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“I BEGAN TO SEE”

Biblical Models of Disability in *Jane Eyre*

ESSAKA JOSHUA

CHARLOTTE BRONTË was an adept commentator, absorber, and interpreter of biblical material, and it is no surprise, given both the ubiquity of biblical allusion in *Jane Eyre* and the extent of the novel's concern with disability, that her biblical intertexts engage with disability. Theologians and scripture scholars have frequently read biblical disability as a condition that has a negative personal and social impact. Commenting on the Hebrew Bible, Saul Olyan observes that the “stigmatizing association of disability with weakness, vulnerability, dependence, and ineffectuality constitutes an exceedingly widespread literary topos in biblical texts” (8). People with disabilities are commonly associated, in biblical narratives, with “the poor, the afflicted, and the alien, on account of a perception of shared vulnerability and weakness” (Olyan, 128), and disability in the Bible is often a marker of low social status as much as it is a physical or mental condition. In a groundbreaking essay collection, *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (2007), David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out “the skepticism with which disability-studies scholars have traditionally approached religious frameworks” that interpret disability (“Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance,” 174), but suggest that, in spite of the “alarming array of ways in which disability prompts cultural disavowal” in biblical

narrative (174), “disability-studies based analyses can guide reform-minded readers to alternative applications of Christian narrative traditions” (183). This chapter examines Brontë’s alternative application of biblical disability in order to establish how these biblical references inflect Brontë’s overall presentation of disability in *Jane Eyre*.

BIBLICAL MODELS OF DISABILITY

Motivations for the study of disability in the Bible are varied but have been neatly schematized in *This Abled Body* as “redemptionist,” “rejectionist,” and “historicist” (4–5; Avalos, 91). A redemptionist approach seeks “to redeem the biblical text, despite any negative stance on disabilities, by recontextualizing it for modern application” (Avalos, et al., 4; Avalos, 91). Rejectionists oppose this, arguing that “the Bible has negative portrayals of disability that should be rejected in modern society” (4–5). Historicists situate biblical texts within their surrounding cultures, and “without any overt interest in the consequence of the conclusions for modern application” (Avalos et al., 5; Avalos, 92).¹ Scholars often, as Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper point out, “combine, in varying proportions, at least some of these approaches” (4). Olyan, for example, presents a balance between an historicist agenda that seeks to identify “the various taxonomic categories” of disability in the Hebrew Bible and a redemptionist-rejectionist reading that recognizes stigmatization where it occurs yet sees the God of the Hebrew Bible as “an advocate for disabled persons, just as he is for other categories of persons represented as weak and marginal” (Olyan, 126). This recent work has aimed at revising traditional scholarly approaches that concentrate on the diagnosis of disability and illness, and at exposing ideologically informed interpretative strategies that have limited the definition of disability to a hybridized medico-religious model.

Disability-studies scholars often approach biblical writings with some unease and focus their attention on how to provide a coherent response to the multiplicity of ways in which the Bible presents disability. Henri-Jacques Stiker and Nancy Eiesland, for example, attempt to resolve some of the contrasting viewpoints by positing a division between approaches to disability in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. Eiesland’s *The Disabled*

1. Avalos uses these various terms to describe the reclamation or rejection of the Bible as a whole. When I use his terms, I mean to signify Brontë’s choice to include or exclude biblical narratives that are redeemable or not redeemable and do not mean to suggest that Brontë is redeeming or rejecting the Bible as a whole.

God outlines the ways in which biblical texts present an overwhelmingly negative attitude toward disability. This, she argues, can result in a disabling theology. In rejectionist mode, she identifies three central biblical themes associated with disability. First, in appearing to conflate disability with sin, the Bible offers an understanding of disability that sees it as a punishment for immorality or pride, and as an imperfection that does not reflect the image of God; it also presents disability as “un-wholeness” (72). Second, disability in the Bible, Eiesland argues, is associated with “virtuous suffering” (72) and operates as a form of trial through which a person becomes pure and accepting of God. As Pauline Otiento observes, along rejectionist lines, this theme “encourages passive acceptance of social barriers for the sake of obedience to God” (2). Finally, disability is associated with social ostracism, charity, and healing: “Failure to be ‘healed’ is often assessed as a personal flaw in the individual, such as unrepentant sin or a selfish desire to remain disabled” (Eiesland, 117). In redemptionist mode, Eiesland presents a new thesis, that the resurrection of Christ’s tortured body is an important symbol not of the “negation or erasure of our disabled bodies in hopes of perfect images, untouched by physical disability” (107) but of the “hope that our nonconventional, and sometimes difficult, bodies participate fully in the *imago Dei*” (107). Simon Horne, conversely, offers a continuity of vision between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.² Horne argues that the “central paradox of the New Testament is that ‘within inability is striking capability’” (88). Disability functions as a kind of paradox that is a surprising and aesthetically pleasing occurrence in narrative because of its unexpectedness; it is not simply a condition that “Jesus eliminates” (88). Disability is, for Horne, a strong indicator of the coming to discipleship: “characters with impairments embody the process of full discipleship and particular qualities, such as obedience, persistence, and trust” (98). There is a range of motivations behind this revisionism. Principal among these is the theological need to produce a sense of a benevolent and just God from a set of narratives that are meant to be a guide to living ethically, and the need to find justification for an inclusive Church. These pragmatic goals are important for disability scholars because to “contemplate the mechanisms of stigma,” as Mitchell and Snyder point out, is to begin the process of providing “ourselves with the opportunity for changing perceptions and alternative ways of comprehending disabled lives today” (“Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance,” 176).

2. Stressing this kind of continuity is not a commitment to thinking that accounts within both Testaments are incompatible.

JANE EYRE AND BIBLICAL MODELS OF DISABILITY

Chapter 6

Although *Jane Eyre* has long been understood to have moral education as one of its central concerns, it is only in recent years that there has been sustained discussion of the biblical sources of the novel. Focusing on Brontë's rewriting and renewing of biblical texts with attention to gender politics, Keith Jenkins suggests, following Joan Chard, that Brontë's selection and manipulation of biblical allusion provides a basis for understanding *Jane Eyre* as a form of spiritual autobiography. Brontë, Jenkins argues, breaks the biblical stories down into their component parts and manipulates them into a *bricolage* that challenges patriarchal authority. He makes the case that the gender reversals apparent in the ascription of male biblical roles to female characters and vice versa, and the undermining of God's providential role in controlling human action in favor of a larger degree of human self-determination, work to strengthen Brontë's social agenda in the novel: to argue for greater self-determination for women. Brontë's uses are sometimes "surprisingly casual" (Jenkins, 134), and scripture is often deployed negatively to emphasize a theological position with which Brontë does not agree (e.g., Calvinism). Catherine Tkacz highlights Brontë's technique of contrasting uses of a single Bible passage, her process of embedding scripture within speech, her amalgamation of ranges of Bible passages, and her evocation of scripture both with and without direct quotation. Tkacz is interested in Brontë's method, rather than the theological explanation for her selectivity, and proves that Brontë's assimilation of biblical material is extensive and that it plays a significant role in characterization, plot, imagery, commentary, and narrative comment. I argue elsewhere (Joshua, "Almost my hope of Heaven") that the biblical allusions have a distinctly anti-idolatry theme that points to the novel's distrust of false Messiahs.

To extend understanding of disability in *Jane Eyre*, I will use a methodology similar to that used by Jenkins and Tkacz: that of employing biblical allusions to explicate aspects of the novel with which these allusions connect. Brontë's approach to the Bible's representation of disability is highly selective. She emphasizes the spiritual worth of disability and the role of a person with a disability as an agent for the power of God. In essence, Brontë locates her discussion of biblical disability around one central question: what is the relationship between the physical body and the spiritual self? The nature of this relationship is explored more particularly through two further questions: What is the theological significance of sight and blindness? What is the theological significance of madness? Through redemptionist selectivity, Brontë dissociates stigma and disability, choosing biblical

quotations that imply that disability is a symbol of being saved and that it is a route to salvation. Although there has been much discussion of the theological significance of the novel, critics have approached disability not through the biblical allusions to it but through a more secular understanding of the conditions the novel presents. Nonetheless, the meanings critics associate with the disabilities included in the novel are theological: Edward Rochester’s disability is seen as a punishment for his immoral behavior, for instance. It seems fitting, then, to explore the possibility of whether Brontë’s biblical allusions to disability in any way contribute to a theological understanding of the condition. The novel’s positive characterization of disability, which I demonstrate by examining its use of certain biblical texts, rules out the punishment interpretation, an interpretation which is plausible only on the assumption—always unargued—that disability is something negative.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PHYSICAL BODY AND THE SPIRITUAL SELF

In general, Brontë rejects the idea of the equation of spiritual cure with physical cure, preferring to dwell on the benefits of disability for spiritual insight, and on the experiences of people with disabilities who demonstrate great faith. St. John Rivers warns Jane to remember the fate of Dives “who had his good things in this life” (423; ch. 35 [Luke 16.19–31]).³ Dives, the rich man, is punished in the afterlife; Lazarus, the man covered in sores who begged at his gates, is rewarded, and his impairments do not disqualify him from recompense in Heaven. To reject St. John’s proposal would be to live as Dives in the luxury of not being a missionary’s wife. Jane is urged to become Lazarus: her uncomfortable life, St. John urges, will make her fit for Heaven.

This story exemplifies the novel’s tendency to include biblical references to disability (or illness) that indicate unexpected salvation, though the reference is misapplied by St. John in his false assessment of Jane’s spiritual worth and in his associating her with the indulgent rich man. As I have written elsewhere, “St. John’s path is rejected by Jane, not because he places too much emphasis on the role of Christ, but because he overlooks the fact that prioritizing Christ does not entail refusing to allow a secondary place for human affection” (Joshua 100). The novel proposes that this is not the cor-

3. The version of the primary text referred to in this chapter is Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

rect spiritual path for Jane. Brontë undermines this reference by making St. John use Lazarus as a false example; nonetheless, this is a positive account of disability as an indicator of the spiritual reward to come, even if it is misapplied.

The link between faith and the healing of a physical disability is present when Edward makes implicit reference to Matthew 8, the passage in which the centurion's servant or son, who is "sick of the palsy" (v. 6), is healed by Jesus because of the centurion's faith.⁴ In Matthew, the centurion expresses his faith by telling Jesus that he is a man of command and that he trusts Jesus's ability to heal by command: "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed" (v. 8). It is this vocation for command that Edward echoes when he cites Matthew 8.9 and excuses his tone by saying to Jane, "I am used to say 'Do this,' and it is done" (125; ch. 8). Edward's allusion signals that he has avoided a religious life. His echo of this passage may also hint that he supplicates for a healing—he is in charge of a sick wife, and it may be that his pursuit of Jane is a misguided form of healing. Like the reference to Luke 16, the passage indicates that Jesus will heal those who do not feel entitled to it. Matthew 8 is another form of elevation of those who are not traditionally regarded as worthy. The chapter is referred to again when Jane is discussing St. John Rivers. He, like Edward, has a commanding nature and is in the role of centurion; but, unlike Edward, he is ostensibly a man of faith, and so the reference may hint at his problematic status as a future martyr. Jane says of St. John, "When he said 'go,' I went; 'come,' I came; 'do this,' I did it. But I did not love my servitude" (402; ch. 34.). Jane takes the humbler role of the centurion's servant, and the reference may hint at her patient wait for spiritual renewal.

Brocklehurst references what he perceives to be Jane's lack of spiritual wholeness by associating her with the healing of a physical disability. He announces that Jane's aunt has sent her to his school "to separate her from her own young ones, fearful lest her vicious example should contaminate their purity: she has sent her here to be healed, even as the Jews of old sent their diseased to the troubled pool of Bethesda; and, teachers, superintendent, I beg of you not to allow the waters to stagnate around her" (67; ch. 7). John 5.2–9, the passage referenced here, is an account of a man who had been ill for 38 years, and who is waiting to be healed at the pool of Bethesda.

4. Although it is conventional to use the names Jane and Rochester, I refer to characters of both genders consistently by their first names, where the first name is known. I think it is more appropriate, when discussing the egalitarian agenda of a novel, to use gender-neutral language than it is to follow a convention that has been for some time regarded as patronizing to women.

The healing is expected to take place when an angel disturbs the water. The man’s mobility impairment prevents him from going into the pool quickly enough, and, since he has no one who is willing to assist him, he is unable to be healed. Jesus tells him that he does not need to enter the pool because he has cured him. John 5 explicitly represents disability as lack of wholeness and suggests that there are two ways for the man to be made whole: either by stepping into the pool or through a miracle performed by Jesus. In both cases, to be cured is to be made whole. Jesus links sin and catastrophe to disability or illness when he tells the man “sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee” (v. 14). Brontë distances herself from this irredeemable account of disability by giving the allusion to Brocklehurst: the healing of a physical disability is undermined as an indication of spiritual cure as the pool is not the cause of the healing in the biblical story.

Through her reference to Mark 5.24–34, Jane links herself to the healing of a physical disability that cannot take place. Here, she describes another self-interested character, Blanche Ingram, as “a great lady, who scorned to touch me with the hem of her robes as she passed” (187; ch. 18). Like her use of John 5.2–9, Brontë’s use of Mark 5.24–34 is also ironic. Reflecting on what she supposes is a courtship being conducted between Edward and Blanche, Jane recalls the woman with the gynecological ailment (“an issue of blood” [Mark 5.25]) who is healed by Christ, whose robes she touches as he passes by her.⁵ The association between Blanche and Christ may be part of the novel’s motif of identifying characters as false Messiahs and is another example of disability as lack of wholeness in these contexts: Christ says to the woman “go in peace, and be whole of thy plague” [Mark 5.34]. Brontë uses the passage negatively, by emphasizing the impossibility of the healing (as Jane does not touch her), to signal that disability is not lack of wholeness.

In contrast, Brontë’s reference to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5.28–29) lends itself to a redemptionist reading and offers a more positive link between the spiritual body and the physical body than the reference to disability as the product of sin in John 5 and Mark 5. Having shut herself in her room to grieve over her aborted wedding, Jane converses with herself about what she should do next. She identifies that her conscience holds her “passion by the throat,” warning her of the temptation with which she is faced: to become Edward’s mistress. It tells her to be active in removing herself from moral danger, “[Y]ou shall tear yourself away; none shall help

5. Candida R. Moss makes a case for Jesus’s discharge of power mirroring the leaky body of the woman. This is part of her wider discussion of impairment as a symbol of connection to God.

you: you shall, yourself, pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim; and you the priest, to transfix it” (307; ch. 27). The words of Jane’s conscience echo, closely, those of the Sermon on the Mount, but with a reversal of genders: “For whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5.28–29). As Tkacz points out, “the loss of the hand and eye is a ‘profitable’ sacrifice enabling one to avoid full punishment for uncoun-tered lust” (10). Disablement is, here, an indicator of being in a position to avoid moral turpitude. This biblical fate is seen more explicitly in the symbolism of Edward’s “mutilated” (441; ch. 37) left hand, and in the ultimate blindness in one of his eyes.⁶ Jane’s positive reference to the disabilities of Matt. 5.28–29 (307; ch. 27) points toward the possibility that Edward’s disabilities could be read as an indication of his spiritual worth.

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SIGHT AND BLINDNESS

Edward’s blindness has been read in various ways, most of which have been negative. From the identification of blindness with castration by Richard Chase, to the reading of blindness as symbolic of the author’s fear of sex and her resistance to her supposed forbidden love for her father by Lucile Dooley, Edward’s blindness is generally understood as a punishment, an affliction, or a humiliation.⁷ We see the beginnings of a redemptionist approach to blindness in its association with a feminist equalization of power in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. They are lukewarm in their endorsement of the view that Edward’s injuries are a “symbolic castration” (Chase, 467); they argue, instead, that his blindness is an attempt to make Jane “an equal of the world Rochester represents” (368), pointing out that the pair are only able to drop their “social disguises” once one of them is blind (368). For Peter Bellis, Edward’s blindness signals the novel’s shift from characterizing Jane’s perspective as merely “an alternative source of visual power” (645) to presenting Jane as the dominant source—this is by virtue of the removal of Edward’s challenging sight. When

6. Tkacz nevertheless reads Edward’s disabilities as punitive, observing that “On one level the loss of his left hand and eye punishes him [Edward] for attempting bigamy; in gaining faith through his experiences, however, he finds that his loss proves profitable and, in regaining Jane and his sight, he discovers that justice is tempered with mercy” (12).

7. Robert Martin’s *The Accents of Persuasion* calls Edward’s blindness a “humiliation” (91), though he suggests that “the reader is never invited either to sentimentalize over him [Edward] or to disregard the brutal facts of his humiliation” (91).

Jane becomes her husband's eyes, Bellis sees her as dominating him (649), rather than identifying her as his aide. Sharon Marcus proposes an alternative version of this idea by seeing Jane as a prosthesis. But Marcus argues that Jane is fragmented by her role as aide: "Critics have often interpreted Rochester's blinding and mutilation as a form of symbolic castration, but Jane appears to adopt—rather than to triumph over—her husband's bodily fragmentation by transforming herself into a prosthetic part" (213). Marcus limits the attraction of seeing Jane as a prosthesis through this subordinating definition of the role of caregiver.

The question of whether Edward's blindness can be positioned as something positive has gained attention recently. David Bolt argues that, although the novel challenges gender hierarchies, "the underpinning hierarchies of normativism over disability and 'the sighted' over 'the blind' persist" (271). Georgina Kleege interprets Edward's blindness as "divine retribution for the sin of wishing to marry Jane when he already has a wife in the attic" and as an event that allows Jane to "rise to power" (70, 71). Kleege rejects the novel for this reason, classing it as one of the "old stories of blindness" (73) that make her "weary and a little afraid" (73). Marianne Thormählen regards Edward as a man "blighted by severe disabilities" (80), suggesting that it "goes against the grain of a present-day reader to regard them as Divine chastisement," but that Edward is fundamentally a man who has been "made aware of the power of God" and who "learns to repent" because he is "stricken" (80). Like Thormählen, Kate Flint follows Edward's own account of his religious conversion: "Divine justice pursued its course [. . .]. His chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever [. . .]. I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom" (*Jane Eyre*, 452; ch. 37). Edward asserts that his blindness is the result of retributive justice and that it is also the beginning of his spiritual sight. Flint observes that Edward's blindness is a "form of punishment that ultimately proves to be a means of illuminating the inward eye" (*The Victorians*, 80). Thomas Vargish also argues along these lines, suggesting that "Rochester's punishments are necessary to his spiritual salvation and therefore to his *rise* toward spiritual equality with Jane" (66, n8). Blindness can be seen, then, as part of his spiritual recovery; but it is, for these critics, still a divine punishment.⁸ That Edward regards his physical blindness as a divine punishment is without question, but the issue here is

8. Flint and Vargish are close to my own view that Edward's blindness, when understood in the context of the novel's references to Messianism and idolatry, "symbolizes the abandonment of idolatry" and is "a positive symbol for his religious well-being" (*Joshua*, 95).

its meaning in the novel as a whole, rather than the character's own presentation of his viewpoint to another character with whom he has a particular and evident agenda. The novel's biblical allusions provide an important context that takes us beyond this negative view of the religious or moral meaning of Edward's blindness.

Edward's own admission that he sees clearly in a spiritual sense in his blind state ("I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom" [452; ch. 37]) alludes indirectly to John 9, a chapter that plays throughout on the meanings of seeing as sensory experience, as understanding, and as recognizing Jesus. Edward's words are closest to "whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9.25), which means, at this stage in the biblical story: though I had been physically blind, I now have spiritual insight. In John 9.3, Jesus explicitly dissociates blindness from sin, asserting that the blindness in this man was not a punishment for his sins or for the sins of his parents, and that he has been made blind so "that the works of God should be made manifest in him." The narrative as a whole suggests that the blind man is the one person who recognizes that Jesus is the "Son of God" (John 9.35)—a Messianic title. John 9 explicitly states that blindness is not punitive and that it has a purpose that derives from God. In various ways, this healing narrative presents the positive religious significance of blindness: spiritual insight and innocence. In associating Edward with the idea that being blind is a necessary condition for spiritual insight, through the echo of John 9, Brontë signals Edward's recognition of his religious role.

This chapter of John is quoted more directly by St. John Rivers. Tkacz has explored thoroughly Brontë's preference for giving the same biblical allusions to pairs of characters who are in conflict as a way to signal her attitude to them. Edward's allusion contrasts with St. John Rivers's use in several ways. St. John concentrates on John 9.4. Emphasizing the importance of recognizing Christ's role in the world, he stresses to Jane the urgency of his missionary work by suggesting that "the night cometh when no man shall work" (423; ch. 35). This quotation closely ties the idea of working while it is day, that is, working while one can see, to a set of definitions of blindness and sightedness that are concerned with spiritual insight and the lack of it. This passage, which quotes Jesus's words about his mission, closely allies being able to see light and being able to do religious or other kinds of work. Through it, St. John warns Jane that he believes his mission to convert Indians to Christianity to be urgent. In echoing Christ's words, here, St. John implies that, because the "night" (or the end of his life) is on its way, it will be too late for her to demonstrate her spiritual worth. Jesus says, in this passage, that he and his followers must "work the work of him

who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9.4–5). Jesus is both the person who works in the light and the light itself. St. John hints here at his false Messianic role: he measures Jane’s allotted time to do her spiritual work as the same length as his own life, echoing Christ’s instruction that everybody must work hard as long as he is in the world. Equally, the reference to sight focuses on what is, for Brontë, a negative component of the John 9 narrative. When Edward echoes John 9, his use of the passage places him in the role of discipleship and not in the religiously irregular Messianic role that he has formerly attempted to adopt. St. John uses the same chapter of John as Edward but aligns himself with its sighted aspects. Thus Brontë subtly suggests that St. John lacks spiritual insight in his pursuit of Messianic glory. The interplay of these positive and negative uses of spiritual sight and blindness, in the allusions to John 9 by Edward and by St. John, when taken together, signal that Edward is not being punished, as he and his critics are suggesting, but that his blindness indicates his spiritual worth and his discipleship.

Edward is compared with another biblical blind man, Samson.⁹ In Judges, Samson sacrifices himself for the greater good of his people, and his blindness may be read as a means to the end of destroying God’s enemies.¹⁰ Samson’s disability is read by some as an example of a punishment, but the biblical story is more subtle than this, and it may just as easily be supposed to be an example of a condition that leads to Samson’s becoming an agent of God. Brontë’s reference to the biblical Samson offers the parts of the tale that signify her redemptionist approach, and she combines a number of different aspects of this narrative in her three references to it in *Jane Eyre*. The first allusion is to Samson’s temptation by Delilah. Samson, who has been a Nazirite from birth and has therefore been bound to the rules outlined in Numbers 6.1—to avoid wine and the fruits of the vine, to avoid cutting his hair, and to stay away from any corpse—is tempted, by his wife’s charms, to break his oath. Forming part of a discussion between Jane and Edward on the past effects of female beauty on Edward’s character, Jane replies to Edward’s appreciation of her face, and to his embrace of her influence over him (“the conquest I undergo has a witchery beyond any triumph I can

9. I am grateful to Jeremy Schipper for discussing disability in the Samson narrative with me.

10. I am presenting a different argument from Bolt, who suggests that *Jane Eyre* is in conversation with Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* rather than with the biblical source, and am departing from his view that the novel leaves “the underpinning hierarchies of normativism over disability and ‘the sighted’ over ‘the blind’ remain intact” (271).

win” [263; ch. 24]), with an enigmatic facial expression. When questioned about what she is thinking, Jane responds to Edward that she “was thinking of Hercules and Samson with their charmers” (263; ch. 24). Here Jane hints that Samson’s (and Edward’s) downfall is his sight—Samson’s susceptibility to the physical charms of his wife Delilah, and to the conflict that this creates with his devotion to God. The sighted Edward is an echo of the sighted Samson at this point because he is overcome by Jane’s particular kind of beauty. As Edward and Jane are discussing “women who please me only by their faces” (263; ch. 24), Brontë draws attention to Edward’s temptation by Jane’s physical appearance as well as by her character—her “clear eye and eloquent tongue” (263; ch. 24).¹¹

Edward himself refers to Samson when he longs for the physical strength to convince Jane to become his mistress after the aborted wedding. He says, “By God! I long to exert a fraction of Samson’s strength, and break the entanglement like tow” (306; ch. 27). The reference is one of the moments in the biblical narrative when Samson plays with the possibility of breaking his vows. He suggests (falsely) to Delilah that if she weaves seven locks of his hair with a “thread of tow,” his strength will be broken (Judg. 16.9). When Delilah does this and Samson is set upon by the Philistines, Samson breaks the bonds with ease. Like Samson, Edward signals here that he both wants and does not want to break the vows he has made before God. Edward likens Jane’s life, in classical terms, to a “silken thread” that has been smooth until this point, and that has now developed a “knot”—“The hitch in Jane’s character,” as Edward describes it (306; ch. 27). It is likely that he is not referring to his prior marriage as the sticking point—which is a hitch not in Jane’s character but in his—but to Jane’s commitment to her chastity. His wish is to break that commitment with the strength of Samson. But to use divinely sanctioned strength for ill by pursuing Jane as a mistress and committing adultery is clearly an indication that Edward is on the wrong religious path; it is his sightedness that leads him to this point.

The final reference to Samson is made by Jane and is to Samson’s blindness and to the strength that has returned with his hair:

But in his countenance, I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding—that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild-beast or bird,

11. Daniel Margalioth notes that “Delilah charmed Samson away from the right path, while Jane charms Rochester into it, but the mastery over the strong is the same, and so are the blinding results” (204). Jane’s charms are a temptation to Edward, but it is difficult to see how he can be on the right religious path at this point. Edward’s conversion occurs without Jane’s mediation, though it may be a consequence of his love for her.

dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson.

And reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity?—if you do, you little know me. (436; ch. 37)

Bolt suggests that Brontë’s reference to a “caged eagle” (272) echoes Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (line 1695).¹² Although Milton’s eagle, part of an epic simile describing Samson’s triumphant death, is a free bird whose “cloudless thunder bolted on” (line 1697) the heads of the Philistine audience who have come to watch him profane himself with his performance in honor of their god, Brontë, nevertheless, appears to be using Milton as her source for the description of Samson’s pitiable state. The biblical source contains no reference to Samson’s self-pity, or to his being pitied by others, but this occurs extensively in *Samson Agonistes*. Bolt’s identification of Milton as the source is significant, because it confirms that Brontë consistently has a redemptive approach to biblical passages about disability; this reference to Edward’s pitiable state as Samson-like can be set aside as it is not a direct reference to the Bible. Moreover, Jane immediately corrects her pitying of Edward’s blindness when she speaks directly to the reader, through her claim to be unafraid of his “blind ferocity” (436; ch. 37).

Brontë’s references to blindness that come directly from biblical sources avoid presenting the condition as disabling or as an indication of low social standing, associating it instead with positive spiritual gains. Blindness is neither compensatory nor punitive. In the case of Edward Rochester, it is an indicator of spiritual insight, one that helps preserve him from spiritually misleading judgments and that represents his right relationship to God and to mankind. Brontë’s use of Samson warns of the dangers of sight and of strength as a route to temptation, and, like her use of John 9, indicates a redemptionist agenda with regard to biblical texts. Her allusion to *Samson Agonistes* complicates this picture, in that, when she gives Edward and Jane moments of self-pity and pity, their recognition of the spiritual gain of blindness is in abeyance. In her reference to *Samson Agonistes*, Brontë is not drawn to the part that alludes to Samson as having his “inward eyes illuminated” (line 1689) but to the idea of the eagle. The eagle is triumphant in Milton’s version, but it is, in this moment of doubt, a caged bird. In this Brontë may be echoing the earlier parts of *Samson Agonistes*, which dwell on Samson’s captivity and self-doubt. Nonetheless, Brontë’s overarching rea-

12. See also Martin, 98–99

son for including the Samson references is Samson's status as a biblical hero whose greatest feat as a warrior comes when he is blind, and who comes to see his blindness as the route to his glory.

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MADNESS

The issue of the role of the disabled body in signaling spiritual worth is taken up again through the reference to King Nebuchadnezzar's madness. On reuniting with Edward at the end of the novel, Jane refers to him as having a "faux air" of Nebuchadnezzar in the fields" (441; ch. 37). There are three aspects of the stories associated with Nebuchadnezzar that may be relevant to the theological message of *Jane Eyre*: the King's spiritual pride and association with idolatry; his dream of a tree; and his madness in the wilderness and his recovery. Given that Jane's reference is explicitly to "the fields," it is likely that this is a direct reference to the King's madness; but, as in the reference to Edward's arm and eye, Brontë may be using the Nebuchadnezzar story in other ways too.

Nebuchadnezzar dreams of an image—with a golden head, a breast and arms of silver, thighs of brass, legs of iron, and feet of clay—that is destroyed by a huge stone (Dan. 2.31–35). The prophet Daniel interprets the golden head as standing for Nebuchadnezzar himself, hinting that the baser substances symbolize the degeneration of his kingdom under different leadership in successive years. Nebuchadnezzar is depicted here, and in the remaining stories in the book of Daniel, as "a foolish and arrogant self-idolater" (Barton and Muddiman, 565). Having dreamt of this idol, Nebuchadnezzar constructs it, inviting all the leaders of his provinces to worship it, threatening death by fire if they refuse (Dan. 3.6). The King attempts to unite a region with diverse religions through commanding the worship of this idol, but the Jewish leaders in his kingdom refuse and are thrown into "the burning fiery furnace" (Dan. 3.21). Being true to their faith, they are saved from the fire's effects (Dan. 3.25), but this is insufficient to convert Nebuchadnezzar. Next, the King dreams of being visited by a messenger from Heaven who tells him to fell a tall tree that provides shade and fruit, leaving a stump that will "be with the beasts in the grass of the earth" (Dan. 4.15). Daniel interprets the tree as referring to the King himself. The dream predicts that Nebuchadnezzar will be forced to dwell with the beasts as an animal until he recognizes the God of the Jews, after which time he will be restored to power. Nebuchadnezzar ignores the warning of the tree and is told directly by a voice from Heaven that he will be driven from his home

and will live as an animal, until “his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like bird’s claws” (Dan. 4.33). His “understanding” is removed from him, suggesting he has gone mad (Dan. 4.34). After his conversion, the King is restored to sanity and his kingdom and his greatness is even increased. He learns that “those that walk in pride [God] is able to abase” (Dan. 4.37). Just as the tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s narrative is a warning, so it is a warning for Edward. Echoes of this return in the scene when Edward refers to his hand as a “mere stump” (441; ch. 37) and sits on a “dry stump of a tree” (445; ch. 37). The tree is referenced again in connection with Edward’s disabilities when Jane asserts “You are no ruin, sir—no lightning struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow” (450; ch. 37). Using the symbolism of Nebuchadnezzar’s benevolent tree, Jane rejects Edward’s assumption that he is more like the blasted chestnut and hints that, in his blindness, he has returned to glory as Nebuchadnezzar does at the end of his narrative.

Although the other parts of Nebuchadnezzar’s narrative (the blasted tree, dreams, and idols) are clearly part of the novel’s wider set of symbolic images, Nebuchadnezzar’s madness is the part of his narrative that is most directly referenced by the novel. Edward places himself in the position of a false God, encourages Jane to see him this way, sees her in this way himself, and is therefore strongly associated with idolatry—the other important theme of Nebuchadnezzar’s story. For instance, Jane says of Edward that she could not “see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol” (277; ch. 24). From the moment Jane hears the Mighty Spirit—God’s voice in response to her prayer—and becomes “enlightened,” she renounces idolatry (425; ch. 35). Edward, coincidentally, renounces it at the same time, and his blindness symbolizes this rejection.

Tkacz is unequivocal in her assertion that the Nebuchadnezzar reference signals that Edward is in “proud defiance of God” and in need of “beneficial correction” (12). Nebuchadnezzar’s madness is, for Tkacz, a punishment that ends “when his pride has been abased” (14). Elizabeth Donaldson sees Edward’s “punishment” as “paralleling Nebuchadnezzar’s [tree] dream,” reading Edward’s blindness itself as a kind of dream, suggesting that “the closed eyes of the sleeping dreamer seem temporarily blinded” and that by “[i]mprisoning and isolating the dreamer, the dream state represents the threat of inescapable interiority, or madness” (“The Corpus of the Madwoman,” 109). But the Nebuchadnezzar story does not offer this kind of detail on the paralleling of dreaming and blindness, and Brontë is less committed to the idea of punitive disability than she might appear. Nebuchad-

nezzar's madness is punitive (when Daniel reveals to the King that he will go mad for a period of time if he does not convert, he means this will be a punishment from God if he does not "break off" his "sins by righteousness" and "show mercy to the poor" [Dan. 4.27]); and madness is linked here to a loss of status and power. Jane makes her comparison between Edward and Nebuchadnezzar in such a way as to undermine it, however. In his blind state, Edward is the forgiven Nebuchadnezzar.

Edward alludes to himself as sounding mad slightly later in the conversation. When recounting crying out Jane's name during his conversion experience, he notes, "If any listener had heard me, he would have thought me mad: I pronounced them with such frantic energy" (452; ch. 37). Given that Brontë aligns the description of Edward with the symbolism of Nebuchadnezzar's story, and given that her understanding of him as retaining his vigor and his central role as a provider of shade and strength in his blindness, we might make a case that Brontë presents disability here as no bar to power.

Bertha Rochester is, obviously, the character most associated with madness. Demonic possession is, in biblical narrative, an explanation for madness. Interestingly, Bertha is associated with demons rather than the demonically possessed of the Bible, who clearly have an identity that is separate from the demon. Bertha is called a demon on several occasions and Edward associates her with Hell, citing the Book of Revelation in connection with her. He explicitly sees Bertha's madness as a religious trial that he must overcome and uses biblical language in order to convey this impression (312; ch. 27). In his descriptions of Bertha, Edward summons up all of the negative aspects of the biblical models of disability. Her disability is strongly connected with sin—he describes her as "at once intemperate and unchaste" (310; ch. 27); he regards her as unclean, and her illness taints him, according to his perception of how the world might see it: "In the eyes of the world I was doubtless covered with grimy dishonour: but I resolved to be clean in my own sight—and to the last I repudiated the contamination of her crimes, and wrenched myself from connexion with her mental defects" (311; ch. 27). To portray life with someone who is mentally ill as hellish does not admit of a redemptive reading, it is clear, but Brontë is offering this model of disability as a way to characterize Edward's misguided approach to his religious test and his marital obligations. He believes himself to "have done all that God and humanity" (313; ch. 27) required of him, but he embarks on a life of dissipation until he finds hope that Jane is his savior and his idol, disregarding what Jane calls "the law given by God" by attempting to marry her (321; ch. 27). Edward returns to his religious path when he realizes his duty of care to Bertha. His attempt to save her from the fire, risking his own

life, is an indication of this. Edward’s association of Bertha with Hell makes explicit his disordered religious state—he has the wrong attitude toward disability at this stage in the novel.

CONCLUSION

Brontë makes no distinction between the Testaments and does not opt for the solution that Stiker and Eiesland offer—that of seeing the New Testament, or even Christ’s disabled body, as redemptive. Instead, her selectivity connotes an inclusive theology of disability that presents it, as Horne does, as an indicator of coming to discipleship. *Jane Eyre* addresses the problem of stigma in many forms, and places disability as central to the theological and romantic resolution. This emphasis signals that biblical allusion is part of Brontë’s attempt to establish the social and religious worth of people with disabilities in this novel. Brontë’s use of biblical texts addresses the problematic associations that the Bible makes between disability and punishment, sin, disruption, and uncleanness. She throws into a negative light the biblical identification of disability as lack of wholeness, as being an outcast, and as indicative of insufficient spiritual worth. She does this in two ways: by associating negative passages, such as the healing of the man at Bethesda, with characters she moralizes against, and by associating passages that admit of a redemptionist reading with characters who show their spiritual worth. The biblical allusions to disability are remarkable in *Jane Eyre* for the consistency of their approach and for their function as indicators of the stage that the characters have reached in their spiritual growth. When the sighted Edward is on what the novel deems to be the wrong religious path, he is associated with the foibles of the sighted Samson; when he has experienced his religious conversion, he is the blind man who spiritually sees (John 9). Edward’s failure in recognizing Bertha’s sacral purpose (or his ethical obligation to her), by associating her with the unclean and unworthy, is part of the lesson he is required to learn.¹³

Biblical healings are controversial in disability studies, for the theology of cure that they may generate and for their reduction of people with dis-

13. It is interesting to note that Brontë’s account of disability in *Villette* is much less sympathetic. Miss Marchmont is an eccentric invalid with a commanding nature who shows little sympathy for others, and a character known only as the “crétin” is described as deformed, animal-like, and mendacious. Brontë’s later use of disability makes the strong connection between biblical references and disability and the consistency of the redemptive approach seem even more striking in *Jane Eyre*. I am grateful to Christine Went for reminding me of these references.

abilities to passive tools of God. Mitchell and Snyder note the scarcity of comment in modern theology and biblical studies on the fact that Christ's healing miracles resolve the difficulties that arise from disability through "the erasure of rather than the acceptance of disability" ("Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance," 178). Brontë's positive use of people who are healed of their disabilities leaves her open to the criticism leveled by some critics that people with disabilities in the Bible are reduced to agents of God. But, one could just as well argue that to be an agent of God is the highest form of dignity within the Christian tradition. Brontë avoids this controversy by the careful selection of aspects of biblical narratives that identify disability as a route to salvation and as an indicator of faith. Her selectivity and manipulation of biblical allusions reveals a redemptionist agenda that helps to clarify the more ambiguous uses of disability in the novel, causing serious doubts about readings that suggest that Edward is punished, Jane has ascended in power over him, and St. John is saved. The biblical intertexts point to a nonpunitive understanding of disability that provides a strong basis for understanding Edward's disabilities not as a divine punishment but as a signal that he is righteous. Brontë takes her inspiration for Edward's disabilities from the hand and eye of the Sermon and the Mount, strongly underscoring that she believes them to be markers of redemption.