

Disability, Desirability and Leah’s Eyes in Genesis 29

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ABSTRACT

In the Jacob Cycle (Gen 25:19–36:43), there is a peculiar passage about the appearance of Rachel’s sister Leah. Jacob clearly prefers Rachel and the narrator includes a comparative note about the sisters in Gen 29:17 which indicates that Rachel was more physically desirable than Leah, describing Leah’s eyes with the ambiguous modifier rakkot (רַכּוֹת). Some interpreters have concluded that this does not describe a defect in Leah’s physical eyes but is an observation about her appearance. In this article, I examine the characterisation of Leah in Gen 29 through the lenses of disability studies and aesthetic philosophy, concluding that while there is probably no physical or anatomical problem with Leah’s eyes, the narrator describes her as if there was, suggesting that Leah’s undesirability is treated as though it were a physical disability. Leah’s characterisation as such is illuminated through an analysis of how disabling conditions are understood in the Hebrew Bible and the overlap between ability and aesthetic appeal is explored to illustrate how the narrator of Gen 29 conflates concepts of disability and desirability in the portrayal of Leah’s character. Ultimately, since Leah does conceive despite being undesired by Jacob, she is portrayed ironically as desired by YHWH and the narrator utilises the subversion of the reader’s expectation to show how YHWH in his sovereignty subverts the expected outcome of the narrative, granting agency to the powerless and favouring the unfavoured.

KEYWORDS: Genesis, Leah, Rachel, Disability, Desire, Aesthetics, Yahwist, Jacob

A INTRODUCTION

The author of the Jacob Cycle (Gen 25:19–36:43) is a master of irony and subversion. His¹ colourful narratives are case studies in contrast and reversal as

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he utilises comedy and tragedy in an entertaining effort to illustrate how the intentions of YHWH prevail through and despite the intentions of the narrative’s central figures. Leah is one such tragic figure as a woman who is rejected by Jacob but accepted and elevated by YHWH who reverses the expectation of the reader by choosing and loving the unchosen and unloved. In terms of her appearance, Leah is negatively evaluated as soon as she is introduced; when she is compared to her sister Rachel she is found wanting and is ultimately rejected. A key element of Leah’s initial rejection by Jacob is the narrator’s observation of her eyes as being *rakkot* (רַכּוֹת), an ambiguous modifier that has consistently divided interpreters but that is important for understanding Leah’s portrayal throughout the rest of the narrative vis-à-vis Rachel’s. Polysemous as it may seem, I will argue that the descriptor is negative and is intended to communicate that Leah’s appearance made her undesirable.

This passage (which concerns the desirability of Leah and Rachel) is rather unique in this early narrative because few Pentateuchal texts are explicitly concerned with aesthetics. Additionally, as I intend to show, Leah’s undesirability is not simply intended to highlight Rachel’s desirability to Jacob but functions in a similar way as a defect or a disability. Leah’s undesirability leads to her rejection which limits her in the narrative and fundamentally separates her from other characters, even while it is contrasted ironically with Rachel’s disabling infertility. The author, who famously depicts Jacob later in the narrative as a disabled character (Gen 32:25), here conflates the concepts of aesthetics and defects, disability and desirability in a way that can better illuminate our understanding of ancient concepts of physical distinction and social separation. Despite being unfavoured due to her appearance, YHWH sovereignly subverts the expected outcome of the narrative by favouring Leah

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¹ Most interpreters credit all or most of the Gen 25:19–36:43 to the pre-exilic “Yahwist” (or “J”). The identity and time period of this writer is debated but it is agreed generally that he writes prior to the sixth century and could be traced back to the tenth century. While I follow the assumption that the Yahwist is singularly responsible for the Jacob Cycle, the author’s identity is only important insofar as it provides insight into the historical epoch in which he writes and the cultural context he inhabits. Thus, I draw some inferences below about how someone from his period would have understood desirability or attributes of beauty and ugliness. For more information on the figure of the Yahwist, see John van Seters, *The Yahwist: A Historian of Israelite Origins* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013). For the Yahwist as a pre-exilic writer, see Richard Wright, *Linguistic Evidence for the Pre-Exilic Date of the Yahwistic Source* (LOTS 419; London: T&T Clark, 2005).

as a mother of many key figures in Israel's history. In order to illustrate this further, I will begin by analysing the description of Leah's eyes in Gen 29:17, moving then to a discussion of multifaceted nature of disability studies and the portrayal of disabling conditions within Hebrew Bible texts, whether physically/functionally limiting (such as blindness) or socially/culturally limiting (such as infertility). Subsequently, I will discuss how ancient perspectives on aesthetic appeal illuminate the narrator's treatment of Leah's desirability as a disability and how he uses irony and reversal to highlight YHWH's subversive role as an actor behind the scenes, leading to Leah's final acceptance despite her initial rejection. This analysis will help to show that concepts of disability in antiquity are indeed far more cultural than medical and will serve to broaden our understanding of ancient Jewish ideas of defects and beauty. I begin first with the enigmatic statement in Gen 29:17.

B WHAT IS WRONG WITH LEAH'S EYES (GEN 29:17)?

Leah is introduced in Gen 29:16 as the older daughter of Laban whose younger daughter Rachel has already caught Jacob's attention. The actual names of the daughters are probably a literary effort by the narrator to prepare the readers for the inevitable contrast between their respective appearance or desirability. The name "Leah" is usually read to mean something like "cow" while the name "Rachel" is read as "ewe."² The following verse contains the author's aesthetic evaluation of the two sisters: "Leah's eyes were *rakkot* (רַכּוֹת) but Rachel was beautiful (יָפֵת) in form and appearance." The meaning of this term used for Leah (root רך) is usually understood as weak, tender, delicate or soft³ but its use here is disputed by interpreters, with some assigning a positive meaning and others a negative meaning.

On the negative side, many have assumed that the context necessitates that Leah is being described as inferior in some way. That is, given the narrator's intentional contrasting of Leah with the beautiful Rachel alongside the fact that in some later Jewish texts, bright and lustrous eyes were seen as desirable (cf. 1 Sam 16:12; Songs 4:1, 9), Leah's eyes are described as dull or lustreless.⁴

² Gale Yee, "Leah," in *ABD* (Vol 4; ed. David Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 268.

³ Dieter Kellermann, "*Rakak, Rak, Rok, Morek*," *TDOT* (Vol. XIII; ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 496–498; Hendrik Bosman, "RKK," *NIDOTTE* (Vol 3; ed. Willem VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1115–1119.

⁴ Bosman, "RKK," 1116; Kellermann, "*Rakak, Rak, Rok, Morek*," 497; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 463; Gordon Wenham,

Regardless of whatever specific problem is proposed, the negative interpretation seems to be followed by the LXX (which renders *rakkot* as ἀσθενής), the Vulgate (which renders *rakkot* as *lippu*), some Rabbinic texts and some later Jewish commentators such as Abraham Ibn Ezra and Moses Mendelssohn.⁵ On the positive side, some interpreters have highlighted the ambiguous nature of the term and argued that it can be understood as positive here. Admittedly, there are examples of multiple connotations for it in different contexts. For example, the term is used in a positive way (in the sense of being tender, delicate or refined) in Deut 28:54, 56 and Isa 47:1.⁶ If it is meant positively, as some interpreters have suggested, this description of Leah could be understood as delicate, sensitive, gentle, kind or pleasant, as if to say that while Rachel was beautiful in every way, Leah’s eyes were her most positive feature.⁷

Genesis, WBC 1b (Dallas: Word, 1994), 235; Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, Chapters 18–50 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 467; Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (JPSTC; Philadelphia, JPS, 2001), 204; Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 405; Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 171; Tremper Longman, *Genesis* (SGBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 371; Andrew Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 2019), 281. Eyes were clearly important to the ancient Hebrew people; on the three occasions in the Hebrew Bible where applying cosmetics is described, reference is made to women painting their eyes.

⁵ Roland Gradwohl, “Waren Leas Augen hässlich?” *VT* 49/1 (1999): 119–121. *Genesis Rabbah* 70:16 suggests that Leah’s problem was that she cried too much due to her refusal to be paired with Esau (an invention inserted into the context based on the assumption of a parallelism between older and younger that characterises the Jacob Cycle). Abraham Ibn Ezra added an aleph to the word *rakkot*, which was probably an attempt to clarify that Leah’s eyes were too large for her face; see Morton Seelenfreund and Stanley Schneider, “Leah’s Eyes,” *JBQ* 25/1 (1997): 21.

⁶ Yee, “Leah,” 268. In *Genesis*, the term is used in a positive way toward animals (e.g. in Gen 18:7, it is used to describe choice cattle) but not toward humans (e.g. in Gen 33:13, it is used to describe children who are frail or weak). Some later texts do use the term positively in contexts where a woman’s appearance is described; one example is *Genesis Apocryphon* 20:4 which speaks of Sarai’s face as ‘delicate’ in a context where the author is lauding her beauty.

⁷ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (ABC 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 225; William Reayburn and Euan Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis* (Philadelphia: ABS, 1997), 671; Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and ‘Sexuality’ in the Hebrew Bible* (BIS 26; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 48 n 66; Bill Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 266; Jerry Rabow, *The Lost Matriarch: Finding Leah in the Bible and*

In my opinion, the negative meaning is correct. If the narrator wanted to compliment Leah in some way, he used one of the most non-standard, ambiguous descriptions possible rather than simply calling her eyes "beautiful" as other texts sometimes do (e.g. 1 Sam 16:12). However, given the ambiguity associated with the term and the division in scholarly opinion, a re-examination of the term and its context is necessary. First, we must recognise that throughout the various patriarchal narratives in Genesis, other characters are consistently contrasted with one another in a way that shows that one is favoured and the other is unfavoured (by YHWH and by human characters). We see this among male figures like Jacob and Esau and female figures like Sarah and Hagar (often involving fertility, as becomes the issue with Leah and Rachel). Leah's appearance is the only reason the narrator gives as to why she is not favoured by Jacob, whose attitude toward her certainly seems to sour further after being tricked into marrying her and does not seem to improve even after she bears six sons and a daughter. This being the case, it seems unlikely that the narrator intended that the description of Leah's eyes be positive when she is initially introduced.

Some have also suggested that since the narrator assigns such an important role to Leah in Israel's story, a negative description of her seems implausible. For example, Arnold alleges that "it seems unlikely that the matriarch of six of Israel's tribes should be described in unattractive terms."⁸ Such a suggestion is simply unfounded; it is as plausible as saying that Abraham's many flaws and foolish decisions would never have been intended to produce a negative evaluation of him simply because of his importance to the narrative as a patriarch. The Yahwist has no qualms assigning negative features or descriptions to his characters as long as these advance the narrative to his desired end. Rather, as Kellerman puts it, "the text is clearly pointing out a

Midrash (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 31; Rabow anachronistically suggests that Leah's eyes were perhaps a beautiful light blue and Rachel's were dark; Sarah Melcher, "Genesis and Exodus," in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (ed. Sarah Melcher, Mikeal Parsons, and Amos Yong; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 44; Janice De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives* (BIS 162; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 185–186; John Goldingay, *Genesis* (BCOT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 465. The NRSV translates *rakkot* as "lovely," which I deem incorrect. Even if one allows for a flexible meaning given the ambiguity of the term, the English word "lovely" is not only generous but also excessive. Even if *rakkot* is meant positively, Leah is still being contrasted with Rachel and is considered less desirable than Rachel based on her appearance.

⁸ Arnold, *Genesis*, 266.

blemish in the matriarch's beauty."⁹ The expression should be understood as describing an unenviable quality and because of this quality Leah had no prospect of attention from Jacob. Instead, in Wilda Gafney's words, "she is eclipsed the moment Jacob sees Rachel."¹⁰ Quite simply, the purely *literal* meaning is that "Leah was not beautiful because of her eyes."¹¹ Attempts to translate the phrase positively obscure the fact that the narrator's point is that Leah suffers by comparison with her sister, whatever precise feature it is that the phrase is meant to describe. The comparative element (which emphasises the attributes of one sister and the detriments of another) is a key part of the context from the beginning of the narrative to its end.¹²

While the language of Gen 29:17 describes only Leah's eyes, Jensen has persuasively argued that the point of this phrase is to describe Leah's whole appearance, especially given that Rachel's whole appearance is described by comparison.¹³ Jensen notes that although interpreters often draw attention to the role of the eyes as a contributing factor to perceptions of beauty in antiquity, there are very few literary examples of this outside 1 Sam 16–17 (which is ambiguous) and the descriptions in the Song of Songs (which do not describe eyes as more desirable than other body parts).¹⁴ Rather, when the same word is applied to people elsewhere (as in Gen 33:13; Isa 47:1), it speaks to a quality of the whole person and often "of a weakness or deficiency, whether in ability, constitution, or experience, and often with regard to carrying out a task."¹⁵ Jensen thus concludes that Leah's general appearance was undesirable, at least partly, because she was perceived to be weak or frail. In the writer's context, I

⁹ Kellerman, "Rakak, Rak, Rok, Morek," 497.

¹⁰ Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 63.

¹¹ Seelenfreund and Schneider, "Leah's Eyes," 19. Josephus went so far as to say that Leah was devoid of beauty (Ant 1.300).

¹² See Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 64; De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an*, 186. It fits the context not only because of the narrator's portrayal of Leah as inferior but also because of the broader motif of sight and blindness that pervades the narrative. For example, Jacob's life is characterised by his response to blind characters (like his father whose blindness allows Jacob to take Esau's blessing; Gen 27:11–29), his own metaphorical blindness in his decision-making (like when he is tricked into sleeping with Leah because he cannot see her clearly; Gen 29:23, 25) and, eventually, his own physical blindness at the end of his life (Gen 48:10, 14). Leah's name for her first son Reuben (a "son of seeing") may also be a reference to her eyes or an ironic play on seeing and being seen when she feels that she is being neither seen nor able to see well.

¹³ Aaron Jensen, "The Appearance of Leah," *VT* 68 (2018): 514–518.

¹⁴ Jensen, "The Appearance of Leah," 516.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 517.

agree with Jensen that this would have been directly related to desirability because it involved perceived suitability for bearing children.¹⁶ Leah's rejection then enables a multi-layered narrative irony, since Leah ends up being the biologically favoured partner because she is directly responsible for six of Jacob's twelve sons and his only daughter, while Rachel remains infertile for most of her life and far less fertile than Leah even on the two rare occasions when she does give birth. Given that she dies after her second birth (implying that she was too physically weak to survive it), the narrative contains more irony if Leah was viewed as undesirable because of an assumption of bodily unsuitability for motherhood.

While Jensen's view is likely the most accurate, a few interpreters have suggested that the term is intended to be very specific and that Leah had some sort of problem with her eyes that could be considered an impairment or a disability.¹⁷ While it is at least *possible* that there was indeed a physical or medical problem with Leah's eyes, such a possibility is beside the point. Presuming that Jensen is correct that *rakkot* is intended to refer to Leah's general appearance, I am arguing that the comment about Leah's eyes is ultimately a comment by the author about her desirability and that the author (and Jacob through the author) treat Leah's undesirability *as though it were* an impairment or a disability. That is, for the author, Leah's undesirability is treated similarly to perceived impairments or disabilities like deafness or muteness. This necessitates a broader understanding of disability in antiquity, one which incorporates social factors (like aesthetic appeal and reproductive expectations) rather than only medical factors, in order to understand better how this ancient author understood disability and impairment in his time. To do this, we must begin with a brief discussion of disability studies before moving to how this field interacts with the study of the Hebrew Bible and how passages like Gen 29 can better aid our understanding of aesthetics and the perception of others in the author's ancient context.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 518.

¹⁷ Some infer that this could be myopia, amblyopia, or strabismus; cf. Seelenfreund and Schneider, "Leah's Eyes," 20–21; David Penschansky, "Beauty, Power, and Attraction: Aesthetics and the Hebrew Bible," in *Beauty and the Bible: Toward a Hermeneutics of Biblical Aesthetics* (ed. Richard Bauckham and Jean-Francois Racine; Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 47–48; Lynn Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors: Women's Stories from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 25. Recently, this view was rejected specifically by Melcher, "Genesis and Exodus," 44.

C **DISABILITY STUDIES AND DIFFERENT BODIES: MOVING BEYOND THE MEDICAL MODEL**

To speak of disability is to speak of corporeality or embodiment. As such disability studies “centers on the differential valuation of human beings based on their perceived physical and/or mental features and ‘abilities’.”¹⁸ If one’s physical or mental abilities are perceived by others to be impaired in some way (that is, one is perceived as unable to perform a task or activity), disability is used to describe the consequences of such impairment(s).¹⁹ Not all impairment results in disability but most disabilities do result in some form of disadvantage. In recent years, there has been a clear move away from viewing disability as a fixed or precise category with distinct boundaries due to a growing recognition that while disability is rooted in physical or mental difference, one’s experience of disability is produced less by biology than by culture.²⁰ The traits or characteristics of a person considered disabled may render them physically or biologically unusual but it is social or cultural factors that render them not simply unusual but inferior.

The idea that disability is about one’s biological or physical (functional) limitations is identified as the medical model. This corresponds to the idea that a disability “is what someone has when his or her body or mind does not work properly.”²¹ This model necessarily focuses on how the person experiencing disability is dependent upon others due to functional limitations or a specific condition. The medical model has been criticised extensively as inadequate and these critiques need not be repeated here. It suffices to say that a central tenet of disability studies today is that disability is a cultural construct and thus a fluid term which encompasses far more than individual disadvantages or limitations.²² While the medical model implies that disability is a property of a person with an impairment, a socio-cultural model of disability recognises that the concept itself is embedded in society, determined by cultural factors and its meaning is therefore dependent on the discourse in which it is engaged (and, similarly, the

¹⁸ Hector Avalos, “Disability Studies and Biblical Studies: Retrospectives and Prospects,” *Interpretation* 73/4 (2019): 344.

¹⁹ This is consistent with the definition offered by Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

²⁰ Julia Belser, “Priestly Aesthetics: Disability and Bodily Difference in Leviticus 21,” *Interpretation* 73/4 (2019): 356.

²¹ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 22.

²² Anna Rebecca Solevåg, “No Nuts? No Problem! Disability, Stigma, and the Baptized Eunuch in Acts 8:26–40,” *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016): 83.

historical context).²³ A socio-cultural model is far more helpful when approaching depictions of disability (especially within texts). This is because it allows for broadening the category of such a phenomenon to include a wider range of bodily characteristics which necessarily have nothing to do with function or ability but, due to a perception (and negative evaluation) of difference, still result in disadvantage, marginalisation and thus limitation.²⁴ To move beyond the medical model means not simply broadening our view of what makes a person's presentation deviant or different but also exploring the value that different bodies are assigned within their historical, social, political and religious milieu, based on certain norms. A socio-cultural model of disability recognises that certain characteristics are used to represent a person's place within a certain social framework.²⁵

As a cultural construct therefore, disability contributes to the generation and maintenance of inequality.²⁶ While quantitative differences in physical and mental functionality are a reality, the meaning assigned to these differences is what makes them significant. The negative effect of disability according to this model (which is utilised here) involves the social meaning and significance attributed to the perceived condition or state of the affected person in the

²³ Some scholars have proposed a distinction between social and cultural conceptions of disability. For example, social models are viewed as dealing with social discrimination against those with impairments and cultural models are viewed as dealing with disability as a product of the way that cultures use differences to understand the world. I incorporate aspects of both models here but draw more directly from cultural models. For a brief discussion of the differences, see Chelcent Fuad, "Priestly Disability and the Centralization of the Cult in the Holiness Code," *JSOT* 46/3 (2022): 291–293.

²⁴ Disability is defined broadly as "an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity"; Rosemary Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 13.

²⁵ Joel Estes, "Imperfection in Paradise: Reading Genesis 2 through the Lens of Disability and a Theology of Limits," *HBT* 38 (2016): 3.

²⁶ This is axiomatic within disability studies as an academic field of inquiry. Culturally and historically, humans have organised societies in such a way that there is often antagonism towards difference. For a fuller discussion on disability in and inequality, see Lennard Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

context.²⁷ As such, the model is not concerned with individual pathologies but with environmental barriers and thus it assumes that "it is the constrictions and inadequacies of society that disable the individual."²⁸ Rather than focusing on impairments which cause limitation in functioning, we speak instead of barriers which cause limitation in one's opportunity to participate in the life of the community on an equal level with others. As a result, we are concerned not with properties of bodies as much as we are about cultural rules about what bodies should be like. What is a "normal" (or "normate," as some scholars prefer²⁹) body is then a matter of subjective construction rather than objective reality and otherness is imposed from outside of a person rather than emerging from their abilities. Consequently, disability is probably best defined as a perceived deviation from a culturally defined normative state.³⁰ With that definition, we are better prepared to examine how such concepts can be analysed in ancient texts and how ideas of disabled bodies are related to notions of aesthetic beauty.

D DISABILITY, AESTHETICS AND THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES: A COMPLEX INTERACTION

As we approach how bodies are perceived in ancient texts, there is always the risk of anachronism since there is no term in antiquity that is equivalent to the modern concept of "disability." As a result, such terms will be used "in an open-ended way about people with non-standard bodies who possibly experienced restrictions on their ability to carry out everyday activities due to injury, disease, congenital malformation, aging or chronic illness, or whose appearance made

²⁷ See the discussion in Saul Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3. A socio-cultural understanding of disability has been critiqued as failing to take into account the real, individualised bodily experience of people with impairments. I do not consider the model appropriate in every context but I assume that it is most appropriate for the study of disabling experiences in ancient texts since we cannot access the lived experiences of the persons concerned but are analysing their literary representation.

²⁸ Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Literature* (ECL 23; Atlanta: SBL, 2018), 15.

²⁹ The term originated with Rosemary Garland-Thomson but is widely used now to indicate constructed concepts of bodily normativity, e.g. Kerry Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives," in *This Aabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 91–101.

³⁰ This corresponds with the definition offered by Joel Baden, "The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible," in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (ed. Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 14.

them liable to be singled out as different."³¹ As recent years have brought about further research on disability in the Hebrew Bible, there has been an increased appreciation for the complex ways that these ancient texts treat different bodies.³² Literary sources in antiquity do stigmatise different bodies but portrayals of disability do not always mean that a person with disability was relegated to isolation or helplessness. Ancient societies did have ideas about the "ideal" body but there were not really categories for able-bodied or disabled persons in antiquity; there was more of a continuum based on different factors.³³

What is key to understand is that representations of disability (ancient and modern) develop and express ideology.³⁴ Ironically, perhaps the most frequently depicted disabling condition in the Hebrew Bible is (female) infertility, which many contemporary readers would not consider a disability (given contemporary views of female social roles).³⁵ That infertility was treated as a disability is especially clear in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis but is certainly not limited to those texts.³⁶ Generally speaking, the Hebrew Bible treats women as

³¹ Anna Rebecca Solevåg, "Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke: Comic Figure, Sinner, and Included 'Other'," *JLCDS* 14/2 (2020): 227.

³² For helpful overviews of research on disability in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East, see Edgar Kellenberger, "Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Disability in Antiquity* (ed. Christian Laes; London: Routledge, 2016), 47–60; Kirsty Jones, "Disability in the Hebrew Bible: A Literature Review," *JDR* 25/4 (2021): 363–373.

³³ Katy Valentine, "Reading the Slave Girl of Acts 16:16–18 in Light of Enslavement and Disability," *Biblical Interpretation* 26 (2018): 353.

³⁴ Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 4, notes that representations of disability "function themselves to mold patterns of thought among those for whom they are intended ... representations of disability must have played a part in the creation and shaping of social categories and therefore, social differentiation in ancient Israel."

³⁵ This is consistent throughout ancient Near Eastern societies and not only in Israel. For example, the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninmah includes infertile women among its list of non-normative humans and the Atrahasis Epic includes infertile women as part of what restrained population growth after the flood. See Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (LOTS 445; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 54; Neal Walls, "The Origin of the Disabled Body: Disability in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *This Aabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 13–30 (27); Melcher, "Disability and the Hebrew Bible," 10; Louise Gosbell, *The Poor, the Crippled, the Blind, and the Lame: Physical and Sensory Disability in the Gospels of the New Testament* (WUNT 2/469; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 154.

³⁶ Such themes are also found in the Deuteronomistic History, for example (cf. Michal, one of David's wives).

though their wombs were naturally closed and needed to be opened by YHWH.³⁷ This is an example of representations of disability expressing ideology in the sense that the trend served to spiritualise an already stigmatising experience, which can be considered “disabling” because of the cultural expectation that women should be mothers. In the sense that women were expected to be able to fulfil this role, to be unable to conceive children was akin to being (physically) impaired. A non-conceiving woman could participate in society in more ways than a deaf or mute person but they were still viewed as having an “incorrectly” functioning body and could not fulfil their perceived role. In almost any instance of disability (not only infertility), “there is always an assumption of divine intervention or intentionality in disabled life.”³⁸ In texts associated with the Yahwist in particular (such as Exod 4:11), disability is considered part of YHWH’s intended creation.³⁹ For that reason, disabling conditions are not always stigmatising in Yahwistic narratives and do not always result in a lack of status but can ironically and subversively distinguish the affected person, as we will see in the case with Leah.

1 Aesthetics, Ugliness and Beauty—Approaching Leah

In order to suggest that Leah was considered physically undesirable, a brief foray into aesthetics is necessary for us to understand what may have been considered beautiful in the Yahwist’s context. Different cultures certainly viewed desirability and beauty differently.⁴⁰ Therefore, I would like to propose what an ancient pre-exilic Israelite writer in particular may have considered appealing based on the (admittedly scant and circumstantial) material we find across the Hebrew Scriptures. Perceptions of beauty and/or physical wholeness in some cultures (as necessarily subjective as they are) could be considered a mark of divine favour, while perceived ugliness or defects could be viewed as the opposite.⁴¹ Although a few recent studies have examined concepts of beauty or attractiveness in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel, very few scholars have

³⁷ This is a key point in the helpful work by Candida Moss and Joel Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁸ Neal Walls, “The Origin of the Disabled Body,” 27.

³⁹ Wynn, “The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability,” 91. This could be contrasted with the Priestly view that disability is an aberration of the created order (cf. Lev 21:17–23).

⁴⁰ Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (2nd ed.; London: Bristol Classical, 2010), 2.

⁴¹ Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 2.

attempted to examine what ancient Israelites found unattractive or ugly and why they thought it to be such.

Drawing from the work of aesthetic philosopher Panos Paris, I propose that ancient Israelite culture had a deformity-related conception of undesirability or unattractiveness.⁴² That is, perceived deformity and personal displeasure "jointly suffice for ugliness."⁴³ Deformity here does not necessarily have to involve physical ability or a statistical deviation from a common standard (since ancient peoples could have understood non-deformed persons to be unattractive) but Paris understands it as a deviation from teleological norms (set by the function of a thing or its end). That is, in this understanding:

Deformity = if an object, O's, form frustrates, inhibits, or hinders O from realizing its end(s), then O is deformed.⁴⁴

With this in mind, then, Paris concludes that:

For any object O, if O is (1) deformed and (2) displeases (good judges, under normal circumstances) insofar as its experience (in perception or contemplation) as (1), then O is ugly.⁴⁵

In the context of the Genesis patriarchal narratives, the end of a woman is motherhood; that is her highest aim in that context and it is from that perspective that we can understand Leah's "weak" appearance as unappealing to Jacob. Her appearance is unattractive because when compared to Rachel, her body is "deformed" in the sense that she is not viewed as being as strong or capable of motherhood. Although a physical problem with her eyes could also be considered a deformity (and thus unattractive) because it deviates from an expectation, as I have argued already, this is probably not the point that the narrator is trying to make. In his opinion, Leah's overall appearance makes her body seem less "motherly" and, to Jacob, this is a disabling defect. Although there is little in the Hebrew Bible itself to help us understand cultural ideas of desirability and there is always a possibility that the writer of Genesis had

⁴² Panos Paris, "The Deformity-Related Conception of Ugliness," *BJA* 57/2 (2017): 139–160.

⁴³ Paris, "The Deformity-Related Conception of Ugliness," 139. In developing this concept, Paris draws on the work of Frank Sibley, "Some Notes on Ugliness," in *Approach to Aesthetics* (ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern and Jeremy Roxbee Cox; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 191–207.

⁴⁴ Paris, "The Deformity-Related Conception of Ugliness," 146.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

different views about beauty from those of the surrounding culture, we can at least make these educated guesses.⁴⁶

Later Hebrew Bible texts seem to back up the idea of beauty as being without defect. Songs 4:7 is a prime example—the writer separates the female subject into a different category from other women by saying that she is ‘without defect’ and thus beautiful.⁴⁷ While the subject’s eyes are mentioned in that text, the text describes the whole body and it is the wholly perfect *whole* body which is key to the author’s idea of beauty. Other important figures such as David (1 Sam 16:12) and Moses (Exod 2:2; cf. Acts 7:20) are described in a way that considers the flawless appearance as especially attractive. In texts like Songs 4:2, the fact that nothing is missing from the appearance (such as a missing tooth) is considered a component of the person’s beauty since there is no defect (or lack when compared with others).⁴⁸ It also must be said that beauty in ancient Israelite culture did not so much evoke transcendence as it does today but it entailed what is pleasing, lively and strong.⁴⁹ This is key to understanding why the “weak” descriptor for Leah is set alongside the pleasing form and appearance of Rachel and key to understanding why so many interpreters of Gen 29:17

⁴⁶ For a full-length treatment of the concept of beauty in ancient Jewish literature, see the helpful work by Joanna Vitale, “A Comparative Analysis of Depictions of Female Beauty in the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” PhD Dissertation (University of Oxford, 2015). See also the comments in Jon Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body and the Household in Ancient Israel* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 24–27. Berquist notes that what we can discern from the Hebrew Bible is that there was “a perception of the body as something that should be whole in order to be a true body” (27). That is, a body that was considered complete and without defect would be desirable. Vayntrub likewise argues that totalising descriptions are key to ancient Israelite ideas of beauty and that “it is clear that there exists a ‘perfection’ or a ‘blemish-free’ dimension to beauty as it is described in Biblical literature”; Jacqueline Vayntrub, “Beauty, Wisdom and Handiwork in Proverbs 31:10–31,” *HTR* 113/1 (2020): 49. Later Rabbinic texts also seem to have a defect-oriented concept of undesirability; see Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 66b.

⁴⁷ Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 5.

⁴⁸ An appearance of symmetry was a generally reliable contributor to attractiveness in antiquity, as in ancient Greece, for example. See Martha Edwards, “Constructions of Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World: The Community Concept,” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (ed. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 42–43. See also Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, 49, who assumes that beauty in the Hebrew Bible is closely related to an absence of blemish, meaning that undesirability is related to the idea of being blemished or defective in some ways.

⁴⁹ Penchansky, “Beauty, Power, and Attraction,” 48.

consider *rakkot* to convey dullness or lustrelessness. The English term for beauty simply has no direct Hebrew translation; the term typically translated "beauty" is יָפֵה and this term can refer to men, women, YHWH or even Israel's cult and there is thus nothing particularly feminising in the term (which appears rather broad). In Israel's Scriptures, beauty is often a feature of those with power. As Penchansky puts it, "David's beautiful eyes manifest his power over other people (while) Leah's weak eyes signify her powerlessness."⁵⁰ As Jacqueline Vayntrub also has argued, there is some evidence from the ancient Near East that a woman's physical appearance was described indirectly using non-physical characteristics or outcomes for the woman's behaviour (as in one Akkadian text which describes the size of a woman's body parts as key to whether or not she will run her household well).⁵¹ What is key to note here, though, is that in ancient Israel, there was conceptual overlap between defect and aesthetic appeal and this overlap can help inform our reading of Leah's situation.

Given the above views, we can now approach the discussion of Leah's appearance beyond the medical model of disability, that is, from the perspective that Leah is likely not deformed or disabled in a physical sense. However, when the narrator compares her with Rachel, her inferior aesthetic appeal is treated as though it is a defect and in a narrative sense, it may as well be a physical disability. Approaching Leah's appearance through the socio-cultural model of disability (rather than the medical model) as a perceived defect allows us to broaden the scope of our understanding of valued bodies within the Genesis text by "drawing on a disability consciousness to interpret texts that do not ostensibly discuss disability or disability-related themes."⁵²

E YHWH AND THE SUBVERSION OF UNDESIRABILITY: LEAH'S REJECTION AND LEAH'S ACCEPTANCE

I have argued thus far that the narrator of Genesis does not portray Leah's eyes as deformed or defective but instead portrays her as undesirable to Jacob (and probably to Laban as well, given his desire to deceive Jacob into marrying her), portraying this aesthetic undesirability as though it were a defect. Given anxieties surrounding infertility in the ancient Near East,⁵³ the author probably understands that men find women more desirable if they appear more likely to

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵¹ Vayntrub, "Beauty, Wisdom and Handiwork," 47.

⁵² Frederick Carr, "Paul, Cochlear Implantation, and Biblical Interpretation: Expanding the Scope of Disability Hermeneutics," *Biblical Interpretation* 31 (2023): 218.

⁵³ De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an*, 25–26.

secure children and thus portrays Leah as unappealing in this regard because of how Jacob perceives her appearance. In this sense, although she is not portrayed as medically disabled, Leah's undesirability is treated *as though it were* a disability and her appearance becomes for the narrative a (socially) disabling defect.⁵⁴ Since conceptualisations of disability often involve functional limitations, Jacob may have viewed Leah as "functionally limited" in the sense that she appeared unlikely to be fertile based on her appearance. Jacob thus makes a judgment about Leah's worth as a person compared to her sister.⁵⁵ Leah is undesired and therefore constantly compared with her sister. Nonetheless, by Leah's repeated pregnancies, YHWH subverts her undesirability and, in effect, disables Rachel by denying her pregnancy and overcomes Leah's perceived defect by favouring her as a mother.

Scholars who have studied the portrayals of disability in literature have noted that authors like the narrator of the Jacob Cycle often use disability as a literary device to advance the plot. This is known as "narrative prosthesis," an idea coined by Mitchell and Snyder to refer to the way that a character's disability is usually erased or overcome as an attempt to resolve a conflict in the narrative.⁵⁶ I suggest that, for the author of Genesis, this idea is key to his understanding of Leah as a triumphant rather than a tragic character. Technically, Leah's undesirability is never resolved in the narrative but the ironic way that YHWH subverts Jacob's desire by having Leah bear most of his children serves as a way to "overcome" her disabling condition by fulfilling the purpose for which the author and his culture assigned to her – being a mother. Rachel, on the other hand, though desirable, is (mostly) kept from conceiving and thus, in a narrative sense, is actually the sister who ends up being disabled. YHWH desires Leah when Jacob does not, indicating that YHWH sees something in Leah that Jacob (perhaps the one with the truly "weak" eyes) cannot see. In that way, the narrator uses her undesirability as a narrative

⁵⁴ Recently, scholars following social and cultural models of disability have noted that other physical qualities which may be considered undesirable could be considered similar to disabilities. See, for example, a recent argument that short stature could be viewed this way by Isaac Soon, *The Disabled Apostle: Disability and Impairment in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 187–201. Short stature is not a disabling function medically but it could be considered to be culturally or socially limiting in the sense that a shorter person may not have aligned with culture or social expectations.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of how appearance relates to perceived disability, see David Anderson, "Beauty and Disability," *IJCE* 19/3 (2015): 182–196.

⁵⁶ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 47–57.

prosthesis which points to YHWH as the ultimate sovereign actor and subverter and Leah's rejection eventually leads to her acceptance and her unfavoured status to Jacob is overtaken by her favoured status to YHWH.

The subversion of undesirability and the sovereign, history-shaping power of YHWH is key to the artistry of the author of Genesis. The author, being eminently concerned with the idea of divine election, shapes the Jacob Cycle deliberately to overshadow human ability to produce the designed divine end. His employment of creative reversals is indeed a statement about the power of YHWH who accepts the rejected woman and chooses the unchosen mother. Even though Leah's legacy is thus vindicated retrospectively, she remains a tragic character who is consigned to a lifetime of being considered defective. As Julia Belser puts it, "the rhetoric of defectiveness has been used time and time again as part of the architecture of disenfranchisement."⁵⁷ Since neither Leah nor Rachel has any agency or choice of their own in being Jacob's partner, there is a sense that the deck is already stacked against Leah in terms of privilege and power and her gender itself is part of the architecture of disenfranchisement working against her in the narrative. As a male in a patriarchal context, Jacob's appearance was not considered a relevant factor by which his worthiness would be judged by others but Leah's womanhood is the key factor in what makes her undesirability disabling. Rachel faces the reproach of infertility but she does not face exclusion and shame in the same way as her sister who must have her value and worth restored through the agency of YHWH.⁵⁸

While at the end of her life Leah is buried with Jacob, toward the end of the Jacob Cycle itself readers can perceive a change in Leah following the birth of several of her sons. In the naming of her first three sons, Leah yearns for Jacob's desire and love and credits the births to YHWH's intervention because of her rejection. After the birth of Levi, however, Leah's statements following childbearing change and do not focus as much on winning Jacob's affection. When Judah is born, unlike her statements after the births of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, Leah does not draw any attention to Jacob's view of her. Rather, she simply says, "this time I will praise YHWH" (Gen 29:35). Similarly, when Gad and Asher are born by Zilpah (Gen 30:9–13), Leah's statements are not focused on Jacob or his affections but on her own future (Gen 30:11) and on how she is perceived by other women (Gen 30:13). In my opinion, this indicates that Leah

⁵⁷ Belser, "Priestly Aesthetics," 357.

⁵⁸ On the reversals attributed to YHWH in the Jacob Cycle, see John Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2011): 87–129.

perceived her husband's rejection of her differently with time, given the favour shown to her by YHWH.

On the other hand, there appears to be no change in Jacob and Gen 30:14–24 implies that the situation may have gotten worse. The narrative about the mandrakes suggests that Jacob has simply begun withholding conjugal relations from Leah and thus ceases to treat her as a wife, given Leah's confrontation with him over the mandrakes.⁵⁹ If this is the case, it would be seen not only as an injustice to Leah but also as a way of further dishonouring her. The mention of the birth of Issachar as "wages" in Gen 30:18 seems to suggest that Leah was not being treated as a wife and was demanding fair treatment by Jacob, crediting his agreement to her continued divine favour. Finally, Leah again mentions Jacob at the birth of her sixth son Zebulun but this time she is concerned with her own honour rather than with his affections (Gen 30:20). By the time her only daughter is born, Leah no longer makes any prayers to YHWH for Jacob's attention.

F CONCLUSION

This study has argued that in the Jacob Cycle, Leah is portrayed as though she were physically disabled but the real problem is that she was physically undesirable. Contrary to what some interpreters have concluded, there is no physical problem with Leah's eyes or body but the narrator here refers to her physical appearance as being aesthetically unappealing. In the Yahwist's social and cultural context, this probably involved a perception of her body as defective with respect to an expectation of motherly vitality, particularly when compared with Rachel. I have here demonstrated how this passage can be illuminated through the study of ancient conceptions of disability as well as notions of fertility and womanhood in antiquity, especially when considered alongside the contributions of aesthetic philosophy.

When disability is viewed as a construct within its context, the narrator can be understood as portraying Leah's undesirability as a disabling condition. Through the agency of Jacob, Leah's appearance has the function of limiting her and contributing to the conflict that dominates the Jacob Cycle. Ultimately, YHWH must intervene in order to overcome Leah's limitation.

Through this study, readers may be better prepared to appreciate Leah's character as a case study in contrasts. The narrator of the Jacob Cycle gives her no agency yet through divine agency she exerts enormous influence. Her identity is constantly assessed only relative to her sister, whose flawless desirability

⁵⁹ Arnold, *Genesis*, 270.

effectively renders Leah defective in the eyes of Jacob, who treats her as though she were disabled. Although Leah's triumphs through her motherhood, her story remains tragic because it is never her own story; she is repeatedly eclipsed by her sister who ironically cannot fulfil the maternal role expected of her in her patriarchal context. Rachel cannot fulfil her culturally presumed "function" as a woman and Leah cannot bring fulfilment to Jacob and remains unfulfilled herself, a character who requires YHWH's subversive actions in order to be seen and valued as a whole person. There is no indication in the Jacob Cycle that Jacob ever warms to Leah. The narrative suggests that Leah's ultimate triumph is that she ultimately displaces Rachel. For, as Jacob nears death, he asks to lie by her side in the ancestral grave at Machpelah in Gen 49:31.⁶⁰ Thus, the tragedy of Leah, whose undesirability was treated as a disabling condition, becomes the tragedy of Rachel who is desired but unable to fulfil her role as a woman and succumbs to infertility – the chief disabling condition of the Genesis narratives. Although Rachel gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin, Leah's six biological sons, two "adoptive" sons and one daughter set her apart positively in the end – the one who was set aside negatively in the beginning.

The divine subversion and reversals in the narrative suggest that the author did not necessarily consider disabilities to be negative or as a deviation from divine intention (as the Priestly writer probably did) but as key to his narrative and as part of YHWH's design as well as conditions that YHWH brings about or resolves. Additionally, by highlighting Leah's vulnerability, the author proffers a subtle critique of Jacob's favouring of Rachel for her beauty and suggests that the author did not necessarily believe that desirability was a sign of divine favour.⁶¹ Just as YHWH overcomes the "natural" state of infertility common to the Yahwistic narratives, he also overcomes Leah's undesirability which, without such intervention, would have disabled Leah and kept her from fulfilling her cultural role. That which should have disabled Leah thus becomes the reason for her favoured status and her rejection becomes her acceptance. For the author, then, Leah's disabling condition illustrates YHWH as sovereign behind the scenes, upending the expected outcome.⁶²

⁶⁰ Rachel Adelman, *The Female Ruse: Women's Deception and Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible* (HBM 74; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 52.

⁶¹ Vitale, "A Comparative Analysis," 208.

⁶² As Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*, 132, puts it, "Disability plays a significant, perhaps even indispensable role in the Hebrew Bible's articulation of God's power and holiness and Israel's election. The Genesis through-narrative intertwines the concepts of God's power and Israel's election with disabled figures. Nor is disability an incidental thread

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in this tapestry: God's power depends, for its representation, on the disabled human figures. The recurring motif of the barren woman who bears represents a God with power over the human (female) body, also involves God's self in the propagation of the elected line. The various plays on male blindness and sightedness also serve to make room ... for the divine, rather than human, selection of the important son. This is not to say that Genesis shows God choosing or favouring disabled persons, but rather that being chosen by God disables precisely because the human bodies must show God to be powerful.”

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