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Song of Songs

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Strange and Stretchy Beauty: Disability and Deviance in Song of Songs 4

Over the past thirty years, the growing field of disability studies has made its mark on biblical studies, particularly within study of the Hebrew bible. Disability hermeneutics allows scholars to reveal the nuanced and shifting conceptions of embodiment in biblical times, and it helps all of us to move beyond our own assumptions about what disability represents or symbolizes in the text. Thus, it is surprising that there is so little contemporary disability scholarship on the Song of Songs, a book that even at first glance has a lot to say about bodies. The love poems of the Song of Songs make rich use of metaphor to describe the bodies of the two lovers, from head to toe. And yet, when disability scholars mention the Song of Songs, it is usually under the assumption that the bodies of the Song of Songs are normatively beautiful and nondisabled. This assumption rests on Song of Songs 4:7: “You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you.” The word that the NRSVUE translates as flaw, *mûm*, can also be translated as “blemish” or even “defect.” *Mûm* is a charged word in disability studies because of its use in Leviticus 21, which lists physical features that disqualify a priest from service. When Song of Songs comes up, it is as a sort of shadow of Leviticus.¹ Because the author describes the woman in Song of Songs 4 as without *mûm*, biblical scholars construct her as the normative, perfect body, or what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the “normate.” Garland-Thomson

¹ For the oppositional view of Leviticus 21 and the Song of Songs, see: David Stewart, “Sexual Disabilities in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 66; Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

writes that “this neologism names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries.”² Thus far, the consensus seems to be that the woman in the Song of Songs is the normate, defined by her lack of defective or deviant qualities.

Under this reading, the Song of Songs is only fruitful as a site of disability study insofar as it represents a cultural ideal that stands opposite to the disabled body. But whether the bodies of the Song are really so normative is up for debate. In *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Jennifer Koosed challenges this assumption, noting “the bodies in the Song are comic, repulsive, unruly, and uncompliant, especially uncompliant in conforming to norms and regulations.”³ These bodies seem to resist the boxes of conventional beauty, and challenge the normate interpretation in their strangeness. In this paper, I reinterpret Song of Songs 4:7 within the context of its surrounding strange and striking bodily descriptions. I begin with an overview of the word *mûm*, and how disability scholars have identified it as a marker of difference and disqualification. I then turn to the Song, and use a disability hermeneutic to argue that the woman described in chapter 4 has more to offer than normate beauty. I identify three major themes in the poem that contradict the normate argument: uncontained female sexuality, animal hybridity, and stretchy enormousness. These features combine to form the image of a strange woman, a beautiful woman, and one whose image can open up conversation about a world of disabled beauty.

The most notable use of *mûm* in the Bible, and the one most illuminating for disability studies, is in Leviticus 21, which lists the qualities that disqualify a priest from coming to the

² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8.

³ Jennifer L. Koosed, “Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Songs,” in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, ed. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, SRTD: Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 208.

altar to offer food to God. Unlike the Song of Songs, which does little to explain what *mûm* or blemish it is that the woman lacks, Leviticus explicitly defines *mûm* for priests: “Indeed, no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who is mutilated or deformed, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles” (Leviticus 21:18-20). These qualities do not line up neatly with contemporary assumptions about disability, and are notably geared towards visually identifiable markers of difference. Jeffrey Stackert and Jeremy Schipper have argued that this passage understands *mûm* as something that goes against God’s visual preferences. They write: “It is the inconspicuous quality of priestly officiation that protects these servants as they venture into close proximity with the deity.”⁴ *Mûm* can thus be understood as a divine irritant, a feature that disqualifies through disrupting a visual experience. As Julia Watts Belser puts it in her work on the passage, “It snags the divine eye, draws the divine gaze.”⁵

In her article “Priestly Aesthetics: Disability and Bodily Difference in Leviticus 21,” Belser surveys how Leviticus 21 has been moved through rabbinic interpretation from an issue of divine gaze to an issue of human, communal staring. She connects the understanding of *mûm* as unacceptable visual distraction to Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s piece “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography.” Disability, while not synonymous with the Biblical conception of *mûm*, also has a hyper-visibilizing effect. Garland Thomson writes, “Disabled people have variously been objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter, or fascination— but they have always been stared at.”⁶ While the normate gets to blend in, unmarked and whole, disabled bodies stand out, and thus experience disqualification.

⁴ Jeffrey Stackert and Jeremy Schipper, “Blemishes, Camouflage, and Sanctuary Service: The Priestly Deity and His Attendants,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 2, no. 4 (2013): 459.

⁵ Julia Watts Belser, “Priestly Aesthetics: Disability and Bodily Difference in Leviticus 21,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73, no. 4 (October 2019): 358, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964319857605>, 359.

⁶ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Politics of Staring : Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” 2013, 56.

Leviticus 21 calls for priests who are pleasing in their unobtrusiveness, invisible in their wholeness, and qualified by their normativity.

Thus, to call the woman in the Song “unblemished” carries immense weight. It draws to mind the pristine, blank bodies of the Leviticus priests. This makes it easy to take for granted that the Song of Songs describes bodies as unobtrusive and normatively beautiful as the ideal priestly body. In his book *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* Saul Olyan uses the Song of Songs to illustrate what he calls “dual oppositions,” which include “whole”/“defective,” clean/unclean, holy/common, honored/shamed, blessed/cursed, beautiful/ugly, and loved/hated.”⁷ For Olyan, the bodies in the Song of Songs sit on the privileged side of these binaries because they are described as beautiful and unblemished. Olyan then is able to use the descriptions and metaphors of the Song to reconstruct beauty norms such as “thick hair and smooth skin.”⁸ While I agree with Olyan that the Song of Songs can help point us towards understandings of beauty and in the Hebrew Bible, I remain unconvinced that the woman’s body can be used as such a normative standard.

In his essay “The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives,” Kerry H. Wynn identifies the ways that contemporary scholars approach scripture with a “normate hermeneutic,” which he defines as “the means by which scripture is interpreted so that it complies with and reinforces the socially constructed norms.”⁹ A normate hermeneutic leads to the assumption that disability in the text always functions to symbolize something negative. The problem with seeing disability as representing powerlessness or ugliness or even death is that it affirms the marginalization of disabled people, and misses the

⁷ Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁹ Kerry Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives,” in *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 92.

possibility that disability can be a mark of status or blessing.¹⁰ While Wynn's article is contained to the Yahwistic narrative, his broader point that disability is not inherently disempowering or negative, and needs to be evaluated on its own merits, is constructive for opening up disability possibilities in the Song of Songs. For my study of chapter 4 of the Song, I suspend the assumption that disability and beauty are mutually exclusive in Biblical literature. I see the bodies of the Song as more than a standard, more than a bar of normativity. And this opens up strange and wonderful possibilities.

As I have argued thus far, the idea of normate, especially the kind of unblemished normate marked out in Leviticus, requires a degree of blending in. The normate body is inoffensive, unobtrusive, and does not draw the eye. In this section, I will argue that the woman described in Song of Songs 4 is both deviant and hypervisible. A low-hanging argument against the woman as a normate figure is her gender. In Cheryl Exum's commentary on the Song, she discusses the gendered differences in how the man and woman describe each other. She writes, "A cultural notion of woman as other may have some bearing on the different status the woman and man have with respect to the gaze."¹¹ Thus, the woman is described in terms that evoke strangeness and mystery through her positionality as other. Disability scholar Carole Fontaine has articulated that in ancient Israel, simply being in a female body could be seen as a handicap, as shown through Biblical stories that feminize the enemies of the Israelites.¹² While the woman in the Song does not seem demonized for her gender, her embodiment as a woman is enough to distance her from the normate. Further, the woman in the Song does not seem like the able-bodied norm for women, notably through her unabashed sexuality. As many scholars of

¹⁰ Ibid, 99-100

¹¹ J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Paperback ed, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 22.

¹² Carole Fontaine, "'Be Men, O Philistines!' (1 Samuel 4:9): Iconographic Representations and Reflections on Female Gender as Disability in the Ancient World," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 68.

gender and disability have shown, disability for women in Biblical texts is closely related to reproduction. Rebecca Raphael writes that in the book of Jeremiah, unapproved sexuality is closely related to childlessness, which is the major disabling feature of women in the Bible.¹³ Despite the fact that the woman in the Song is surrounded by signs of fertility, including animals giving birth, there is no mention of her conceiving or bearing children. She seems to be moving outside the bounds of marriage, and boldly claims her sexual pleasure. Before we even get to specific descriptions of the woman of the Song, she walks right into multiple Biblical modes of disablement. She is clearly female-bodied, bears no children, and demands sexual pleasure from the very first verse of the Song: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!”

When we turn to the poem in Song of Songs 4, there are five verses of physical description that come before the description of the woman as unblemished. These lines are populated with metaphor, particularly metaphors from the natural world:

“How beautiful you are, my love,
how very beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.
2 Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
that have come up from the washing,
all of which bear twins,
and not one among them is bereaved.
3 Your lips are like a crimson thread,
and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.
4 Your neck is like the tower of David,
built in courses;
on it hang a thousand bucklers,
all of them shields of warriors.
5 Your two breasts are like two fawns,

¹³ Rebecca Raphael, “Whoring after Cripples: On the Intersection of Gender and Disability Imagery in Jeremiah,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

twins of a gazelle,
that feed among the lilies” (Song of Songs 4:1-5).

In his reading, Olyan assumes that these animal descriptions are indicative of Israelite beauty norms. For example, when the author writes “your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle,” Olyan interprets symmetry as a beauty norm.¹⁴ When I read these lines without the assumption that the woman is normatively beautiful, they not only evoke symmetry, but also a bizarre amalgamation of animal parts. In *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies and the Song of Songs*, Fiona Black traces the numerous ways that scholars have tried to explain away the strangeness of the woman’s body in the Song of Songs. The word “grotesque” comes up over and over in the commentaries, followed by various attempts to reconcile or explain away the issue of a strange body in love poetry.¹⁵ But Black takes the word grotesque as her “hermeneutical key” in her interpretation of the Song of Songs, and finds a body that is hybridized, in process, and even dehumanized.¹⁶ While Black does not specifically use a disability lens, she meets the body in the Song as is, and leans into its strange and even monstrous nature.

Grotesque art is characterized by the hybridization of human and animal.¹⁷ And the woman described in chapter four is a whole menagerie of animals— flying out from her veil, streaming down her back, and nestling on her chest. These living, moving animals draw the eye, evoking both pastoral beauty and grotesque oddity. Historically, dehumanization and animality walk hand in hand, and comparing a subject to an animal is a timeless strategy for marking out difference. Disabled people have a long history of experiencing comparison to animals. Further,

¹⁴ Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8.

¹⁵ Fiona C. Black, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies in the Song of Songs*, T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies 392 (London ; New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2009), 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 66.

as Stephanie Jenkins, Kelly Struthers Montford, and Chloë Taylor articulate in their introduction to *Disability and Animality*, disabled folks and animals have a shared history of being put on display.¹⁸ The woman of the Song embodies both the freak show and the zoo. Like the disabled people put on display in freak shows, she blurs the boundary of what it means to be human. Sammy Jo Johnson analyzes the connections between the freak show and the zoo, writing, “the animalization of many freak performers was an integral part of the elaborate construction process, transforming one from human to freak.”¹⁹ In the first few verses of chapter four, the woman experiences something of this transformation. We, the reader, watch transfixed as she undergoes a process of animal hybridity. This animality, while still paired concretely with the assertion of beauty, is a site of disablement and hyper-visible deviance from the “normal” human body.

In her work, Black points out that the Song of Songs body is characterized by not just hybridization, but also by what she calls disproportion.²⁰ The disproportion of the woman in chapter 4 goes beyond flattering exaggeration of normative beauty. Both the slopes of Gilead and the tower of David call to mind a landscape, stretching across the natural and built environment. The woman is, in the simplest reading, larger than life. Her body, already female and oversexed, is also oversized. Enormous, stretched out, or disproportionate bodies draw the eye through their deviance from the norm. In her article “Brides and Blemishes: Queering Women’s Disability in Rabbinic Marriage Law,” Belser points out the way that notions of women’s disability are especially policed through visual norms, including norms about size. Using an intersectional

¹⁸ Stephanie Jenkins, Kelly Struthers Montford, and Chloë Taylor, eds., *Disability and Animality: Crip Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*, 1st ed. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2020), 1.

¹⁹ Sammy Jo Johnson, “Zoos, Circuses, and Freak Shows: A Cross-Movement Analysis,” in *Disability and Animality: Crip Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*, ed. Stephanie Jenkins, Kelly Struthers Montford, and Chloë Taylor, 1st ed. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2020), 64.

²⁰ Fiona C. Black, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies in the Song of Songs*, T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies 392 (London ; New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2009), 154.

feminist lens, Belser concludes that for women, “disability emerges as the shadow image of the idealized fantastic female body.”²¹ And the idealized female body often reflects anxieties about size and containment. In her work, Belser points to rabbinic discourse on whether large breasts are *mûm*:

“It was taught: Rabbi Natan said: “Any woman with breasts larger than those of her fellows—this is a blemish.” How much? R. Meyasha, grandson of R. Yehoshua b. Levi, said in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi: “A hands-breadth.” Is such a case possible?! Yes. Rabbah bar Bar Hanna said: “I saw an Arab woman who twisted her breasts and tossed them over her back to nurse her son.” (Bavli Ketubot 75a)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the gendered and racial dynamics behind this teaching. Suffice to say, these rabbis consider overlarge, uncontained breasts to be *mûm*. Size pushes the boundaries of normate, stretching into deviance and disability.

Despite her supposedly unblemished nature, the Song of Songs woman seems much closer to the Arab woman with the exaggerated and enormous breasts than the ideal, compact wife. Everything about her is strikingly huge and stretched out. After the first five verses of description and metaphor, the next reads:

“Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh
and the hill of frankincense” (Song of Songs 4:6)

In regards to this passage, Exum writes, “Where earlier she likened him to a sachet of precious myrrh lying between her breasts (1:13), now her breasts, with which the woman herself is metonymous, are spiced mountains of myrrh and frankincense upon which he will cavort, no doubt like a gazelle or young deer.”²² While Exum takes the issue of disproportion as poetic

²¹ Julia Watts Belser, “Brides and Blemishes: Queering Women’s Disability in Rabbinic Marriage Law,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2 (June 2016): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv070>.

²² J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Paperback ed, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 168.

license,²³ I want to linger with the idea of a body that can be described as mountainous. Not only is the woman an amalgamation of animals, she is the topography where they run and play. Black points out the way the body is “stretched and dismembered as it aligns it with topographical features.”²⁴ This stretchiness is disruptive and eye-catching; it breaks the norm. The text flaunts the woman’s huge and uncontained body, seeming to fly in the face of any preconceptions about what size a woman’s features should be.

Thus far, I have examined the six verses that come before Song of Songs 4:7, which states that the woman is without *mûm* or blemish. I have identified potential sites of deviance from the able-bodied normate, which I grouped as uncontained female sexuality, animal hybridity, and stretchy enormousness. This brings me back to verse seven, which I choose to read in the context of the strange and disabled bodily descriptions that precede it. When the author says “*kullāk yāphâ*,” or “all of you is beautiful,” I read that the all encompassing wholeness of *kōl* includes all the deviance I have discussed so far. Every part of the unapologetically sexual, hybridized, and disproportionate body is beautiful. Disability and beauty are not opposites, and disability scholars have pointed out the ways that disability has complex and shifting functions in Biblical texts. In his work on David and Mephibosheth, Schipper writes that in scripture, “disability imagery does not function as a transparent mode of character representation with one stable meaning.”²⁵ Disability is an ever-shifting category, with different layers of meaning in different parts of the Hebrew Bible. Here in the Song of Songs, the disabled body is beautiful because of, not in spite of, its distance from the normate. Unlike the normate, the woman of the Song demands to be seen, and overflows with strangeness and all-encompassing oddity.

²³ Ibid, 165.

²⁴ Fiona C. Black, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies in the Song of Songs*, T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies 392 (London ; New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2009), 155.

²⁵ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story*, Library of Hebrew Bible 441 (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 125.

Disability is what makes us want to look at the woman in the Song of Songs. If she had the perfect, nondescript priestly body of Leviticus, we would not be reading, and loving, the Song of Songs today. In his article “Disability Aesthetics,” Tobin Siebers writes that “Disability intercedes to make the difference between good and bad art.” He writes that Nazi art, with its pursuit of the perfectly normative body, is boring and “kitsch.”²⁶ No one wants to look at Nazi sculptures; they do not draw the gaze. Luckily, the Song of Songs has a body that stretches, that breaks boundaries, that is too much and that demands to be seen. The body is wholly beautiful, wholly interesting, wholly strange. Thus, the beauty and wholeness of the woman in the Song comes from her disability, not her conformity.

In the context of the disabled and beautiful body, I can not exegete *mûm* the same way it is used in Leviticus, as visual defect or deviance. As I hope I have shown, the woman in the Song simply can not be described as nondisabled or visually unobtrusive. Instead, I take the cultural/political meaning of *mûm* as the key to reading verse 4:7. If *mûm* is a feature that disqualifies, from priesthood or marriage or society at large, then the Song of Songs body is truly without *mûm*. There is nothing disqualifying in her body, nothing that needs to be hidden away or excluded. All of her strange and disabling features contribute to an image that stands up to the author’s gaze and is beautiful. I read the author as saying:

“The whole of you is beautiful, my love
(your stretchiness, your strangeness, your all-too-much);
there is nothing at all that disqualifies you from our shared life together.”

To conclude, I suggest that we too, in our strange and falling-apart bodies, get to share in this message. As Black writes, “There is not a great distance between the bodies of the lovers in

²⁶ Ibid, 543.

the Song of Songs and the bodies of its readers.”²⁷ What Black interprets as grotesquerie and what I interpret as disability is an inroad for us to see ourselves in the body of the Song. Our bodies are reflected in the Song; our universal condition of humanity and disability. In her argument “The Case for Conserving Disability,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson seeks to move our collective understanding of disability from disqualification to “the essential characteristic of being human.”²⁸ Disability is not just something that affects a small group of marginalized people; rather, every one of us inhabits a body that will experience disability. As Garland-Thomson articulates, disability is a narrative, epistemic, and ethical resource that makes our shared world better. I would add to that list that disability is a resource of beauty, and a resource for us to find beauty in our own strange and deviant bodies. Song of Songs 4:7 is a message for us, too, a love song for our ever-changing bodies. It is an opportunity to take up Garland-Thomson’s call to conserve disability, and to see disability as a human experience that enriches our shared life together. And it is an opportunity to imagine a world where disability does not mean disqualification— a world we can make our own.

²⁷ Fiona C. Black, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies in the Song of Songs*, T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies 392 (London ; New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2009), 186.

²⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Case for Conserving Disability,” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 9, no. 3 (September 2012): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-012-9380-0>.

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