CHAPTER 1

The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible

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In an essay on the rhetorical use of disability in the Deuteronomistic History, Jeremy Schipper has argued that in the Hebrew Bible, barrenness or infertility can be presented as a disability.¹ He makes three main points in this regard: first, that barrenness is mentioned in close context with illness (Deut 7:14–15); second, that barrenness is said to be “healed” (Gen 20:17); and third, that barrenness appears to be “under the control of a divine ‘sender/controller’” (following the terminology of Hector Avalos²). Rebecca Raphael, in her book on disability in the Hebrew Bible, states that “an understanding of disability as bodily impairment in the context of social environment reveals that female infertility, seldom viewed as a disability in modern post-industrial societies, is the defining female disability in the Hebrew Bible.”³ This chapter will explore in more detail some of the nuances of barrenness as disability in the Hebrew Bible, with the fundamental question in mind: what can we know from the biblical material about the reality of barrenness, and the treatment of barren women, in ancient Israel? It will do so through three separate though interconnected lenses. First, the question of what the biblical texts might be able to tell us about the “realia” of infertility in ancient Israel: where on the spectrum of “normality” did ancient Israelites conceive of fertility and infertility? Second, the theological aspect: to what force or forces did the ancient Israelite authors ascribe barrenness? Third, the rhetorical use of barrenness in the biblical texts: how did the biblical authors use barrenness to advance their various agenda? Discussion of these

three issues will, I hope, provide greater nuance to the biblical depiction of barrenness and the discussion of biblical barrenness in the context of disability studies.

The (Ab)Normality of Barrenness

If disability is defined as a deviation from a culturally defined normative state, as a social construction rather than any objective reality, then to classify infertility as disability requires that its opposite, fertility, be understood as normal.⁴ Fertility must be considered the default and infertility the abnormality, just as health is the default human condition and sickness the abnormality. Yet the biblical materials do not unanimously, or even regularly, portray fertility and infertility in this way. The text of Deut 7:14–15, although it does refer to barrenness and illness in successive sentences, does so in an unequal and illuminating way: “You shall be blessed above all other peoples; there shall be no sterile male or female among you or among your livestock. Yahweh will ward off from you all sickness: he will not bring upon you any of the dreadful diseases of Egypt, about which you know, but will inflict them upon all your enemies.” The blessing of 7:14, a lack of infertility among all of Israel’s people, is explicitly contrasted with “all other peoples”; that is, the normal, universal condition, at least on a community-wide basis, is that there will be some infertility. Israel, a people entirely fertile, are the remarkable and blessed exception to the rule. The sickness of 7:15, on the other hand, is not a natural state; it is inflicted by Yahweh, and not on everyone—it is not a universal state—but only on Israel’s enemies, as an explicit punishment. Infertility and sickness are mentioned sequentially, but they are not equivalent: infertility (again, not for everyone, but for some) is the default status, and universal fertility the blessed; health is the default status, and sickness the cursed.

Admittedly, the existence of infertility as an occasional or even common condition within a given community does not mean that those individuals who were barren were not considered deviations from the communal norm, just as the presence of sick persons in a given community does not mean that illness is not a deviation, and therefore socially constructed as a disability. Yet, when we come to the individuals in the Bible who are said to be barren, it is not clear that such is always the case. The example of Rachel and Leah is instructive: “Yahweh saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren” (Gen 29:31).⁵ Leah’s fertility is the result of divine intervention; the obvious correspondence is that Rachel’s infertility is the result of a lack of divine intervention. Both sisters started from the same state—infertile—but only one (so far) was given the gift of fertility by Yahweh.⁶

The opening of Leah’s womb is extraordinary by biblical standards. When Yahweh acts to open something, it is a signal of a transformation from the usual to the unusual.⁷ In Psalm 105:41, Yahweh “opened a rock so that water gushed forth,” an unusual moment for a rock if there ever was one. Yahweh opens Isaiah’s ears (Isa 50:4–5), not thereby changing him from deaf to hearing, but transforming his ordinary human ability to hear into the extraordinary prophetic ability to hear Yahweh’s words. Similarly, Yahweh opens Ezekiel’s mouth (Ezek 3:27), not thereby changing him from mute to speaking, but transforming his ordinary human ability to speak into the extraordinary prophetic ability to speak Yahweh’s words.⁸ Most prominent in this regard is Balaam’s donkey, in Num 22:28: “Yahweh opened the donkey’s mouth, and she said to Balaam . . .” The snake of Genesis 3 notwithstanding, it seems a reasonable assumption that in ancient Israel animals were not given to talking; Yahweh opens the donkey’s mouth and changes it from its usual speechless state into one of eloquently voiced sarcasm.⁹ Thus, the opening of Leah’s womb, her fertility, may be seen as a transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and, as in Deut 7:14–15, may be rightly considered a divine blessing.

Such seems to be the case also in Gen 49:25, when Jacob blesses Joseph in the name of “the God of your father who helps you/Shaddai who blesses you/with blessing of heaven above/blessings of the deep that couches below/blessings of the breast and womb.” The final element here, “blessings of the breast and womb,” picks up directly on the traditional language and iconography of the ancient Near Eastern fertility goddesses. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky has aptly demonstrated, in Israelite religion, at least as presented in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh, the sole deity, has taken over the traditional roles of the ancient Near Eastern gods and goddesses, including that of the fertility goddesses.¹⁰ For our purposes it is useful to note that in ancient Mesopotamia the deities were seen to play a crucial role throughout the process of childbirth, from conception to delivery; this eternal human act could not be accomplished without divine assistance.¹¹ Similarly, ancient Egyptians had fertility charms and wore fertility amulets to guarantee healthy children, while Hittite literature contains numerous fertility rites.¹² This should be no surprise: conception was, and to a certain extent remains, mysterious. Sexual intercourse, even when timed correctly, does not inevitably lead to pregnancy, even in fertile women. Like the unpredictable weather, human fertility seemed to be at the will of a higher power, even when most women were indeed fertile (just as most of the time the rain fell in its appointed season). Thus, not only the barren woman, but even the woman who had already borne children would pray for fertility, and be thankful to the deity when another child entered the world; this we see, for example,

in the case of the first woman, Eve, who upon bearing her third son, Seth, declares, "God has provided me with another offspring" (Gen 4:25). Fertility, for every individual person, was a blessing from the deity, as Ps 127:3 clearly states: "Sons are the provision of Yahweh/the fruit of the womb, his reward."¹³

If fertility is achieved by Yahweh opening the womb as in Gen 29:31, then, as stated earlier, infertility is a result not of any positive action on the deity's part, but rather of a lack of action: Yahweh not opening the womb. In light of the view of fertility as blessing, as a change from an unremarkable state to a remarkable one, we may perhaps better understand some of the language used to describe barrenness in the Bible. Sarah says to Abraham in Gen 16:2, "Yahweh has kept me from bearing." Although Sarah ascribes her infertility to a divine action, literally "restraint," we can, in light of Gen 29:31, consider this not as Yahweh actively preventing Sarah from giving birth, but rather as passively neglecting to open her womb. So too, in Gen 30:1-2: "Rachel became envious of her sister, and said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, 'Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?'" Again, the word "deny," or better, "withhold," here may be best understood as signifying a lack of positive action, rather than as denoting a negative action.¹⁴ And so similarly in 1 Sam 1:5, about Hannah: "Yahweh had closed her womb." It is noteworthy that explicitly in the latter two cases, and implicitly in the first, a contrast is being drawn between the barren woman and a fertile rival. The words "restraining," "withholding," and "closing" are therefore to be read as rhetorical devices necessary to convey the opposition between Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and Hannah and Peninah: if one is "opened," then the other is "closed." We are not required to see in these passages any literal force behind the ostensibly active prevention of fertility by Yahweh.¹⁵

Yet, the very notion of fertility as blessing leads back to the problem of infertility: since most women were fertile, it would be only too easy to view those who were barren as unblest—not punished, *per se* (as will be discussed shortly), but not favored the way fertile women were. It need hardly be said that fertility was a highly desired state in ancient Israel; what is important in this regard, however, is to note that fertility would have increased a woman's standing, since fertility equaled divine blessing. We see this in the story of Genesis 16: "He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem" (Gen 16:4). Note that, as in the case of Leah and Rachel, it is the revelation of fertility that changes the social status, rather than the revelation of infertility. Before Hagar conceived, she was (as far as we know) Sarah's humble maid-servant, though she knew Sarah to be barren. It is the recognition of her

own fertility that causes the shift in perception: Hagar is (now) blessed, Sarah (remains) unblest.¹⁶ Fertility, not infertility, is the marked state.

The Origins of Barrenness

If, according to some biblical texts, fertility was a markedly blessed state and infertility a zero-marked state, then the question of the origin of that barren state necessarily emerges. We have already begun this discussion somewhat in the previous section, by noting that infertility can be seen as the result of a lack of positive action on the part of the deity. Nevertheless, as the story of Sarah and Hagar demonstrates, the barren woman could be an object of scorn. This is the case also, of course, in the story of Hannah, in which Peninah taunts Hannah for being childless (1 Sam 1:6). This was evidently also the case in ancient Egypt, where we have a letter in which a man is mocked for not producing children and a document of wisdom literature containing an admonition against denigrating the childless.¹⁷ The denigration of the barren woman, therefore, is culturally understandable; it is, however, perhaps more akin to a wealthy person denigrating the average than it is to an average person denigrating the poor. The biblical examples cited provide evidence of individual scorn only, not a broad social stigma attached to the condition of barrenness.¹⁸ From the perspective of the blessed, "unblest" signifies "cursed," especially for a condition, fertility, that is only two-sided: if an unblest woman is barren, and a cursed woman is barren, then an easy equation can be drawn. This is not to say that there are not degrees of fertility: it is abundantly clear that many children were a greater blessing than few, as in Job 5:24-25, "When you visit your wife you will never fail/you will see that your offspring are many," or Deut 28:11: "Yahweh will give you abounding prosperity in the issue of your womb."¹⁹ There are degrees of fertility, and degrees of blessing; but there is only one degree of barrenness, and it could thus be regarded, rhetorically if not also in reality, as the curse that stands in opposition to the blessing of fertility. (In those cases where the barren woman is denigrated for her infertility, she is, as noted, always set in opposition to a fertile counterpart; barrenness is not mentioned as worthy of denigration in any other context.)

Indeed, some biblical texts clearly do treat barrenness as a curse; most prominently, Gen 20:17-18: "Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children, for Yahweh had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham."²⁰ Here there can be no doubt that Yahweh is actively preventing childbirth: not only is infertility afflicting an entire group of women rather than a single individual as in the previous examples, but it is

explicitly a punishment (albeit a preemptive one), which is in turn explicitly healed.²¹ The use of healing terminology, as Schipper notes, equates barrenness with the unnatural state of illness.

Infertility could therefore be considered by some to be a curse, a mark of divine punishment resulting from some human misbehavior.²² Yet, it is clear that this was not the case universally. The five biblical women said to be barren—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Samson's mother (Judg 13:2–3)—are all introduced as barren almost before we know anything else about them. What little we do know, in the cases of Rebekah and Rachel, is entirely positive. There is no indication in the text, nor is there any exegetical reason for assuming, that these women are barren because they have been punished for any wrongdoing. Rather, they are simply barren; it is a fact of their existence (on which see the next section). Fertility is a blessing, but it does not follow that infertility is a curse. Wealth is a blessing: "There shall be no needy among you, since Yahweh your God will bless you" (Deut 15:4), but poverty is not therefore a curse: "There will never cease to be needy ones in your land" (Deut 15:11). Moreover, even in some texts where we might expect to see barrenness treated as a curse, it is conspicuously absent. There are two lengthy lists of curses in the Pentateuch: Lev 26:14–38, the curses that accompany the Holiness Code, and Deut 28:15–68, the curses that conclude the deuteronomic covenant. In both cases, fertility is listed among the blessings that derive from obedience to the laws: "I will look with favor upon you, and make you fertile and multiply you" (Lev 26:9); "Yahweh will give you abounding prosperity in the issue of your womb" (Deut 28:11). Yet, the corresponding curse of infertility is nowhere to be found. Rather, the curses regarding offspring are all predicated on the existence of children: wild animals will bereave the Israelites of their children (Lev 26:22); the Israelites will be driven to eat the flesh of their children (Lev 26:29; Deut 28:53); their children will be delivered to foreign conquerors (Deut 28:32). The curses of Deuteronomy 28 are in fact quite explicit that childbirth will continue (although if only in the service of causing future agony). Deut 28:41 states, "Though you beget sons and daughters, they shall not remain with you." Deut 28:56–57 describes the woman who, having given birth, is forced from hunger to eat the infant and the afterbirth.

If barrenness was not, for the most part, explicitly considered a divine affliction, this does not mean that it was not recognized as being of divine origin. From a contemporary medical standpoint, we may say that infertility is simply a natural phenomenon, a part of how the world is: some women are simply barren. We cannot, however, just import our modern views into the context of the ancient world, and especially not into the world of the biblical

texts. There is no stand-alone concept of "nature" in the Bible. Yahweh is responsible for everything, whether by direct intervention in a given moment or by virtue of having created the world, and its various phenomena, from the beginning. That said, in some cases, and according to some biblical authors, natural phenomena are less attributable to Yahweh's actions than to Israel's: rain, for example, comes when Israel obeys, and is held back when Israel disobeys (or comes far too much when humanity is evil, and is held back when they have been punished enough).²³ Yet, this Israel-oriented view of nature does not seem to encompass the issue of infertility (though abundant fertility is frequently conditioned by Israel's obedience). As noted, with the exception of Gen 20:17–18, nowhere is barrenness ascribed to disobedience; it is out of humanity's control.

It is, however, in Yahweh's control, explicitly in the case of its removal, and implicitly in the case of its existence. Relief from barrenness was sought through divine supplication, not only in the explicit case of infertility as a curse (Gen 20:17–18), but also in those cases where barrenness seems to have had no discernible origin: Isaac pleads with Yahweh on behalf of Rebekah (Gen 25:21), and Hannah prays to Yahweh for a son (1 Sam 1:11). In this it is less like rain, and more like sickness—not remarkable sickness like plagues, which are always of divine origin, but normal human illness, which can sometimes be fatal even without there having been any violation of Yahweh's commands. Such is the case, for example, with Hezekiah: "In those days Hezekiah fell dangerously ill. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came and said to him, 'Thus said Yahweh: Get your affairs in order, for you are going to die; you will not get well'" (2 Kgs 20:1). Hezekiah prays (20:2–3), and Yahweh heals him (20:5–11). The equivalence of infertility and sickness is drawn also in Exod 23:25–26: "I will remove sickness from your midst. No woman in your land shall miscarry or be barren. I will let you enjoy the full count of your days." Here, somewhat as in Deut 7:14–15, infertility and sickness are aligned; yet, whereas in Deut 7:15 the sicknesses mentioned are explicitly plagues of divine origin, in Exod 23:25–26 they seem to be "naturally occurring" human illnesses; the miracle promised in Exodus is that even the normal course of human life, including sickness, will be perfected. Note that the final clause, "I will let you enjoy the full count of your days," signifies completion of the natural human lifespan. The alignment of infertility and sickness in Exod 23:25–26 thus puts the two on an equal footing; yet, this text does not indicate that either is a punishment, a curse, or any other negatively grounded result of Yahweh's action. The text speaks to the mitigation of otherwise "natural" human existence.

From these texts we may reconsider the conceptualization of illness and fertility as they conform to the "religious model of disability." According to

this model, disability is the result of divine anger and punishment and is therefore imbued with negative connotations, with the disabled person being demonized and ostracized for their disability. This is, for the most part, the lens through which disability in the Hebrew Bible has been viewed, and in many cases with justification. Yet, in the case of infertility, and common illness, the religious model does not do justice to the biblical presentation. Even granting divine origin for barrenness and sickness, it does not necessarily follow that they derive from divine punishment, or that those who were barren and sick were mistreated in any culturally universal way. It may be noted that there are no specific instructions on how Israelites are to treat the barren or the sick, as there are for the blind and the deaf, for example (see, e.g., Lev 19:14; Deut 27:18 [positively]; Lev 21:18; 2 Sam 5:8 [negatively]). The disabled are not restricted from full participation in the social life of ancient Israel. Nor are they listed in the common grouping of those Israelites at social risk: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (see, e.g., Deut 10:18; 24:17, 19).²⁴ Although, regarding Avalos and Schipper's use of the language of "sender/controller," Yahweh clearly plays the role of "controller" in his removal of infertility and sickness, it is not as clear that Yahweh is explicitly perceived as "sender."

In short, nuance is required when describing barrenness as either "natural" or "of divine origin." With the exception of Gen 20:17–18, it seems that barrenness falls somewhere in between these two categories: it is natural, insofar as it is a part of human existence that does not derive from direct divine action, but it is of divine origin also, insofar as "nature" is inseparable from divine creation and control.²⁵ The religious model of disability, which would view barrenness as divine punishment and therefore worthy of special cultural treatment, does not take this nuance into account: divine origin does not necessarily mean divine punishment.²⁶

The Rhetoric of Barrenness

Across the biblical texts, barrenness is mentioned in two main ways, as we have seen: in individual terms—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, and Hannah²⁷—and in communal terms—Abimelech's court, or the Israelite people as a whole. In each category, the notion of barrenness is employed in distinct ways by the biblical authors. It is crucial, before making any claims about the sociocultural reality of infertility as disability in ancient Israel, to recognize how infertility is appropriated for the rhetorical aims of the text.

In the first category, that of barren individuals, there are a number of commonalities that extend across the specific narratives. First, as we have already had occasion to mention, there are no indications that any of these women

are barren as a result of sin or punishment. They are introduced as barren; their infertility is, for the most part, their defining characteristic (note particularly the introduction of Sarah in Gen 11:30: "Sarai was barren," and of Samson's mother in Judg 13:2–3: "His wife was barren and had borne no children. An angel of Yahweh appeared to the woman and said to her, 'You are barren and have borne no children'").²⁸ Second, there is divine intervention: Yahweh grants each woman fertility—again, without any indication that the woman did anything new to deserve this blessing.²⁹ Third, each woman gives birth to a major figure in Israel's mythic past: Isaac, Jacob (and Esau), Joseph (and Benjamin), Samson, and Samuel.³⁰

In the case of the three matriarchs in the J narrative, as has long been recognized, their infertility is a narratological device: it presents a challenge to Yahweh's promise to make Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into a great nation (Gen 12:1–3; 13:16; 26:4; 28:14). The removal of this ostensible obstacle to the fulfillment of the promise therefore serves to highlight Yahweh's power over history: the "natural" infertility of the matriarchs is overcome by divine intervention.³¹ It is important to recognize that this theme of Yahweh's power in the fulfillment of his word is common to J, E, and P, but it is only in J that barrenness is explicitly mentioned. In E, we are told that Abraham is childless (Gen 15:2), and that Sarah gives birth despite Abraham's old age (Gen 21:7), but Sarah is not described explicitly as infertile.³² Similarly, in P we are informed that Sarah has borne Abraham no children (Gen 16:1), and it is Sarah's and Abraham's age that is mentioned as the challenge to their having a son (Gen 17:17).³³ For these authors, the central thematic element is not barrenness per se, but age: the miracle of Isaac's birth is that Yahweh is able to overcome the common restriction on human reproduction after a certain age (for both men and women).³⁴ Despite being explicit about Sarah's barrenness (Gen 11:30), J contains the same idea: when Yahweh promises Sarah a son, she refers not to her infertility, but to her age: "Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?'" (Gen 18:12). The infertility of the matriarchs serves to prove (in both senses of the word) Yahweh's power.³⁵ It is a narrative trope, putting Yahweh's promise of progeny in jeopardy—just as, in its way, the Exodus serves the narrative end of jeopardizing Yahweh's promise of the land.³⁶

This same trope is picked up in the cases of Samson's mother and Hannah. Here the threat is not to the promise of a future Israelite nation, as with the matriarchs, but to the existence of the already established Israelite nation. Samson and Samuel are the two greatest (and last) judges before the establishment of the kingship with Saul. The threat to Israel in the time of Samson is explicit: "Yahweh delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years" (Judg 13:1). With Samuel, it is somewhat less obvious, but the last

verse before the story of Hannah certainly presents a danger to the success of Israel as a people: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased" (Judg 21:25). Again, in these two cases the barrenness poses a narrative obstacle to be overcome, highlighting Yahweh's power over history and dedication to the success of the Israelite people, especially in the tenuous pre-monarchic period.

In the individual stories of barrenness, infertility is not the central concern: it is a rhetorical means to a theological end. Why the women are barren, the issue of blessing and curse, or the cultural treatment of the barren women is not mentioned, nor is it relevant. It is therefore only with great caution, if at all, that we may draw any conclusions from these stories about the general condition of barrenness in ancient Israel, as a disability or otherwise, other than to state that it was a known feature of human life. From the perspective of these texts, barrenness primarily disables Yahweh—and then only momentarily and to demonstrate the ease with which the disability is overcome.

When we turn to the category of communal barrenness, there are again commonalities among the biblical texts, but they are of a different order. This category comprises three texts, which we have already had occasion to mention: Gen 20:17–18; Exod 23:25–26; and Deut 7:14–15. In all three passages, it is not the infertility of an individual that is mentioned, but of an entire community: Abimelech's court in Gen 20:17–18, and the Israelite people in Exod 23:25–26 and Deut 7:14–15. In these passages, barrenness is aligned, one way or the other, with sickness: explicitly in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and implicitly, through the use of the word "heal," in Genesis. Further, in all three we find the language of blessing and curse: curse in the case of Abimelech's court and blessing for the Israelites.

In a manner very distinct from the category of individual barrenness, in these examples infertility is used rhetorically to demonstrate Yahweh's response to human actions. The women of Abimelech's court are stricken with barrenness as a result of Abimelech taking Sarah. Israel will be miraculously free of infertility if the people are obedient to Yahweh's laws. Humanity, to an extent, controls its own fate with regard to its fertility. In the cases of the legal texts in Exodus and Deuteronomy, barrenness is but one element for which this is the case: sickness, miscarriage, and the natural human lifespan are invoked alongside barrenness in Exod 23:25–26; fertility of the land and of animals, as well as sickness, is mentioned in Deut 7:13–15. As noted, these are "natural" elements, regular parts of human existence that will be overcome by the divine will—as long as Israel obeys. And just as there is something "unnatural" about the entire Israelite community being fertile, so too there is

something "unnatural" about the entirety of Abimelech's court being barren; there is explicit divine intervention at work, and it is explicitly in response to the question of human obedience and disobedience.³⁷

The rhetorical use of barrenness in these texts, therefore, is to demonstrate Yahweh's power over the common human condition; that is, that some women, but not all, are barren, and that a universalizing of infertility or fertility among an entire population is a sign of Yahweh's response to human (dis)obedience. The underlying assumption, obviously, is that fertility is a desired state; the texts, however, use (in)fertility not for its own sake, but as a part of a larger discourse, one that includes other "natural" elements on an equal footing.

Across both categories, then, there is a central commonality: barrenness is employed rhetorically for greater theological ends, in both cases in order to demonstrate Yahweh's power, although in different respects. When this rhetorical use of barrenness is recognized, it forces an adjustment in how we evaluate the perception of infertility in ancient Israel. It is not clear from the biblical texts that barrenness is a particular concern in its own right; it is either the logical mechanism by which Yahweh's promise of progeny is challenged or a single element among others used to claim Yahweh's power to alter the normal course of human life. The societal standing or treatment of the barren woman is not at issue in any of these texts. Indeed, to an extent the rhetorical nature of the biblical texts as a whole should serve as a caution against deriving too much information about the reality of infertility in ancient Israel from the biblical material.

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This chapter has examined the issue of barrenness in the Hebrew Bible from three interrelated perspectives: the question of where infertility lies on the spectrum of biblical "normalcy"; the question of whether and how infertility was regarded as of divine origin; and the question of how barrenness was used rhetorically by the biblical authors to serve larger theological aims. I have tried to describe more fully the biblical treatment of barrenness in light of all three questions, not to demonstrate that barrenness was or was not a disability, or disabling, in ancient Israel, but rather simply to draw attention to the nuances inherent in the biblical text. It is important, however, to note that at least the religious model of disability faces a challenge from the biblical material, and that the lack of explicit textual description of how barren women were treated—either positively or negatively—may render any conclusions about the reality experienced by barren women in ancient Israel tentative at best.

Notes

1. Jeremy Schipper, "Disabling Israelite Leadership: 2 Samuel 6:23 and Other Images of Disability in the Deuteronomistic History," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Semeia Studies 55; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 104–13 (esp. 105).
2. Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel* (HSM 54; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 332.
3. Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (LHBOTS 445; New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 57–58.
4. On the definition of disability, see Saul Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2–3. Olyan does not treat barrenness in his book.
5. See also Gen 30:22: "God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb."
6. So too perhaps Ruth, who is not said to be barren, but for whom divine intervention is necessary for her to bear children: "Yahweh let her conceive, and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:13).
7. Cf. R. Bartelmus, "pātaḥ," *TDOT* 12 (2003): 173–91 (182).
8. In this light we should also understand Ezek 24:27; 33:22, which, though they use the language of dumbness, are clearly meant metaphorically, as Ezekiel has spoken already (beginning in Ezek 4:14).
9. Outside of body parts, we might also consider Deut 28:12 in this regard: "Yahweh will open for you his bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land." This is not describing the natural rains to which Israel is accustomed, but to extraordinary weather; the context is that of the blessings that will accrue to Israel if the people obey the deuteronomistic covenant. See similarly Mal 3:10: "I will surely open the floodgates of the sky for you and pour down blessings on you."
10. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Fawcett-Columbine, 1992).
11. Cf. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 48–49; Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (SHCANE 7; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 95–96; M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Cuneiform Monographs 14; Groningen: Styx, 2000), 35–37; Claudia D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1–18* (BZAW 382; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 35–36.
12. Geraldine Pinch, "Private Life in Ancient Egypt," in *CANE* 1:363–81 (376); Fiorella Imparati, "Private Life among the Hittites," in *CANE* 1:571–86 (575). Although the evidence is scanty, at least two Ugaritic texts have also been identified as possibly being incantations against infertility (KTU 1.13 and 1.23); cf. N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilmilku and His Colleagues* (Biblical Seminar 53; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 169–73, 324–35; Klaas Spronk, "The Incantations," in *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*, ed. Wilfred G. E. Watson and Nicolas Wyatt (HdO 39; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 270–86 (284–85).
13. This notion is taken up directly in the Talmud, which describes the "key of child-birth" as being "in the hand of the Holy One" (*b. Taanit* 2a). It is noteworthy that this comment is made in the context of a discussion of God's power over rain. See also Deut 28:53, in which offspring are described as those "whom Yahweh has given to you."
14. See its use in Num 22:16: "Please do not refuse to come to me" (or more literally, "do not withhold from coming to me").
15. It should be noted that Gen 29:31 and 16:2; 30:1–2 are all from the same pentateuchal source, J; the story of Hannah, being from the Deuteronomistic History, may well have belonged originally to one of the pentateuchal sources, and perhaps J, though in its present context it is difficult to decide with any certainty.
16. Similarly, the "disgrace" to which Rachel refers as having been removed upon the birth of Joseph (Gen 30:23) seems to refer not to any broader social disgrace, but rather to her specific position vis-à-vis Leah.
17. Pinch, "Private Life," 376.
18. Thus, we cannot consider Peninah's treatment of Hannah as evidence that "within Israelite society such a condition [i.e., barrenness] was certainly one which assigned the patient a biologically and socially dysfunctional role" (Avalos, *Illness*, 332).
19. Though a multitude of offspring is a central feature of the patriarchal promises in Genesis, it should be noted that (with the exception of Jacob) the patriarchs do not have many offspring as individuals—Isaac has two sons, and until he remarries in his very old age (Gen 25:1), when he has six more (who are never again mentioned), so does Abraham. The promises of multiple offspring, as is commonly known, refer not to the individual patriarch's children, but to the nation of Israel that will, in time, grow from the patriarchs' lineage.
20. It has frequently been conjectured in pentateuchal scholarship that Gen 20:18 is a secondary addition to the original narrative of Gen 20:1–17. This conjecture is groundless; for the argument that the verse is an integral part of the story, see Joel S. Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* (FAT 68; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 228–30.
21. Although the same word, "restrain," is used in Gen 20:18 as in Gen 16:2, it does not necessarily follow that it has the same precise nuance in both cases. I argued earlier that in Gen 16:2 the word should be understood as "did not open," rather than "actively closed"; here, however, it does seem to have an active meaning. It is the context that is determinative: we already know that Yahweh has threatened to punish Abimelech (20:3) for his misbehavior, while there is no such threat in the case of Sarah. Furthermore, as these two texts are from different sources (Gen 20:18 from E, Gen 16:2 from J), we cannot assume a priori that the word is used in the same way by both authors (especially when it is found only once in each source—in these very texts). Again, the context is determinative.

22. This is the case also in the Hittite cultural context, in which barrenness was a divine curse for crimes such as perjury (cf. Imparati, "Private Life," 575), and in both Mesopotamian and Hittite treaties (cf. Mary Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* [SBLDS 91; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986], 15).
23. Cf. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 100–107.
24. The one exception is Ps 113:7–9, in which the barren woman is aligned with the poor.
25. The obvious questions of theodicy that arise from the biblical portrayal of barrenness—notably, why would Yahweh create a world in which some women are unable to conceive?—are challenging, but belong to the realm of theology, not necessarily that of biblical disability studies.
26. Cf. Joel S. Baden and Candida R. Moss, "The Origin and Interpretation of *šāra'at* in Leviticus 13–14," *JBL* (forthcoming).
27. As the rhetorical function in the case of Michal in 2 Sam 6:23 has already been treated by Schipper, "Disabling," it will not be discussed here.
28. The exception is Rebekah, whose barrenness is mentioned more briefly than in the other narratives (only in a subordinate clause in Gen 25:21), and who has already been the focus of a previous narrative (Genesis 24).
29. Hannah's vow in 1 Sam 1:11 looks to be the impetus for Yahweh granting her fertility, but this does not mean that she has changed from undeserving to deserving of blessing by virtue of the vow. We may compare the enslavement of the Israelites in Exodus: the text tells us that Yahweh initiated the deliverance from Egypt because "the cry of the Israelites has reached me" (Exod 3:9), yet we can hardly think that the Israelites had been deserving of enslavement before this moment and were suddenly found worthy of rescue.
30. Cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 34–35. On the rhetorical use of barrenness in the J stories of the patriarchs and in the story of Hannah, see also Callaway, *Sing*, 32–33, 56–57.
31. See Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*, 62: "[The text's] representation of God's power rests on the back of an infertile woman." Though Raphael engages in exegesis of the patriarchal narratives, she does so from an entirely canonical perspective, which means that she misses the important distinctions between the various pentateuchal sources and at the same time comments on a sequence of texts that were never intended to be read together.
32. The assumed connection of Sarah and infertility in E is only associative, in the narrative of Genesis 20: Sarah is not called barren, nor is there any intimation that she may be, but the divine punishment of Abimelech's court is barrenness "because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham" (20:18). It would be reading canonically to assume that in E, as in J, Sarah is necessarily barren.
33. In this regard it is worth noting that in the Hebrew Bible a lack of children is not necessarily the same as barrenness. This seems to be the case in Gen 15:2 and 16:1, but also, for example, in the levirate law of Deut 25:5–10, which is predicated on the assumption that a childless widow—the text does not specify how long the woman was married before her husband died—should remarry in order to bear children with her husband's brother.

34. This is the central focus also in the case of the Shunnamite woman in 2 Kgs 4:8–17, in which the prophet's power is demonstrated by the woman conceiving despite her husband's age.
35. Note that in P, after the initial challenge and demonstration of Yahweh's power over fertility in Gen 17:17, there is no further need to remark on this theme: Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel all bear children without mention of any difficulty of any kind.
36. See David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2nd ed.; JSOTS 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
37. The case of Lev 20:20–21, in which forbidden sexual relations do not produce offspring, is different. It is not that the man and the woman are made barren—it is that their coupling will be fruitless in this particular instance. It may be compared to Yahweh's decree that David and Bathsheba's first child would die (2 Sam 12:14): it is not that they cannot bear healthy children, but that their initial illicit coupling was forbidden from being fruitful.