

The Gospel of John emphasizes the binary opposition between dark and light, associating God only with the latter. But this is not the case in other parts of the Bible. When God separates

¹²⁹ Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 98.

¹³⁰ Eiesland, 101.

day and night by creating the sun and moon, God sees that both the light and the darkness are good (Gen 1:18). And when God is leading the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness, God leads them “in a pillar of cloud by day... and in a pillar of fire by night” (Exod 13:21 NRSVue). In both cases, light and darkness are opposition, but God occupies both. In Psalm 18, God comes down from heaven, surrounded by darkness (v. 11) and with darkness under God’s feet (v. 9). And Jesus teaches his disciples, “What I say to you in the dark, speak in the light” (Matt 10:27), implying that Jesus will share wisdom with them in darkness. So, darkness in scripture is not always necessarily negative.¹³¹

One way to resymbolize blindness (which is equated to darkness) in John 9, then, is to recall the above examples. Even though the Fourth Gospel wants to emphasize the dichotomy of light and dark, and does so in this story, our interpretation can hold that in tension with the more diverse imagery of God throughout scripture. Before his healing, even while he is in the “darkness” of his blindness, the man has access to God. And, as I have shown, it is not his newfound sight that makes him a good disciple but the traits he develops while still in darkness.

Blindness as an Asset

Jesus tells his disciples, “It’s necessary for us to do the works of the one who sent me while it’s day; night comes when no one is able to work” (John 9:4). However, there is a notable exception to his teaching: blind people are often able to work in the darkness as well as they can in the light. Jesus is speaking metaphorically, of course; he is the “light” of the world, and when

¹³¹ Womanists and other Black scholars have interrogated the symbolism of darkness/blackness in the Bible, especially as it relates to race. See, for example: Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

he leaves, the world will become “dark” again. But his symbolic warning that night will be incapacitating only applies to sighted people.

Sheri Wells-Jensen, a linguistics professor at Bowling Green State University, was born blind. And while her childhood was marked by people worrying about her and micromanaging her every step, she had a place of refuge: her backyard at night. There, she says, she felt free: “No eyes are on me now. This is just me and the world, and I can move through it gracefully and quietly and intentionally. And I felt powerful, and I felt sleek... I had the night on my own terms.”¹³² The night, for her, was not a time of restriction but a time of expanded possibility and freedom. For her, Jesus’ teaching that night is coming would sound not like a warning but an opportunity.

Jesus later says, “The one who walks in darkness does not know where they are going” (John 12:35). But again, a blind person is already equipped to walk in darkness. Whereas a blind character in literature is often depicted as helpless, at night it is the sighted who lose access to the primary sense that allows us to move through the world. So being blind need not be read as a deficit. In the night, being blind is an asset.

Sight as Sin

Ironically, the John 9 story shows that sight, and not blindness, is the sign of sinfulness. In John, the explanation always points to the sign, and the man’s explanation (v. 31-32, see subsection “Thoughtfulness” above) points to Jesus’ healing ability—*not* the status of the healed man’s eyes. The disability reveals nothing about the blind man’s sin, as Jesus himself had affirmed (v. 3). But the story does indicate something about sin: namely, Jesus’ sinlessness. Jesus may have violated the Sabbath rules as the authorities understand them, but the healed man uses their own logic

¹³² Andrew Leland, “The Right Stuff,” Radiolab, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/right-stuff>.

against them. “If this man weren’t from God, he couldn’t do anything” (v. 33). In this sense, the man’s blindness at the start is a red herring. The fact that the villains of the story get distracted by his blindness—“You were born entirely in sin, and you’re teaching us?” (v. 34)—proves its folly.

In the end, Jesus says to the authorities, “If you were blind, you wouldn’t have sin; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (v. 41). This is the complex irony of this story. The blind man is sinless, and the sighted religious authorities are sinful. Sight being a sign of sin is inherent in Jesus’ teaching here, but only after removing ableist assumptions about blindness does this sign become apparent.

Conclusion to Disability as Sign

I have shown that the story is not only about Jesus’ miraculous healing of the man but it is also about the man’s response to Jesus: fierce and thoughtful. Readers can identify with the disabled character not *despite* his blindness or *because* of his healing but because he is a character who grows and changes in the course of the story. The goal is not to ignore the blindness but to identify the ways the narrative prosthesis affects our reading of the story and the characters in it.

I also showed that, even with a complex depiction of a disabled man, the text still presents a problem for disability-informed interpretation: the use of blindness as narrative prosthesis. This problem originates not only in the biases of the reader but within the text itself. And finally, I offered opportunities for creatively resymbolizing disability in the John 9 story.

CONCLUSION

Our bodies participate in the imago Dei,
not in spite of our impairments
and contingencies but through them.¹³³
–Nancy Eiesland

What is universal in life, if there are universals,
is the experience of the limitations of the body.¹³⁴
–Lennard Davis

Imani Barbarin tells a story of the moment a Christian pastor first affirmed her disability as God-given. A woman with cerebral palsy, Barbarin grew up in the Black church, fighting “an undercurrent to the theological conversation that my faith would lead me to a ‘whole’ body.”¹³⁵ She describes a strong faith in God but a wavering faith in Christians, who frequently stop her to pray for her healing without her consent. So she was shocked when this pastor affirmed that God made her as she is, so why would she *not* use her crutches in heaven? In response to that affirmation, she writes, “I can love myself even if I don’t want to be evidence of a miracle.”¹³⁶

Critical disability theory can help to identify and disentangle some of the ableist biases that plague interpretations of the biblical texts. But theory is useful only to the extent that it critiques lived realities. The field of disability studies “values documented experience of individuals with

¹³³ Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 100.

¹³⁴ Davis, *Bending over Backwards*, 32.

¹³⁵ Imani Barbarin, “Fearfully, Wonderfully and Still Disabled AF: Faith and Self Love,” *Crutches and Spice* (blog), March 27, 2018, <https://crutchesandspice.com/2018/03/27/fearfully-wonderfully-and-still-disabled-af-faith-and-self-love>.

¹³⁶ Barbarin.

disabilities above all other sources of information about disability.”¹³⁷ Disability-informed biblical interpretation, too, must privilege the lives of actual disabled people. The perspectives of disabled people can help to loosen some of the calcified interpretations of familiar biblical stories.

To that end, the paradigms in womanist biblical interpretation have much to teach disability biblical scholarship. Womanist scholars seek “to empower African American women as readers, as agents, and as shapers of discourse by uncovering the program and agenda of both biblical texts and dominant cultural readings.”¹³⁸ I suggest that disability interpretation take on an analogous outlook. Disability biblical scholarship should seek first to empower disabled people “as readers, as agents, and as shapers of discourse.” Like Black women, disabled people have a “flesh-and-blood” interest—to borrow more of Weems’ language—in the interpretation of biblical texts. To pretend otherwise is to indulge the fallacy that these ancient texts, however sacred, must be privileged over the well-being of real people.

Like any type of biblical interpretation that prioritizes the well-being of one group, disability interpretation is actually beneficial to everyone, disabled and nondisabled alike. Alison Kafer writes, “Much as feminist activism benefits people who want no part of feminism, disability studies and activism ideally benefit people who are not interested or invested in either.”¹³⁹ Everyone has a body and experiences the attendant limits. Disabled people have insights into biblical interpretation to which nondisabled people are not privy. Social locations, with all their intersections, shape not only the answers we get but also the questions we ask.

¹³⁷ Linnéa E. Franits, “The Issue Is—Nothing about Us without Us: Searching for the Narrative of Disability,” *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 59 (2005): 577.

¹³⁸ Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation,” 49.

¹³⁹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 14.

Becky Tyler felt distant from God when she was young because she could not see herself in the Bible. That is, until her mother pointed out that in prophetic visions like Daniel's in the Hebrew Bible, God's throne has wheels.¹⁴⁰ In the Bible, Tyler found, God is sitting in a wheelchair. "This made me feel like God understands what it's like to have a wheelchair and that having a wheelchair is actually very cool, because God has one."¹⁴¹

Herein I have attempted to offer some insights that can further the project of disability-informed interpretation. But more important than any academic contribution is my accountability to disabled people like Becky Tyler, Imani Barbarin, and Mary Stainton. Too many interpretations reinforce the cultural belief that disabled people are disposable or unimportant. To the disabled people who have been excluded from interpretation and marginalized by Christians foisting prayers on them, I offer the biblical stories of impairment as antidote to sin; the narrative separation of healing from forgiveness in Mark 2:1-12; the fierceness of the man who receives his sight in John 9; and the symbols of blindness as an asset and God found in darkness. Disabled people are not signs of God's power. Impaired bodies are not marked by evidence of sinfulness. Disability hermeneutics must start from there; interpretation of the New Testament has detached itself from lived experience for long enough.

¹⁴⁰ See Daniel 7:9 NRSVue: "His throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.

¹⁴¹ Rose, "Stop Trying to 'heal' Me."

APPENDIX A: JOHN 9 TRANSLATION

¹ And passing on his way, he saw (εἶδεν) a man who'd been blind since birth (ἄνθρωπον τυφλὸν ἐκ γενετῆς). ² And his disciples asked him: "Teacher, who sinned—this one or his parents—that he was born blind (τυφλὸς γεννηθῆ)?"

³ Jesus answered, "Neither he sinned nor his parents. But rather with the result that the works of God be made known in him (ἀλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῇ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ). ⁴ It's necessary for us to do the works of the one who sent me while it's day; night comes when no one is able to work. ⁵ As long as I'm in the world, I'm the light of the world."

⁶ After saying this, he spat on the ground (ἔπτυσεν χαμαί) and made mud from the spit (πηλὸν ἐκ τοῦ πτύσματος), and he smeared (ἐπέχρισεν) the mud on his eyes. ⁷ And he said to him, "Go away to wash (νίψαι) in the swimming bath (τὴν κολυμβήθραν) of Siloam" (it means "sent"). Then he went and washed, and he came back seeing.

⁸ Then neighbors and people who'd seen (οἱ θεωροῦντες) him before, that he was a beggar, said, "Isn't this the one who sits and begs?" ⁹ Some said that it was him. But others said, "No, it's someone like him."

He said, "I am."

¹⁰ So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened (ἠνεώχθησάν)?"

¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and smeared it on my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then after going and washing, I recovered my sight (ἀνέβλεψα)."

¹² And they said to him, "Where is he?"

He said, "I don't know."

¹³ They led the one who'd been blind to the Pharisees. ¹⁴ (It was the sabbath on the day Jesus made mud and opened his eyes.) ¹⁵ Therefore, again the Pharisees were also asking him, "How did you receive your sight?"

And he said to them, "He put (ἐπέθηκέν) mud on my eyes. And I washed, and I see."

¹⁶ Then certain Pharisees said, "This man is not from God because he doesn't keep (οὐ τηρεῖ) the Sabbath." But others said, "How is a sinful man able to make such a sign (τοιαῦτα σημεῖα ποιῆν)?" And a division was among them. ¹⁷ Then they said to the blind one again, "What do you say about him? Because he opened *your* eyes."

And he said, "He's a prophet."

¹⁸ Then the *Ioudaioi* didn't believe about him—that he was blind and received his sight—until they called the parents of the one who'd received his sight (τοὺς γονεῖς αὐτοῦ τοῦ

ἀναβλέψαντος). ¹⁹ And they asked them, saying, “Is this your son who, you say, was born blind? Then how does he see presently?”

²⁰ Then his parents answered and said, “We know that he’s our son and that he was born blind, ²¹ But we don’t know how he sees now. And we don’t know how his eyes received sight. Ask him. He’s of age; he’ll speak for himself.” ²² His parents said these things because they feared the *Ioudaioi*. For already the *Ioudaioi* made an agreement that if someone confessed the messiah (τις αὐτὸν ὁμολογήσει χριστόν), they’d be put out of the synagogue. ²³ Because of this, his parents said, “He’s of age; consult him.”

²⁴ Then they consulted the man—that is, the blind one—a second time and said to him, “Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner.”

²⁵ Then the man answered, “Whether he’s a sinner, I don’t know. One thing I know: I was blind. I now see.”

²⁶ Then they said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

²⁷ He answered them, “I told you already, but you didn’t listen. Why do you want to hear again? You don’t want to become his disciples, do you?”

²⁸ But they rebuked him and said, “You’re a disciple of that one, but we’re disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but we don’t know where this man is from.”

³⁰ The man answered and said to them, “In this is something marvelous: you don’t know where he’s from, but he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if someone is a God-fearer and does God’s will, this is the one God hears. ³² Through the ages, it’s unheard of that anyone has opened the eyes of someone born blind. ³³ If this man weren’t from God, he couldn’t do anything.”

³⁴ They answered and said to him, “You were born entirely in sin, and you’re teaching us?” And they threw him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they threw him out, and finding him, he said, “Do you believe in the son of man?”

³⁶ He answered and said, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”

³⁷ Jesus said to him, “But you’ve found him, and he’s the one speaking with you.”

³⁸ And he said (ἔφη), “I believe, sir.” And he prostrated himself before him.

³⁹ And Jesus said, “I came into the world for the purpose of judgment, so that those who don’t see might see—and those who see might become blind.”

⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees who were nearby heard these things and said to him, “But we’re not blind, are we?”

⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you wouldn’t have sin; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

APPENDIX B: MARK 2:1-12 TRANSLATION

¹ He entered again into Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that he was at home. ² And so many gathered that there was no more room, not even at the door, and he taught (lit. spoke the word to) them.

³ And they came to him, bringing a paralyzed person (παραλυτικὸν) who was being carried by four people (φέροντες πρὸς αὐτὸν παραλυτικὸν αἰρόμενον ὑπὸ τεσσάρων). ⁴ But being unable to bring him [the paralyzed person] to him [Jesus] on account of the crowd, they removed the roof where he was, and having dug through, they let down the bed where the paralyzed person (ὁ παραλυτικὸς) laid.

⁵ And Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralyzed person, “Child, your sins are forgiven (ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι).”

⁶ But sitting there were some of the scribes, considering in their hearts, ⁷ “Why is this man speaking in this way? He speaks impiously! Who’s able to forgive sins, except God alone?”

⁸ And immediately knowing in his spirit that they were arguing among themselves in this way, Jesus said to them, “Why are you debating these things in your heart? ⁹ What’s easier (τί ἐστὶν εὐκοπώτερον): to say to the paralyzed person, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, and lift your bed, and walk’ (ἔγειρε καὶ ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει)?

¹⁰ “But in order that you might know that the son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth (ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς)—” He said to the paralyzed person, ¹¹ “To you, I say: Get up, and lift your bed, and go to your home.”

¹² So he rose up (ἠγέρθη). And immediately lifting the bed, he left in front of all of them, so that all were driven out of their senses (ἐξίστασθαι) and glorified God, saying, “We’ve never seen something like this!”

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