

*SENSE AND
STIGMA IN THE
GOSPELS*

Depictions of
Sensory-Disabled
Characters

LOUISE J. LAWRENCE

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
Introduction: Sense and Stigma	i
Embodiment and Performance	3
Disability Studies	3
Sensory Anthropology	5
Overview of Book	7
1. Looking through a Glass Darkly: Sensing Disabilities of Biblical Studies	10
The Senses in Biblical Studies	11
Biblical Studies: A ‘Sight-Centric’ and ‘Textocentric’ Discipline	16
A Sensory Profiling of Biblical Studies: Disabilities and Possibilities	22
Language and Metaphors	25
Artefacts, Aesthetics, and Media of Communication	27
Biblical Studies: Disabilities and Possibilities	29
2. Blind Spots and Metaphors: Refiguring Sightless Characters in the Gospels	31
Blindness as a Metaphorical Tool of Rejection	32
Corporeal Metaphors: Illness and Disability	36
The Metaphor’s Referent: Sightlessness, Stereotypes, and Stigma	39
Biographical Insights from Blind Interpreters	41
Transgressive Reappropriation of Blind Characters	47
Disabling Eye sight	48
Resistant Touch and More Reciprocal Relationships	51
Blind Spots and Metaphors: Refiguring Sightless Characters in the Gospels	54
3. Sounding Out a ‘Deaf-Mute’: Mark 7: 31–37 as Deaf World Performance	57
The Silencing of the ‘Deaf-Mute’ in Biblical Studies	59

viii *Contents*

Deaf World Arts: Subverting Audism and Cultivating a 'Third Ear'	63
Aaron Williamson's 'Phantom Shifts'	67
Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner's 'I Am Ordered Now to Talk'	71
Sounding Out a 'Deaf-Mute'	74
4. The Stench of Untouchability: Sensory Tactics of a Leper, Legion, and Leaky Woman	76
The Leper, Legion, and Leaky Woman as 'Untouchables'	78
The Stench of Untouchability	83
Stinking Humiliation: The Sensory Tactics of the Leper	87
Dirty Protest and Naked Ambition: The Sensory Tactics of Legion	90
Seeping Bodies: The Leaky Woman's Sensory Tactics	94
Untouchability and Sensory Tactics	96
5. Sense, Seizures, and Illness Narratives: The Case of an 'Epileptic'/'Demon-Possessed, Boy'	98
Diagnosis and Exegesis: The Boy with Seizures	103
Medical Anthropology and Storytelling	110
Refiguring the Story of the Boy with Seizures: Chaos and Quest	112
Sense, Seizures, and Illness Narratives	122
Conclusion: 'Sensory-Disabled' Characters Refiguring God	124
Challenging the Binary: Ability and Disability	125
'Sensory-Disabled' Characters Refigured	127
Refiguring Jesus and God	129
<i>Notes</i>	133
<i>Works Cited</i>	167
<i>Index to Sense and Stigma in the Gospels</i>	187
<i>Index to Biblical and Other Ancient Texts</i>	193

Introduction: Sense and Stigma

How one ‘senses’—engages with and understands the world—has deep ramifications for not only one’s personal identity but also how one is regarded and treated by others. Those who are perceived to lack particular dimensions of sensory experience are frequently branded as ‘disabled’ in one way or another. In the pages of the gospels, characters with sensory ‘disabilities’¹ are curiously ‘everywhere’ and ‘nowhere’. ‘Everywhere’ in the sense that those who are deaf, blind, untouchable, and ‘out of their senses’ in demon-possessed states form the numerous stock props in tales of messianic healings; but ‘nowhere’ in that no meaningful identity, agency, or complexity is attributed to them beyond formulaic and flat character traits. In such processes, these characters are literally defaced: ‘marked, marginalized, and muted...on the basis of bodily difference’.² As a result, biblical scholars have understood characters with sensory disabilities either as nothing more than objectified beneficiaries of divine healing or, in contrast, ‘defiled evildoer[s]’³ in need of physical and spiritual therapy. In both cases, the characters are not important in themselves, but only as part of the larger plot or theological schema in which they feature. Indeed through healings these characters’ sensory disabilities are often expediently eliminated from the narrative stage. Their sensory ‘abnormalities’ and the chaos they respectively represent, are quelled, subdued, and normalized.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s thesis that characters with disabilities frequently function within literary texts as cultural ‘others’, the anti-types of social norms, is particularly relevant in this respect. An able body ‘still largely masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things’⁴ and thus passes without comment, whereas the disabled body stands out as odd, problematic, and needing to be reckoned

2 *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels*

with.⁵ This certainly rings true in relation to such characters in the gospels. Their sensory disability encapsulates their identity and marks them out as 'deviant', excluding them from participation in realms in which 'normal' others are more openly incorporated. As a result their condition regularly features as the subject of metaphorical discourses used to denigrate and reject certain persons, ideologies, and beliefs.

Erving Goffman was particularly sensitive to the ways in which the perception of deviance from a 'norm' marked out an individual or group as stigmatized and evoked negative and castigatory reactions from others. The stigmatized individual was 'reduced...from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one'.⁶ Moreover, these destructive correlations were internalized by the stigmatized, and interactions with 'normals' were accordingly adjusted: many chose to conceal their irregular features, others fled and isolated themselves to avoid enduring more shame, and only a few fought to aggressively dispute the stigma imposed upon them. As Thomas Reynolds explains, 'stigma is not the property of an individual body but rather the result of complex social projections that represent bodies, lumping them into general stereotypes insofar as they display undesired qualities'.⁷ Whilst Goffman's thesis has since been criticized for its lack of interest in the dynamics of power and the stigmatized subject's forms of resistance, his overall thesis that stigma is an applied 'deviant identity' manifested and performed in social exchanges, rather than a static condition dependent on biomedical factors, continues to be largely influential.

In this book I will initiate a variety of interdisciplinary dialogues with disability studies and sensory anthropology in a quest to refigure characters with sensory disabilities featured in the gospels and provide alternative interpretations of their conditions and social interactions. In each instance I will try to reclaim the identity of those stigmatized as 'other' (according to particular physiological, social, and cultural 'norms') by exploring ethnographic accounts which document the stories of those experiencing similar rejection on account of perceived sensory 'difference' in diverse cross-cultural settings. Through this process these 'disabled' characters will be recast as individuals capable of employing strategies to destabilize the stigma imposed upon them and tactical performers who can subversively achieve their social goals. By way of introduction here I briefly lay

out the disciplinary terrains I will be exploring: 'Embodiment and Performance', 'Disability Studies', and 'Sensory Anthropology'.

Embodiment and Performance

Embodiment and performance will be two central concepts to 'think with' throughout this book. 'Making sense' is a bodily, fleshly and emergent process, played out by individuals and groups, from one situation to another. Thus sensory perception is 'not passive...but *acts* that shape a sense of bodily self and ground that sense of self into experienced and re-livable sensations'.⁸ Indeed even when stereotypical traits are employed within biblical literature, one can still question, through sustained engagement with particular narratives, how characters variously impact, echo, or resist the dominant cultural consciousness of the text in which they appear. Such considerations challenge the essentialist binary of 'normal' and 'disabled' which is often tritely rehearsed. For as Petra Kuppers states, 'there is no pure body, no pure self, no pure social world, and a theory of touching and texture which acknowledges the positionality and interweaving of knowledge is called for'.⁹

Performance studies likewise understands categories such as gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and latterly disability not as a 'static fact of the body'¹⁰ but rather a purposefully enacted role-play. As such the performer herself is not a 'passive specimen on display' but rather 'an active maker of meaning'.¹¹ Performance is at base a verb not a noun and as such it signifies 'what one does' rather than 'what one is'.¹² In this respect, performance takes seriously the ways in which individuals can influence, control, and tactically convert the stereotypes and stigmas so 'deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination',¹³ notwithstanding the fact that alternative models may seem, at first sight, exasperatingly limited.

Disability Studies

Lennard Davis declared in 1997 that 'Disability Studies is a field of study whose time has come'.¹⁴ Now, over a decade later, disability perspectives are fully established and used in history, politics, social science, literary studies, and more recently, biblical interpretation.

4 *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels*

Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper's landmark work, *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (2007) offers the following definition of the aims of a disability-critical standpoint:

Disability studies foregrounds an awareness of how the particular discourse(s) one uses (including theological, medical, social-scientific discourses and so on) influences the way in which one conceptualizes the term 'disability'. This approach draws on the tools of various disciplines to examine how social, literary and institutional discourses produce and represent a conception of disability...such scholarship opens up the study of disability as a subject of critical enquiry. It promotes the need for critical theorization of disability just as scholars in the humanities and social sciences have critically theorized race, gender, sexuality and other identity markers.¹⁵

Three models of disability are frequently cited within the literature. First is the medical perspective, which views a disability as a functional or biological defect in a body which is in need of diagnosis and treatment.¹⁶ Of course the biomedical model is culturally remote from the biblical world, which tends to view disability not primarily as pathology but rather, in the words of Jeremy Schipper, as a 'social, political, cultic, sexual, moral, theological, or military issue'.¹⁷ Second is the social model of disability which does not primarily view a physical 'impairment' as disabling, but rather the social context the individual inhabits. The social model unveils the 'ableist' discrimination which is encoded in social, religious, and environmental structures disallowing certain individuals' full participation in their communities. This model has been the most dominant paradigm in biblical studies hitherto. Its weakness is the exclusion of the actual experiences of people with 'disabilities' within its considerations. Third is the cultural or 'minority group' model which takes seriously the views of those labelled as disabled and seeks to get an 'insider' view of complex personal identities and shared rich sub-cultural heritages. In Gill Green's terms it is this perspective which most readily holds promise for the transformation of stigma. In her opinion,

We are witnessing a realignment of social relationships—the old order in which the sick and disabled are disempowered and marginalized is being replaced by a world characterized by their increasing confidence and reassertion of their personhood. In contrast to the traditional notion of a long-term condition defining a person and their identity, people living with long term

conditions are increasingly resisting such labels and are actively defining their illness in relation to who they are.¹⁸

Of course, in biblical studies we are dealing with ancient and alien cultural evidence which does not seem to document the experience or autobiographies of those it deems 'disabled'. That is not to say however, that, what Mark Osteen terms 'an empathetic scholarship'¹⁹ is a theoretical impossibility. We can imaginatively speak *with*, rather than *for* those who cannot speak for themselves, by immersing ourselves in the experiences and stories of those in other cross-cultural settings who have experienced similar marginalization on account of their perceived sensory disabilities. Sensory anthropology seems one particularly promising disciplinary context to explore in this respect.

Sensory Anthropology

There has, in the last decade, been what some regard as a 'sensual revolution' in the arts and humanities.²⁰ Largely based on insights from sensory anthropology, this transformation has hailed the senses not as given biological phenomena, but rather as cultural constructs, dynamic and fluid, enacted and performed. David Howes accordingly submits that 'sensation is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression, the medium through which all values and practices of society are enacted.'²¹ Thus social hierarchies, structures, race, gender, class and social norms are all 'learned' through the senses.

Sensory anthropology not only reveals the social construction of sensory models but also that cross-culturally functional competencies may be valued very differently; indeed a characteristic is only conceived as a deficiency or disability in those situations in which an alternative dominant model is operative. Constance Classen illustrates the cultural relativity of sensory frameworks when she states:

When we examine the meanings associated with various sensory faculties and sensations in different cultures we find a cornucopia of potent sensory symbolism. Sight may be linked to reason or to witchcraft, taste may be used...for sexual experience, an odour may signify...social exclusion. Together these sensory meanings and values form the sensory models used by a society, according to which the members of that society 'make sense of'

6 *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels*

the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular 'worldview'. There will likely be challenges to this model from within a society, persons or groups who differ on certain sensory values, yet this model will provide the basic perceptual paradigm to be followed or resisted.²²

Howes and Classen have accordingly offered pointers in approaching the 'sensorium'—'the sensory apparatus or faculties considered as a whole'²³—operative in different cultural contexts. Here I flesh their categories in reference to sensory disability as outlined by Elizabeth Keating and Neil Hadder in their cross-cultural work on this theme.²⁴

- (a) The sensorium which a Euro-centric cultural approach promotes (an Aristotelian five-fold model of the senses in which sight is highly valued) is not necessarily the model that other cultures share. Moreover, who and what is considered 'abnormal', 'deficient', 'dangerous', or 'other' is different in different cultures. For example, the Hausa of Nigeria mark two senses, sight and experience (which includes emotion and intuition along with smell, hearing, touch), but celebrate taste in particular. In this context the loss of 'taste' would be particularly serious though other sensory losses may not necessarily be viewed as 'disabling' to such an extent.
- (b) The sensory priorities and relationships shared (intersensoriality) between senses within a specific cultural context need to be considered carefully. For instance, the Columbian Desana where smell is central, talk about the 'odour' of music, thus showing an alternative sensory perception to 'hearing'. Similarly, persons with sensory disabilities may share sensory discourses, but the actual perception may be markedly different. For example musical vibrations would be 'felt' by a person who could hear as well as a person with hearing impairments. However the former would also experience 'audio', whereas for the latter, vibration would constitute the sound of the music. Also, whilst a particular sense may be celebrated in one culture, another sense may be conceived as dangerous. Howes and Classen use the example of vision in Islamic societies where the suppression of the visual ensuing from aniconic norms which prohibit visual displays of God or creation correspondingly leads to evil eye accusations, which 'would seem to be designed to emphasize hearing (and obeying or "submitting" to) the *word* of God'.²⁵

- (c) Senses which are used widely for functional purposes may hold different sorts of symbolic capital within particular cultural contexts. Howes and Classen note that some sensory data enshrined in language or myth and ritual may actually be remnants from previously held sensory frameworks. They cite Cheever Mackenzie-Brown's work on Hinduism as an example of a context in which sight and vision eclipsed hearing as the predominant sensory medium to experience Hindu scriptures. In some instances, of course, knowledge of previous sensorial orders may be lacking, so one can only imaginatively reconstruct what one sensory register may be building upon, or reacting to.
- (d) Sensory models are not constant and unchanging, but rather fluid and dynamic. They adopt and adapt over time within different circumstances, social hierarchies, and contexts. Likewise sensory disabilities are only considered as such in contexts in which particular individuals or groups are marginalized or excluded from full participation. Martha's Vineyard, an island south of Cape Cod in Massachusetts, famously has a high incidence of genetic deafness. This lessened and rendered invisible the distinction between hearing and deaf as most inhabitants could communicate in sign language.²⁶

In many ways sensory anthropology takes seriously the challenge set by the cultural or minority group model in disability studies. Namely, it does not disparage alternative ways of knowing, including those performed by individuals with different cultural sensory perceptions, nor does it judge those epistemologies by ableist Euro-centric principles. Anthropology's main strength has always been to empathize and share the space of 'the other' in order to gain an insider's view of particular cultural experiences and perceptions; such insights are crucial in imaginatively sharing a space with characters with sensory 'disabilities' in ancient texts such as the gospels.

Overview of Book

The main aim of the following chapters is to refigure various 'sensory-disabled' characters from a disability consciousness perspective, informed particularly by ethnographic studies; this hopefully will allow some of their strategies, agencies, and identities, which are so

often lost behind a label of 'disability', to come to the fore. The first chapter conducts not only a review of works which have taken the 'senses' in biblical traditions as their main theme, but also a disciplinary profile of biblical studies in which its eye-centricity and textocentrism is exposed. Pointers for reimagining the exegetical task in accord with other sensory frameworks, particularly as these are evidenced by the 'sensory-disabled', are proposed.²⁷

Each subsequent chapter takes as its focus particular characters with sensory disabilities. Chapter 2 explores the metaphorical symbolization of blindness as spiritual darkness and sin. It also 'unveils' the use of blind characters as props in various indirect characterizations of Peter, the disciples, and the Jewish leaders. In imaginatively refiguring these negative associations, biographical material from the sightless/'blind' is used to question the centrality of the eye and its epistemological stability and reinstate the importance of sound and touch in renegotiating social hierarchies.

Chapter 3 reimagines the interaction between Jesus and a 'deaf mute' not as the fulfilment of Isaiah's 'audio-centric' messianic prophecy (Isa. 35: 5–6), but rather a subversive and evocative performance of Deaf World Arts which disrupts any neat equivalence between hearing, spoken words, and knowledge.

Chapter 4 creatively reads characters that are subject to haptic (sense of touch) and olfactory (sense of smell) censure within the gospels alongside ethnographic studies of untouchable groups in India. It is the 'stench' (both physical and ideological) of pollution which ironically arms them with 'poisoned weapons' which they use tactically to question the oppressive systems which mark them out as not-touch-able.

Chapter 5 utilizes ethnographic evidence of the narrative dynamics of seizure events to reconceptualize the incident as a strategic, multi-dimensional illness narrative in which not only the boy and his father, but also the crowd, disciples, and Jesus have key roles to play. Finally, in conclusion, some attention is given to how the interpretations in this book could refigure understandings of God and Jesus through a 'sensory disability' consciousness and deconstruct the abled/disabled binary so common in contemporary discourse.

Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper identify three main ways in which biblical scholars can approach biblical texts concerning disability.²⁸

First, there are 'redemptionist' approaches in which a biblical text is 'redeemed' for modern application and 'rescue[d]...from the misinterpretations of modern scholars with normate views'. Second, a 'rejectionist' approach unveils culturally distant and negative portrayals of disability which should not in any way 'provide normate values today'. Third are 'historicist' methodologies, in which ideological landscapes of the history and interpretation of disability in the Bible are unveiled. Whilst selected elements drawn from these approaches will be evident in my own discussions, I do not favour a monolithic perspective or interpretive agenda which could easily be aligned with rejectionist, reformist, or historicist positions. Rather I wish to imaginatively and creatively bring together inter-disciplinary perspectives drawn from sensory anthropology and disability studies, to offer not only salutary exposés of oppressive interpretations of characters with sensory disabilities, but also at times new and cathartic interpretations which reconfigure the profiles of these flat and often silent characters in fresh and innovative ways. These novel readings will not only emphasize new dimensions of sensory-disabled characters, but also help exegetes acknowledge their own sensorial biases and norms which have prejudiced their interpretations and closed off the means to engage with the multidimensional natures of other sensory worlds.

*Looking through a Glass
Darkly: Sensing Disabilities
of Biblical Studies*

Most biblical commentaries and monographs are, I suspect, written in hushed university libraries where sensory experiences beyond vision and texts are strictly prohibited. Cautionary signs read ‘Silence Must Be Observed At All Times’, ‘No Eating Or Drinking’, ‘No Running’, and in one notable case ‘No Offensive Body Odors’.¹ Academia it would seem can be quite ‘sniffy’ about the sensory. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records that ‘sense’ evokes a twofold meaning. First, a faculty through which bodies respond to an external stimulus; and second, a method of comprehension; literally the means by which one ‘make[s] sense of’ and interprets phenomena.² These channels of ‘making sense’ are of course never innocent. Quite the contrary, they can silence other ways of sensing including those employed on the margins of society. George Roeder, an American historian, bemoans a similar predicament in his own field when he links narrow sensory interests to perceptions of social hierarchies based on gender, race, class, and social status.³ He provocatively questions whether historians have overlooked sensory dimensions beyond the visual for some of the same snobbish reasons that well-mannered and ‘deodorized’ Western (white, male, able-bodied) elites find body odours distasteful:

Not the nation’s leaders, but their wives, used perfume. Not managers but manual labourers had the jobs and the living conditions most likely to give them body odor. Historians seldom sweat for their profession, and I think

of us as quite normal, rather than arrogant or malicious, when I note that we have sometimes taken pride in this, and this pride may have had some influence on how we regarded the historical role of sensory experience. This does not mean that most historians treated the sensory dimensions of history as they did because they thought this would help protect the existing social order. They wrote and taught as they did because sensory experience did not seem particularly pertinent to the study of political, economic, diplomatic, military and intellectual history, as traditionally defined.⁴

Mark Smith likewise gave voice to this trend when he bemoaned the fact that Western scholars have ‘tended to ignore the so-called “lower” senses...through a largely unconscious occularcentrist or retinaphilic “lens” which...has informed scholarly “perspective” and tethered rational truth to a stable, cool, authenticating eye’.⁵

In this initial chapter I do not seek to refigure a sensory-disabled character but rather refigure the character of biblical criticism and its ‘sense-making’ methodologies. My agenda is threefold: first, to offer a brief review of the handful of works in biblical studies which have taken the senses as their central theme. Second, to illustrate scholarly trends in biblical studies in which ‘sight-centricity’ is central and other sensory perceptions are largely bypassed. I will use as an example the ocular ‘honour and shame’ complex which has frequently been used to ‘look down upon’ those perceived as ‘other’, including the ‘sensory-disabled’. Sensory anthropology will be employed as a specific example of an alternative construction of these values. This sort of enquiry offers a distinct interpretation of the cultural construction of senses and associated sensory ‘disabilities’ in particular contexts. Third, I will initiate a general sensory-profile of the discipline of biblical studies and consider how this could be transformed with reference to a cultural consciousness model of disability. Contextual interpretation and recent work on embodiment and performance will be brought into conversation with groups and minority cultures perceived by mainstream biblical studies as ‘sensory-disabled’ in some way.

The Senses in Biblical Studies

Whilst Robert Jütte opens his magisterial study of the *History of the Senses from Antiquity to Cyberspace* (2005) with the statement that ‘interest in the body...[and] everyday culture...[means] senses are

back in fashion',⁶ it is true to say that in biblical studies this trend has not been largely followed. There are only a small number of studies which take 'the senses' as their central subject matter and among them, those which mention sensory disabilities, if they do so at all, do so rather cursorily.

Dorothy Lee for example has conducted a narrative survey of 'The Gospel of John and the Five Senses' to explore how the evangelist uses sensory symbolism to positively furnish his faith ideals.⁷ Many others have taken one particular sense and traced it in narrative terms through particular biblical passages or books. Isaac Kalimi for instance, has investigated the sense of sound as a literary trope which enables the reader to be transported from one location or context to another in traditions as diverse as the Joseph story, ark narrative, and throne succession accounts.⁸ Dominika Kurek-Chomycz has also employed a literary-theological methodology in her exploration of olfactory dimensions of 2 Corinthians 2: 14-16, linking the fragrance of the gospel to the cult of wisdom.⁹ She has also probed the tradition of the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany in the Gospel of John and contends that this character's fragrance is used to appropriate social order in John's world and thus functions as an important means to bolster her positive depiction.¹⁰ In such studies however, little consideration is given to the place of one sense *vis-à-vis* others. For example, is it an ideological accident that 'olfactory' imagery should be used in reference to a female (rather than male) character in John? How is smell or sound valued in comparison to touch, sight, or kinaesthesia ('awareness of the position and movement of the parts of the body by means of sensory organs in the muscles and joints')¹¹ in the biblical worlds surveyed?

Steven Weitzman, in his essay 'Sensory Reform in Deuteronomy', goes some way to considering the sensorium as a whole when he probes the 'training of the senses' in Deuteronomy.¹² In spite of the fact that Israel had heard God's words and seen his supernatural activity, they still did not fully 'make sense of' them (Deut. 29: 1-4). Thus, Weitzman proposes, Deuteronomy initiates 'an unprecedented attempt to reform through... "regimen of perception"—a set of practices by which to discipline, train and refocus Israel's senses'.¹³ Furthermore he suggests that Deuteronomy may be an example of the education of the senses long before Foucault would document

such processes: 'one that seeks to reshape how the self relates to the world by teaching the senses that mediate between them—the eyes, ears, and the tongue—to act in new ways'.¹⁴ Within this schooling of the senses, Weitzmann contends that sight is particularly policed in order that the memory of God's works may be cultivated and visible idols may be rejected.¹⁵

All the above studies to some degree replicate the Aristotelian five-fold Western models in their literary appropriations of the sensory. Ian Ritchie in his study of smell in Isaiah 11: 3 is a notable exception. He proposes that smell both as a means and metaphor of knowledge in the Hebrew Bible has often been sidelined in favour of sight or hearing.¹⁶ Building on his cross-cultural work in Africa, he takes to task both translators and commentators for obscuring olfactory cognition and simply assuming an Aristotelian hierarchy.

Taking such critiques seriously, Meier Malul in his *Knowledge, Control and Sex* (2002) accordingly abandoned a fivefold scheme and instead proposed an eightfold model of the senses: sight, hearing, speech, smell, taste, touch, mobility, and the sexual sense. In relation to the latter he states, 'the sex organs may be regarded as part and parcel of the human epistemic sensorial apparatus, besides such "classic" senses as sight, hearing, taste and smell, the sex organs coming closer to the tactile sense in their operation in the process of carnal knowledge...sexual activity would then be perceived as an epistemic activity as much as the activities of looking, hearing and touching'.¹⁷ For Malul, thinking in the Hebrew Bible should not be considered apart from specific physical embodiments, moreover, the pre-eminent sense throughout scriptural tradition is, he proposes, touch.¹⁸

Avalos's development of a so-called sensory criticism helpfully theorizes some of the prompts in both Weitzman's and Malul's work, in that rather than focusing on a preordained sensory model, or each sense individually, he designs a method whereby one can plot the ways in which biblical texts comparatively evaluate different senses and 'sensory disabilities'. Avalos maintains that differential privileging of senses can be detected by, among other methods, contrasting expressions of valuation, e.g. 'hearing is better than seeing', documenting 'expressions of antipathy toward particular senses', and identifying 'narratives about the performance of valued tasks and functions in the absence or diminution of certain senses'.¹⁹ Avalos's framework

allows biblical interpreters to achieve an enhanced understanding of how biblical authors portray and regard human embodiment and use it to forward particular political, social, and religious agendas; it can also go some way to perceiving the respective severity of sensory disabilities in particular contexts.

Avalos's work was the main inspiration behind my own recent plotting of a sense-scape of the Gospel of Mark.²⁰ I established that Mark was an audio-centric text. This likely reflects the reality and dependence on orality to communicate the gospel among Mark's audiences. His was a gospel that was primarily heard and not seen. Accordingly, the gravest sensory impairment within Mark's world was to be deaf and without speech, for speech itself should be considered as a sensory phenomenon in Mark's world. Sight, although statistically an important sense, was shown to give insufficient data to attain true insight. The audio-centric nature of Mark's sensorium may well have openly challenged 'visiocentric' forms of imperial propaganda prominent at the time.²¹

The only book-length project on senses in biblical traditions hitherto is Yael Avrahami's newly published PhD thesis from the University of Haifa, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (2012).²² Well versed in sensory anthropology,²³ Avrahami constructs a sevenfold sensory model from material in the Hebrew Bible: sight, hearing, kinaesthesia, speech, taste, touch, and smell. She notes how collectively this sensorium is used to furnish 'metaphors for life' and 'ability and sovereignty' within the texts she surveys²⁴ and how sensory disabilities are used to signify an inability to act or create life. Thus the powerful sensory disabling metaphors are used to castigate inanimate idols: 'the message is clear: creative abilities belong to God alone, God has created the senses and he is the source of ability'.²⁵

Opposing general statements that hearing must be central, due to aniconism and the centrality of law in Jewish history, she seeks to cut through sensory hierarchies, but states that 'if force[d] to choose a side in the age-old dispute of the supremacy of sight vs. hearing in biblical epistemology one must choose sight'.²⁶ This is based on her close reading of associative patterns within literary texts, where eyes and heart are frequently paired and used in reference to learning and education and where sight and smell are coupled in terms of moral judgement so much so that 'the appearance of blindness in

the context of the elderly [and] punishment creates an associative link between [these] and foolishness'.²⁷ Kinaesthesia and sight are also coupled in moral formation, for 'walking in the light' functions as a dominant metaphor for righteous following of commandments.²⁸

Avrahami does devote one small subsection in a chapter on 'Theology of the Senses' to sensory disability, or what she elsewhere terms 'non-functioning sensorium', as she believes these not only 'indicate lack of ability and lack of independence'²⁹ but also 'the absence of any real existence or power'³⁰ in the world of the Hebrew Bible. In Avrahami's view there are primarily two main complexes of knowledge which can be retrieved surrounding sensory disabilities. First, actual information about day-to-day difficulties of those 'who have been cast to the margins of society' in social, political, legal, and practical terms on account of their sensory lack or loss. Second, the prejudicial contexts in which sensory disabilities feature, namely divine punishment and rejection of opponents.³¹ Divine chastisement for example was often meted out through the senses (Deut. 28: 28–9) and warriors too sought to inflict physical damage on sense organs to indicate 'the loser's surrender and inferiority'.³² For Avrahami therefore, the lack of a particular sense can be nothing more than socially debilitating. No alternative sensory frameworks are proposed for such characters. Rather, the sensory-disabled are in effect rendered as 'non-persons', for 'like all marginalised people, they are betwixt and between, part person, part non-person, between life and death, between society and the outside'.³³

The works briefly surveyed here all take as pre-eminent a largely literary methodology in their survey of respective biblical presentations of the sensory and try in part to illustrate that social relationships and experiences are mediated through a variety of sensual means in biblical texts. Moreover, sense experience extends to both divinities and idols; the living and the dead and the embodied and disembodied. Whilst cumulatively providing important pointers for 'sensitizing' biblical scholarship to the senses, perhaps the overriding drawback of such approaches is that the observing 'eye' tends to flatten these literary texts into neat sensory compartments. A narrative-critical approach is after all, irrevocably bound to the visual medium of written and 'viewed' texts. Ian Ritchie's comments are apropos in this respect:

The bias of modern scholarship stems from the sensorial paradigm shift between the modern Western ‘worldview’ and the life world of the ancient Hebrews. The modern paradigm, Edward Said has so ably indicated in his work entitled *Orientalism*, is profoundly visualist and textualist. This paradigm assumes the priority of the visual mode of knowledge and equates seeing, especially the seeing of texts, with knowing. Modern discourse profoundly embeds this priority that the uses of non-visual senses, in connection with modes of knowing, are made to appear ‘non-sensical’.³⁴

Moreover, in reference to characters with sensory disabilities, such studies tend to stigmatize and alienate such individuals, attributing them with little or no agency and not attempting to flesh out their alternative sensory models and ‘ways of making sense’. Thus, the subversive social powers that these other sensory experiences may provide are also bypassed.

Biblical Studies: A ‘Sight-Centric’ and ‘Textocentric’ Discipline

Biblical studies is of course a ‘bookish’ industry; its primary evidence and focus are textual and literary, as illustrated by the methods of the studies perused hitherto. Over the last four decades however, there has been a growing interest in ‘fleshing out’ and ‘embodying’ understandings of biblical traditions through the adoption of various socio-cultural perspectives drawn from anthropology. Whilst the critical hub of such studies is not limited to textual evidence, but includes reconstructions of the social contexts of authors and/or recipients, still an ocular-centric and ‘wordy’ metaphor persists at the heart of the endeavour. Cultures are ‘seen’ as a textual phenomenon, and people and social movements are ‘read’ accordingly.³⁵ Deciphering a *world-view* often remains the dominant concern.

In recent years anthropology has itself had to confront its predominantly ‘visual’ and ‘textual’ bias to incorporate what Paul Stoller has termed a more ‘sensuous scholarship’.³⁶ This does not mean a plethora of studies which take ‘senses’ as their main topic (as reviewed above in biblical studies) but rather a methodology that sees senses as critical dimensions of all arenas of social life. Such perspectives seek to remember the fact that not all wisdom is spoken or written. Moreover, the agency and sensory perceptions of individuals differ according to

their placing in social hierarchies. As Dwight Conquerwood, an ethnographer who worked among refugees in South-East Asia and Gaza evocatively states, 'the white man researcher is a fool not because he values literacy, but because he valorized it to the exclusion of other media, other modes of knowing. I want to be very clear about this point: *textocentrism—not texts—is the problem*'.³⁷ Conquerwood sardonically contrasts the 'textual knowledge' of the Western scholar with the embodied 'local know-how' of community memory and practice when he states: 'it is the choice between science and "old wives' tales" (note how the disqualified knowledge is gendered as feminine)'.³⁸ He exposes the 'blind spots' of epistemologies which link knowing with sight alone and also unveils the domination of the textual over other 'unlettered' forms of meaning. He cites John and Jean Comaroff's ethnography of colonialism in South Africa as an example of how Tswana peoples exercised social agency extra-linguistically:

They excavate spaces of agency and struggle from everyday performance practices—clothing, gardening, healing, trading, worshipping, architecture, and homemaking—to reveal an impressive repertoire of conscious, creative, critical, contrapuntal responses to the imperialist project that exceeded the verbal. The Comaroffs intervene in an academically fashionable textual fundamentalism and fetish of the (verbal) archive where 'text—a sad proxy for life—becomes all'.³⁹

Sensory anthropology, a pursuit which itself grew out of a dissatisfaction with what Howes termed 'the incorporeality of conventional academic writing',⁴⁰ likewise encouraged anthropologists to engage more broadly with other sensory experiences (aural, kinaesthetic, dramatic, olfactory, and such like). Howes recounts how on ritual occasions, for example, much is consciously performed and communicated by multi-sensory media without words.⁴¹ Also, the cultures of the marginalized that often do not inhabit a visual space 'require gustation, listening, feeling, smelling, and other sensory attention to become evident'.⁴² Stoller similarly contends that in many African contexts wisdom is interpreted not in terms of 'reading' or 'writing' but rather physical ingestion: 'people are transformed through their internal digestive processes'.⁴³ For Stoller such understandings are significant, especially in the ethnographic accounts of cultures in which 'the Eurocentric notion of text and of textual interpretations—is not important'.⁴⁴

To give just one example where sight-centric and textocentric constructions have been adopted and utilized in social-scientific criticism of the Bible, let us consider the values of honour and shame. The adoption of cultural 'scripts' which try to identify dominant assumptions and values held by the cultures producing and receiving biblical texts have supposedly enabled biblical interpreters to consciously evade the hazards of ethnocentrism (judging all contexts from one's own cultural standpoint) and anachronism (chronological misplacement of ideas) within their work. It has also put embodied experiences at the heart of exegetical projects. Such approaches presuppose that biblical texts are 'high context' literature in which many elements are assumed to be self-evident by the author and original receivers (e.g. collectivistic, group-orientated, and anti-introspective elements) but when encountered in a different context may not be understood in quite the same way.⁴⁵

In reference to this book's theme, honour and shame are also two values which have often been employed as binary pairings to plot 'ability' and 'wholeness' (honour) as opposed to 'disability' and 'disintegration' (shame). Saul Olyan makes this point when he states that biblical depictions of disability are 'in part the product of the operations of a number of native dual oppositions...clean/unclean, honoured/shamed'.⁴⁶ Moreover these oppositions respectively mark 'discourses of valorisation and stigmatization'.⁴⁷ Avrahami similarly constructs the 'associative space' occupied between 'the vocabulary of sensory disability' and 'fear, shame and inferiority'. In her opinion, 'the use of such vocabulary in these contexts contributes to the semantic marginalisation of the sensorially disabled'.⁴⁸ Carol Fontaine also in her comments on Leviticus 21: 16–22 notes that in general terms the 'honourable' person is a fecund male, who is modified by circumcision, bears no physical or sensory imperfection and who is accordingly able to offer sacrifice. For in her words: 'in the paradigm of honor and shame being less than fully male is certain cause for self-loathing'.⁴⁹ Bruce Malina sees the rationale of townspeople, neighbours, and kin who petition on behalf of 'disabled' persons in the gospels in terms of honour and shame; the blind, deaf, demon-possessed 'pointed to a defective family' and thus posed threats of disintegration to the entire group.⁵⁰

The model of honour and shame was largely drawn from the British anthropologist, Julian Pitt-Rivers's construction of honour as an

ocular value, denoting 'the value of the person in his/her own *eyes*' and 'the *eyes* of the society',⁵¹ resulting in large part from a sight-centric ethnographic perspective. It was that which could be 'seen' and 'surveyed' which was ultimately fixed as knowledge. Many of the subsequent criticisms of the Mediterranean construct in anthropology can be perceived, at base, to be criticisms of the 'hegemony' of sight which seeks to control, dominate, and objectify the 'observed'. The 'objectifying' of the area identified by Michael Herzfeld, and summed up in his term 'Mediterraneanism' as an adjunct to Said's 'Orientalism', demonstrated the reification of the area into an 'exotic other' by ethnocentric observers.⁵² The forced isolation of characteristic themes such as honour and shame as the 'quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region'⁵³ not only artificially limited anthropological theorizing about the area but also exposed the dominating and reductive power of the participant observer's eye. This was coupled with the suspicion that a political agenda was at play in the 'eyes' of Anglo-American anthropologists in forging difference and distance from dwellers of the Mediterranean region.⁵⁴ In biblical studies a similar argument has recently been forwarded by James Crossley who, utilizing the insights of Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, and Edward Said, has taken to task those employing a Mediterranean cultural script in New Testament Studies for their latent racism. Crossley argues that stereotypical pictures (note the ocular metaphor) of Arab cultures 'covering vast cultural areas...smack of old-fashioned imperialistic anthropology'⁵⁵ in which the imperial power 'looked down upon' the colonized.

Feminist critics similarly focused on how the socially marginal and muted females, often under-represented in the ethnographic record, do not neatly enact or support the constructed social systems of which they are assumed to be a part.⁵⁶ Their experiences, largely in the 'private' realm, were 'out of sight' of the gaze of the Western male ethnographer. Lila Abu Lughod's study of Bedouin women in the Western Desert of Egypt,⁵⁷ for example, unveiled a very different sensory register from the sight-centric, male honour model of Mediterranean anthropology which pictured women, to a certain degree, as 'disabled' in the public realm, without voice, modest, and shameful. She showed however that in oral poetry (*ghinnawas*), an audio-centric medium, women unmasked their sexuality and love and

expressed their interpersonal emotions. Nadia Seremetakis in *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani* (1991) in a similar vein reveals the 'acoustic' role of females in Greek mourning rituals. The women exert autonomy and power through their 'sounds' which function as instances of 'gendered cultural resistance' in a predominantly ocular-centric, patriarchal culture. Mourning is a uniquely female activity and therefore becomes one place in which dominant male patterns can be challenged. The main force of the women's power though is crucially not words, but rather a vocal, 'antiphonal' lament of obscene language—'in the laments they could kill a person with language'⁵⁸—and ends in undifferentiated screaming. Sound 'constructs the space of death and the separation from the everyday social order... The acoustic pain of singing is self-inflicted corporeal violence, like scratching the face and pulling out hair.'⁵⁹ Seremetakis goes on to describe how these screaming soundscapes dramatize and subvert the 'polluting' orifice imagery of the female body (and the corpse) so prominent in male discourse.⁶⁰

A similar appeal about the silence of honour and shame constructions with respect to those perceived as sensory 'disabled' could also be made.⁶¹ Shlomo Deshen's 1992 ethnography, *Blind People: The Private and Public Lives of Sightless Israelis*, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2, for example, documents the experience and performance of visual impairment. Deshen, by virtue of his ethnographic subject matter, unsurprisingly evokes a world that is 'other' to sight-centric models and in which cultural values such as 'honour' are subversively resisted. In contrast to honour's collective group nature, kin and group identities are shunned, for the blind want to escape the stigma they acquire in family groups and can only do this by becoming more independent.⁶²

In light of such dissenting voices from the margins, it has been said that honour, once the 'mainstay of Mediterranean anthropology', has now become its 'virtual bogeyman',⁶³ a symptom of a largely dated approach in which the anthropological observer 'visualized' values which were errantly 'read' into the lives of diverse peoples and regions. Criticisms such as these powerfully jolt interpreters into acknowledging their own social location and the sensory epistemologies they may uncritically assume. In Nadia Seremetakis's words, knowledge is 'extralinguistic and revealed through expression, performance,

material culture and conditions of embodiment'.⁶⁴ This realization has been particularly evocative in relation to anthropological 'sensing' of the whole social order: the bodily, banal, underside and everyday is now viewed as just as significant as the elite, textual, and literate. Moreover, it has made ethnographers aware that the dominant sight-centric models and frameworks of the mid-twentieth century are themselves reflective of elite sensory paradigms and prompted them to question how particular individuals may reflect, challenge, or subvert aspects of the dominant sensory order of which they are a part.

'Textocentrism' in disciplines like sensory anthropology is as a result of these trends being supplanted by more performative conceptions of culture, which take seriously other sensuous elements and construct meaning as collective, participatory, and embodied.⁶⁵ Conquerwood proposes a 'hermeneutics of experience, relocation, humility and vulnerability', 'listening to and being touched' by everyday performances and imaginatively trying to 'occupy spaces' of the other. In this respect, 'proximity, not objectivity, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return'.⁶⁶ Herzfeld accordingly urges that sensory studies should therefore not be consigned to the margins as a singular field;⁶⁷ rather, understandings of character, cultural traditions, memory, and material culture are all membranes through which sensory elements pass.

It is not coincidental that the adoption of a performance methodology is also emerging within biblical studies and this could hold great promise for unearthing alternative sensory experiences 'from below'. David Rhoads in a programmatic essay proposes performance as a fundamental part of all early Christian reception of New Testament traditions. Indeed these written compositions may be transcriptions of what were first, oral performances.⁶⁸ Gospel 'readers' were in fact 'listeners', 'observers', and 'co-dramatists'⁶⁹ and whilst manuscripts may have been important vehicles for the spread of Christianity, these were 'not central to the experience of the early church'.⁷⁰ Rhoads, now voicing a consensus, relays how ancient contexts were 'oral': speech and hearing were the dominant forms of communication and literacy was the reserve of a small, elite minority. Rhoads estimates only 5–8 per cent at most could read, with still fewer being able to write. Meir Bar-Ilan's estimations are even slimmer: he contends that in the Maccabean period literacy rates for Jews were '1.5% if not lower'.⁷¹

Such statistics deal a powerful blow to those who contend that the New Testament grew within what could be understood as a predominantly ‘scribal’ context.

One of the important contributions that ‘performance theory’ offers exegesis is that performers themselves became key ‘interpreters’ as well as ‘mediums’ of tradition. They would ‘put their own take on the story’; ‘fit it to the immediate audience and situation and even adjust it to the responses of the audience in the very course of performing’.⁷² The recipients’ are also not cast as passive receptors but rather active co-dramatists. Building on Tom Boomershine’s work, Rhoads argues that the performers always took on the character of the individual or group who had direct speech. They did not use onstage focus. Thus, the audience were always directly addressed by the character the actor voiced. They would also therefore ‘play’ the disciples, the crowds, the ill and disabled, Jesus, even God—they would in short be part of the drama.⁷³ This sort of direct agency also makes kinetic, non-verbal, emotional, and sensory elements, which could be seen as mere incidentals in our textual readings, much more important.⁷⁴

A Sensory Profiling of Biblical Studies: Disabilities and Possibilities

For sensory anthropologists the senses are to be conceived in reference to culture, not just physical organs. They would concur that ‘knowledge [likewise] is not a given, but a culturally and historically embodied language’.⁷⁵ Research is a ‘sensory process’ which, like other such practices, propagates and hallows certain ways of ‘making sense’ and in the process rejects or ignores alternatives.

A number of recent works which have attempted to delineate the nature of biblical studies, and its teaching and research methodologies, attest to a largely historical-critical, textocentric, and ocular-centric discipline.⁷⁶ Whilst acknowledging the astounding proliferation of exegetical ‘lenses’ developed in recent years (literary, narrative, feminist, postcolonial, queer, liberation, African-American, Dalit, etc.), historical criticism still remains at least implicitly prevalent within the guild, as does an ‘assumed “normate” context’ modelled by an ‘able-bodied, white Protestant [heterosexual] male’.⁷⁷

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Kent Harold Richards, in their delineation of the 'ethos' of the biblical studies discipline, thus acknowledge at the outset of their project 'the still dominant Euro-American scientist ethos'.⁷⁸ Dale Martin in his review of the pedagogy of the Bible similarly concludes that 'one would have to say that in spite of recent innovations which move away from teaching only historical criticism, that method is still the dominant one taught'.⁷⁹ In their *Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (2011) Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood likewise bemoan the fact that even 'reader-response' approaches all too often conceive of texts 'shackled to their hypothetical historical contexts'; thus reader-orientated practice becomes another 'exercise in historical criticism', albeit one 'performed in wig and dark sunglasses'.⁸⁰

Purposefully, ironically, and jarringly using a colonial metaphor, Moore and Sherwood state that 'theory's empire' if conceived relatively in the world of biblical studies, would 'approximately [be] the size of Tobago or the Falklands Islands' such is its 'underwhelming reality'⁸¹ in relation to the expansive dominance of Western historical approaches. The relative size of 'disability's empire' would be even smaller: probably comparable in size to the Faroe Islands, most people may have heard of it, but few could pinpoint its specific locale or nature.⁸² It is also true to say that the historical critical paradigm has colonized works at this interdisciplinary interface. Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper confess as much when they state:

Biblical scholarship on disability focuses on close readings of the textual representation of disability rather than trying to reconstruct the lived experience of people with disabilities in antiquity. Although these biblical texts may indicate that people with disabilities suffered social stigmas in antiquity, they provide little, if any, information about the actual living conditions or the everyday experiences of people with disabilities. While these texts do not provide a clear window into the past or help us distinguish medical impairments from social discrimination on the basis of a social model, a focus on their representations of disability may increase our understanding of how these texts both reflect and reinforce ancient cultural ideas about identity and social organization. In this sense, disability studies can help biblical scholars better understand the ancient cultural contexts of biblical literature.⁸³

Such narrow interests are frequently lamented by more advocacy-orientated disability practitioners. Amos Yong in his recent review of

Moss and Schipper's volume, for example, states that a focus on the 'social model' of disability as evidenced within a particular historical context, in effect just individualizes, privatizes and flatly stigmatizes conditions. Whilst such works do acknowledge 'the condition of being positioned as "disabled" to be conceptualized as oppression, rather than an unproblematic description of the characteristics and functioning of the bodies of some individuals',⁸⁴ nonetheless readings which try and imbue interpretations with a 'disability' cultural consciousness are largely lacking, precisely because 'literary' evidence documenting such experiences is virtually non-existent from the ancient world. Thus, as Olyan illustrates, 'association[s] of disability with weakness, vulnerability, dependence and ineffectuality [which] constitute an exceedingly widespread *literary topos* in biblical texts'⁸⁵ *de facto* remain the dominant picture in disability analyses. Commentators, whilst paying lip service to stigma, often have no means to challenge it and thus end up perpetuating rather than confronting assumptions of the texts *vis-à-vis* disability. Yong accordingly states,

Perhaps this is precisely what objective biblical scholarship is supposed to do: merely describe the historical effects of scriptural reception, without rendering theological judgment. The latter is inevitably subjective or perhaps would be indistinguishable from this or that ideological stance, both outcomes of which biblical scholars have been trained to assiduously avoid.⁸⁶

However, Yong employs the example of feminism as a pursuit not just equipped for recording women's roles within a text, but also actively criticizing 'normative theological commitments' surrounding gender in texts. This latter element seems largely undeveloped in many disability readings, yet in his opinion:

The field of disability studies is similarly committed to championing the rights of people with disabilities against their marginalization from the dominant, ableist culture. So if disability studies are to inform contemporary readings of the biblical literature, is there not a presumption here in favor of a resistance toward ableist or normate readings of the Bible? Is it not also the case that disability is not negative and disability studies readings of the image of the cripple (or whatever other impairing condition) ought to critically interrogate the effects of such associations? If so, is not the emancipation and liberation of those with disabilities an underlying goal, and in this case, readings that

intentionally engage the theological dimensions of the biblical texts would not only be appropriate, but also in some sense be required?⁸⁷

In a similar vein, in analysing the 'ethos' of graduate biblical education, Fiorenza and Richards petition for the construction of a dynamic 'disciplinary space' which should be remodelled according to 'different social and geographical locations and in light of different experiences of the ethos of biblical studies'.⁸⁸ This call for a democratic space populated with voices which are largely unheard in biblical studies is also an important rallying call for disability studies. Sensory anthropology likewise appeals for different 'democratic spaces' which show diverse ways of belonging to cultures and forming identities. Howes and Classen in their sensory-profiling strategy probe among other elements 'Metaphors and Language' and 'Artefacts, Aesthetics and Media of Communication' in different contexts.⁸⁹ If these categories are applied in very broad brush strokes to the academic discipline of biblical studies, and reimagined according to a disability consciousness, what sort of patterns would emerge?

Language and Metaphors

Howes and Classen first ask ethnographers to note how words, metaphors, and turns of phrase belie how particular sensory organs or sensory functions are evaluated. In biblical studies the frequently employed metaphor of the biblical 'text as a window' through which one either looks 'behind', 'at', or 'in front of' belies the sight-centricity of exegetical 'outlooks', 'lenses', and 'perspectives'. Pheme Perkins demonstrates the employment of a visual metaphor in reference to one of the prime media of exegesis, the biblical commentary, when she writes, 'I like to think of commentaries as windows into the world presented by the biblical text.'⁹⁰ In such volumes, the cultural consciousness of the 'commentator' is often screened out, for the purposes of 'scholarly [objective?] perspective' and their 'discerning eye'. In a typically sardonic description of the 'epistemological decorum' of a biblical commentator, Moore and Sherwood testify:

This self-effacing reader does not write, but as his name implies merely comments. He is a civil servant of the text....For hundreds of pages at a time, there's little or nothing on his own text to indicate that it was written by a

living, breathing human being....He lives vicariously through the text and willingly under its thrall.⁹¹

Commentaries as a genre of course 'self-reflectively witness to the success of the historical critical paradigm'⁹² and have often in the words of Gordon Fee, as 'good technicians of the text', avoided other theological, ethical, or consciousness concerns 'like the plague'.⁹³ Whilst a new wave of commentaries documenting positions from the margins based on race, gender, or social class have been forthcoming in recent years, disability studies still rarely features in such genres. Bruce Birch gives voice to this when he notes how in writing commentaries on the Books of Samuel, and reading references to the blind and lame, he just skipped 'blindly' over them, completely unaware of their relevance. He sees this as a 'disability' of biblical scholarship itself:

I have been trained in Biblical scholarship with a limited awareness and understanding that has allowed me to spend decades in studying and teaching the Bible without noticing or paying any particular attention to the large number of references to impairment/disability in the biblical witness....It is socially easier not to notice such persons, and I suppose it has been easier for biblical scholars to give texts referencing impairment/disability only the general descriptive treatment accorded to a disabled character that enters the story or the minimal explanation given to a reference to impairment that crops up in a text.⁹⁴

It would seem that the language and metaphors of the discipline thus link the eyes with knowledge. One of the great contributions of post-modernism however, has been to acknowledge and celebrate diverse forms and media of knowledge. To give just one example, reading with subalterns in India (Dalit peoples, etc.), Sathianathan Clarke has commended a 'multimodal' approach that encourages oppressed groups to 'perform' transformation in response to biblical narrative and images. In oral cultures interpretations are 'corporately weaved together'⁹⁵ and frequently represented in 'media other than writing'⁹⁶—the Dalits for instance use drumming, dancing, spinning, weaving, painting, and carving in their hermeneutics and, as will be seen in Chapter 5, make political protests through bodily senses. Clarke urges mainstream biblical studies to literally 'come to its senses' and acknowledge the great contribution that cultures which speak with their hands, rather than words and written texts, can offer.⁹⁷

Such analyses cumulatively question the epistemological centrality of the observer's eye. Moreover they disorder and disrupt simplistic equations between sense organs and sense perception. One may see with one's ears, speak with one's nose, smell with one's touch, and hear with one's tongue.

Artefacts, Aesthetics, and Media of Communication

Howes and Classen's second category is the use and appreciation of cultural objects, relics, and the media through which sense is conveyed. The key artefacts within biblical studies are of course ancient texts; and given this textual focus, disciplinary linguistic skills are essential. As Martin reveals,

Students are taught Hebrew and Greek...introduced to reference books such as analytical concordances, bible dictionaries, and books that display different English translations side by side...students are taught to outline passages and books to analyze the rhetorical devices such as chiasm and parallelism, to recognize different genres of literature...[and develop] the practice of comparing different manuscripts [and traditions].⁹⁸

In such disciplinary training, 'meaning [is conceived as] inherent in [language] and text'⁹⁹ and 'eisegesis' is seen as the diametric opposite of "'responsible" historically sensitive interpretation'.¹⁰⁰ A disability consciousness however may well prompt interpreters to acknowledge that for some 'the limits of language' are not the 'limits of the world'.¹⁰¹ In a similar vein the postcolonial feminist, Musa Dube, initiates contextual interpretations of biblical stories among African readers and revels in the dictum offered by one participant that 'God never opened the Bible'. This graphically illustrates the fact that God was active and dynamic, not contained in, or contained by, particular written directives in printed texts. The deaf community which use sign language likewise 'retell and weave their own stories of healing and empowerment'¹⁰² through not words but bodily gestures, and experience 'sound' as vibrations, all elements which will be expounded more in Chapter 3. A similar trajectory could be traced in relation to comprehension through the fingers in Braille or the ears in audio or sound recognition technologies.

Stephen Tyler has as a result, petitioned scholarship to literally 'de-scribe' and resist the limiting power structures of the written word, for in his opinion such moves stultify the possibilities of the imagination: 'writing puts everything in the past, it has no future'; 'the past is the incurable illness of writing'.¹⁰³ He submits that oral cultures provide a resistance to this 'algebraism—shufflings of meaningless signs'.¹⁰⁴ In his opinion, 'our redemption in/from this tale of loss and liberation is not in sight nor in hand [by which he means scribal practice] could it be just on the tips of our tongues? [or more specifically in the actions of our body]:'¹⁰⁵ Oral and performative cultures also often appropriate a text to a cultural context shared by others: 'Sometimes the story is framed in a new context, or the ending changed, or variants suggested alongside the original story'.¹⁰⁶ Peter McDonough's study of issues of translation of gospel stories into sign language found that what the deaf community and the hearing community valued as good translations differed significantly. For the deaf, the most important criteria were that translations were 'embodied in [their] own culture and colloquial idiom'. In contrast, for the hearing the most important element was a 'direct and true translation of biblical texts'.¹⁰⁷

Janet Lees, a speech therapist and minister, in her essay, 'Enabling the Body', is also alive to the problems that the 'wordy' artefacts and media of biblical studies can pose to 'those of us who cannot speak, read, or turn over the pages'.¹⁰⁸ More importantly she sees 'marginal characters' within stories as important touchstones for 'sensitising' interpreters to different knowledge bases and ways of making sense. She cites the case of Andrew who has cerebral palsy and his review of visiting Jerusalem as a pilgrim in his wheelchair. He got out of his chair and sat on the floor amidst dust, feet, legs, and cries out so he is not crushed. Lees accordingly writes, 'Andrew's view of what these early Christian communities looked like to disabled people is from the floor'.¹⁰⁹ Palm Sunday looks very different when told from this dusty and quite literal 'view from below'.

In contextual interpretations, the medium of communication is also changed from depersonalised 'comment' to a story encapsulating personal experience. Holly Toensig for example, uses the exorcism of Legion narrative to articulate her own feelings about 'guarding the tomb' and memory of her brother who committed suicide due

to paranoid schizophrenia. Legion in her reading therefore primarily represents not as perhaps expected her schizoid brother but rather herself. She jarringly claims: 'I am the demoniac living among the tombs, shrieking in personal mourning, unwilling to give my brother into hands so bent on delivering him to hell.'¹¹⁰ Through critically contextualizing the biblical character in her own experiences she feels that 'Mark 5 provides a means to "visit that place" so often avoided.'¹¹¹ She contends that 'viewing the text only through a [historical] lens at the exclusion or denigration of other perspectives threatens the idea that biblical texts are living traditions that are challenged and renewed by lived experience'.¹¹² She sees personal narratives as a central tool in which people can variously listen, tell, and share stories of struggle and more importantly 'find and name the numerous commonalities between people'.¹¹³ In short, artefacts and media of communication take on very different characteristics when conceived from a space which takes a disability consciousness seriously.

Biblical Studies: Disabilities and Possibilities

Classen has identified 'sightseeing' as a major Western tourist occupation,¹¹⁴ for what is 'seen' is ultimately 'valued'. In many ways this short survey of the senses of biblical studies has also confirmed the value placed upon sight above other forms of knowledge production. Those works which had as their main focus 'senses and the sensory' oft-times replicated an Aristotelian hierarchical ordering of sensory perception; other studies that did propose alternative sensory models for biblical worlds still nevertheless tended to compress and conceive of the sensory-disabled as entirely 'other' on account of their perceived difference. Their alternative sensory experiences were not explored or valued whatsoever.

Mitchell and Snyder rail against the tendency to reify sensory patterns and close down difference. Arrestingly they state: 'eugenics offered a form of redemption that would solve social crises through the eradication rather than accommodation of human variation'.¹¹⁵ In order to encompass variation in human capacities we must question and distort so-called 'similitude' in 'understanding[s] of ourselves as social and biological animals'.¹¹⁶ In light of such critiques, it seems timely to probe ethnographies that adopt alternative sensory

positions and consciously seek to rehabilitate experiences 'from below' which were under-represented in previous studies. The continuum of structure and agency is necessarily refigured for each individual according to their hierarchical and ideological place within social structures, since the ability of individuals to exercise transformative agency depends on their position.¹¹⁷

Whilst an ethnographer may well choose to ignore all previous studies of an area if he/she has plentiful data of her own from face-to-face participation and engagement, for the biblical scholar this is not an option. One cannot live among or interview the peoples we meet in the Bible, especially not those considered disabled who often leave little documentary evidence. Thus, in the words of Seth Schwartz, 'we are not looking for analytical tools...[but alternative ways] of providing ourselves with sets of social-historical assumptions (in the absence of real information) against which we can measure the exiguous fragments of information we do have'.¹¹⁸ In short, we need evocative resources to juxtapose with our texts, if not to reach 'reality' then at least to generate new questions. Sensory anthropology, which charts the sensory lives of those so often under-represented by previous ableist, Euro-centric suppositions, I contend, offers such a resource.

Imagination is of course key in such undertakings, but this has always been true of anthropology which has sought to conjure a shared space with 'the other'. Lees similarly believes that 'the move toward including people with disabilities as research partners rather than the object of research'¹¹⁹ is central. For whilst the voiceless, or those whose stories are not encased solely in texts and literature are often hard to access, ethnographic material which witnesses to their experiences (albeit often by proxy through an ethnographer's hand) does allow a certain sensitizing and opening up of their lives. In short, sight-centric methodologies disable the scholar who with them inevitably 'look[s] through a glass darkly'; however by creatively sharing the space of another, they are enabled to feel, hear, smell, touch, and move 'face to face'. This is surely reason enough to engage with the sensory strategies to be explored in the following chapters of this book.