

The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat* in Leviticus 13–14

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Of all the eccentricities and diversities of human embodiment, no physical abnormality seems to have captured the imagination of biblical authors so much as *ṣāraʿat* (צִרְעָת), “skin disease,” which is accorded detailed treatment in both Priestly legislation and non-Priestly narratives. Scholarly treatments of the condition have tended to view the diverse scriptural portraits as descriptions of the same condition: an essentially homogeneous medical condition with, importantly, a single cause. This approach rides roughshod over the diverse views of the various biblical authors. In this article we will first examine the Priestly notion of the origin of *ṣāraʿat*, with the specific intent of demonstrating that, unlike the non-Priestly narratives, the Priestly laws of Leviticus 13–14 do not present *ṣāraʿat* as a divine punishment for human sin. The second part of the essay provides a brief overview of how three distinct hermeneutical groups—precritical interpreters, historical-critical scholars, and scholars of disability studies—understand (or fail to understand) the distinctive claims of the Priestly legislation regarding *ṣāraʿat*.

I. THE PRIESTLY PRESENTATION OF *ṣāraʿat*

In the Hebrew Bible, the non-Priestly narratives involving *ṣāraʿat* are generally in agreement that the affliction is the direct result of sinful behavior of some sort. In these texts the disease is inflicted by YHWH on the sufferer, and it is from YHWH alone—frequently through prophetic intermediation—that healing can be

sought. Thus, in the story of Numbers 12, Miriam's *šāraʿat* is inflicted on her directly by יהוה as a punishment for her speaking ill of Moses. Moses, acting in his prophetic intercessory role, attempts to persuade יהוה to heal her, and it is only when יהוה allows her punishment to end, after seven days, that she is healed and readmitted into the camp. In 2 Sam 3:29, among the divine punishments David calls down upon the house of Joab is that of *šāraʿat*. In 2 Kings 5, the disease of the Aramean general Naaman is not explicitly from יהוה, but he is healed through the prophetic action of Elisha. It is further demonstrated that Elisha has the power to cause *šāraʿat*, as he does with Gehazi at the end of the chapter, in this case as a clear punishment for sin. In 2 Chr 26:19–21 the king is said to commit a blatant cultic sin, namely, the illegitimate offering of incense in the sanctuary (26:16–19), and יהוה strikes him with *šāraʿat* before the priests (26:19–20).¹ These four passages, potentially from four different sources,² exhibit a common conceptualization of the origin of *šāraʿat* and, given the divine origin, the necessary measures by which it may be removed.³

If the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible are united in the claim that *šāraʿat* is the result of sin, the Priestly regulations concerning the disease in Leviti-

¹ 2 Chronicles 26:19–21 is the Chronicler's expansion of the much briefer notice in 2 Kgs 15:5, in which it is reported that יהוה struck Azariah with *šāraʿat*. This passage from 2 Kings does not make an explicit connection between *šāraʿat* and sin. The notice of *šāraʿat* does follow the typical Deuteronomistic statement that the king did not remove the *bāmôt*, but this should not be taken as a cause-and-effect relationship. First, the Deuteronomistic assessment of Azariah is definitely positive (2 Kgs 15:3). Second, other kings are said to have let the *bāmôt* remain, and they are not afflicted with *šāraʿat* or any other punishment (cf. 1 Kgs 22:44; 2 Kgs 12:4; 14:4; 15:35). Third, the very fact that the Chronicler creates a story of cultic sin when reworking this passage is good evidence that the Deuteronomistic text did not contain any specific allusion to such. In short, the notice in 2 Kgs 15:5 seems to be simply an annalistic comment on the health of the king rather than a judgment. The Chronicler, with his well-known tendency to see sin and punishment as transpiring within a single generation (rather than transgenerationally as in Dtr), transforms this brief comment into the scheme of sin and punishment that we see in the other narratives.

² Numbers 12 is classically assigned to the Elohist source, because of the presence of Miriam (who is known only in E), the prophetic depiction of Moses, and the location of the tent of meeting; see Alan W. Jenks, *The Elohist and North Israelite Traditions* (SBLMS 22; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 54–55. More recent European scholarship attributes it to an independent layer of pre-Priestly writing; see, e.g., Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 76–88. 2 Samuel 3 is perhaps from the pre-Deuteronomistic narrative of David's rise to power. 2 Kings 5 is from the originally independent cycle of Elisha stories. 2 Chronicles 26:19–21 is obviously from the Chronicler, as it is an expansion of the Deuteronomistic text from 2 Kings 5.

³ We deal here only with texts regarding *šāraʿat*, rather than with disease in general, since the Priestly passage under discussion refers only to *šāraʿat*. Numerous diseases and other afflictions are, of course, viewed in a wide variety of biblical texts as the result of divine displeasure.

cus 13–14 are equally clear that this is not the case: *ṣāraʿat*, in the Priestly presentation, carries no religious or moral guilt, is not associated with any kind of sin, but is rather a simple fact of human existence, one that, like many others, has cultic and ritual implications.⁴ This is evident both from the placement of the *ṣāraʿat* laws in the Priestly corpus and from the details of the evaluation and treatment of the disease in these chapters. Though this unique Priestly view of the etiology of *ṣāraʿat* has been recognized by some scholars, it has not received a full argumentation; the following intends to rectify this situation.

As most scholars have noted, *ṣāraʿat* is not categorized with sinful actions in the Priestly laws; it is, rather, aligned both textually and conceptually with the ritual impurities resulting from genital discharge (Leviticus 15), childbirth (Leviticus 12), and corpse contact (Lev 11:24–28, 39–40); especially relevant is the combination of these elements in Num 5:2.⁵ In the Priestly worldview, none of these events is attributed to sin—indeed, all three are natural and largely unavoidable parts of human activity. Nowhere in these impurity regulations—including in Leviticus 13–14—is there any mention of sin, neither in the impurifying act nor in the concomitant purification rituals.⁶ The Priestly laws are carefully ordered, and

⁴ This has been recognized, if not argued fully, by Martin Noth, *Leviticus* (trans. J. E. Anderson; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 108; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 200; Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 185; Baruch J. Schwartz, “Leviticus,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 232–34; David Janzen, *The Social Meanings of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: A Study of Four Writings* (BZAW 344; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 103; Roy E. Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 199; Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 53–56.

⁵ Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 818. The relationship between ritual impurity and sin is clearly drawn in the Priestly writings and has been described in painstaking detail by Milgrom and others: although sin does cause contamination of the sancta, not all impurity derives from sin. It is thus difficult to accept the reading of Nobuyoshu Kiuchi (“A Paradox of the Skin Disease,” *ZAW* 113 [2001]: 505–14), who states that “it could be reasonably assumed that uncleanness has a close connection with sinfulness” (p. 513), and further that “the disease of *ṣāraʿat* is chosen [out of all possible skin diseases the author could have described] because its symptoms are most apt for describing the nature of human sinfulness” (ibid.). He says this despite admitting that the prescriptions of Leviticus 13–14 do not necessarily have “some kind of sin in view. There is no indication in the text itself about the possibility” (p. 511). Kiuchi’s interpretation, concluding as it does with the statement that “man tends to hide his own sinfulness, which is an affront to the omniscient God. If all his sinfulness is revealed before God, he is accepted into his presence” (p. 513), is more homiletical than exegetical.

⁶ The *ḥattāʿt* sacrifice, prescribed for childbirth (Lev 12:6, 8), *ṣāraʿat* (Lev 14:19, 22, 31), and genital discharge (15:15, 30), is not a “sin offering,” as commonly rendered (as in the major trans-

we cannot ignore or underestimate the importance of the larger context of the laws of *šāra^cat* in P.

Comparison with the non-Priestly narratives involving *šāra^cat*, on the one hand, and the Priestly regulations concerning sin, on the other, provides further evidence that sin plays no part in the Priestly *šāra^cat* laws. In relation to the non-Priestly narratives of *šāra^cat*, we do not find in Leviticus 13–14 any activity on the part of Yhwh, as in Numbers 12; 2 Sam 3:29; 2 Kgs 15:5; and 2 Chr 26:20; nor is there any supplication, by either the sufferer or his representative, as in Numbers 12 and 2 Kings 5. In Leviticus 13–14 there are in fact no measures the sufferer (the *mēšōrā^c*) can take to relieve his affliction, at least none that the Priestly author puts forward; he must simply wait for the disease to pass. Whereas the prophet takes on the role of healer or intermediary in Numbers 12 and 2 Kings 5, in Leviticus 13–14 the priest has no role in the removal of *šāra^cat*, but only in its diagnosis—and even in this the priest does nothing but say whether the sufferer has *šāra^cat*, and only for the purpose of determining whether the *mēšōrā^c* is a source of impurity; all other considerations are absent.⁷ The affliction comes without warning and disappears only with the passage of time.⁸ In relation to the priestly regulations concerning sin in Leviticus 4–5, the section on *šāra^cat* in Leviticus 13–14 lacks any introductory statement identifying the specific sin committed, as in Lev 5:1–4, 20–22, or even a statement noting that there has been any sin at all, such as we find in 4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:15, 17. There is no moment at which the sufferer realizes his sin, as in the cases of 4:13–14, 22–23, 27–28; 5:17, 23, or confesses his guilt, as in the case of 5:5. Most notably, even after the offering of sacrifices, the *mēšōrā^c* is not said to

lations: ESV [English Standard Version], KJV, NAB, *NIB*, NIV, NJB, NRSV, NJPS), but rather, as Milgrom has conclusively demonstrated (*Leviticus 1–16*, 253–92), a “purification offering,” required to purge the sanctuary of the impurity that has accumulated there, including that which derives from the various forms of ritual impurity described in Leviticus 11–15. Thus, the prescription of this sacrifice does not serve to indicate any connection with sin.

⁷ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The History of Israelite Religion* (in Hebrew; 8 vols. in 4; Tel Aviv: Bialik, 1955–56), 1:549–51; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 887. This seems to be true also in Deut 24:8, in which the Israelites afflicted with *šāra^cat* are told to obey the instructions of the Levitical priests. Milgrom (“Profane Slaughter and a Formulaic Key to the Composition of Deuteronomy,” *HUCA* 47 [1976]: 1–17, here 9–10) takes this as a direct reference to the Priestly laws of Leviticus 13–14. If this is the case, then the Deuteronomic authors have adopted the Priestly protocols but not the Priestly concept of the origin of disease, as is evident from numerous other references in the book to disease as divine punishment (see Deut 7:15; 28:21–22, 27–28, 35, 59–61; 29:21; 32:39). In his analysis Milgrom ignores the subsequent verse, Deut 24:9, which links *šāra^cat* to the narrative of Miriam in Numbers 12. It seems more likely that the Deuteronomic author, most likely a member of the priesthood, believes, like the Priestly authors, that the diagnostic role belongs to the priests. This verse is thus evidence not of textual dependence but rather of common authorial background and tradition.

⁸ Cf. Noth, *Leviticus*, 107.

be forgiven (*wēnīslaḥ lô*), as in 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18, 26; rather, precisely in the place where we find the statement of forgiveness in Leviticus 4–5, we find in 14:20b the proclamation “he is clean” (*wēṭāhēr*).

It is readily admitted that the Priestly laws differ in genre from the non-Priestly narratives: the laws are not directly concerned with the manner in which *šāra^cat* is contracted or healed, but rather with its diagnosis and the removal of the impurity that results from it. Thus, many of the features we find in the narratives that speak to the divine origin of *šāra^cat* are not expected in the legislation. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow that, because the Priestly authors do not provide an etiology for *šāra^cat*, they therefore assume the etiology evident in other biblical corpora. The lack of Priestly etiology does not entail the acceptance of the non-Priestly etiology. The logic of the Priestly concept of impurity further speaks against the notion that *šāra^cat* is a punishment for sin. According to the Priestly worldview, the danger of sin is not an individual one but a corporate one: sins, both unintentional and intentional, result in the collection of impurity in the sanctum. This impurity, if left unpurged, causes the departure of $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ from the tabernacle, the withdrawal of the source of life from the midst of Israel, national death, and destruction. It is thus incumbent on every individual Israelite to make expiation for his unintentional sins in a prompt manner: each individual is responsible for the health of the Israelite body as a whole (the impurity resulting from intentional sins can be purged only once a year on the Day of Atonement, as described in Leviticus 16). There is no room in the Priestly system for individual punishment for sin, nor is it ever mentioned; sin and impurity threaten the entire community. Given the clarity of this system in P, *šāra^cat* cannot be a punishment for unintentional sin, as the rituals for purging the impurities resulting from unintentional sin are already clearly laid out in Leviticus 4–5, and there would be no need for a specific ritual for the *mēšōrā^c*; nor can it be a punishment for intentional sin, for there is no ritual except that of Leviticus 16 that can purge the impurities resulting from intentional sin. The rituals prescribed in Leviticus 11–15 as a category, including that for *šāra^cat*, are elaborated precisely because they do not fall into the category of rituals connected with sin, already detailed in chs. 4–5. These impurities result from nonsinful activities and are therefore not assumed in the foregoing Priestly system.

Although the placement of Leviticus 13–14 among the Priestly laws of ritual impurity and the absence in these chapters of any explicit reference to sin, supplication, or forgiveness are strong evidence, other considerations equally point away from any connection between *šāra^cat* as presented in Leviticus 13–14 and sin. Among the prominent difficulties in the Priestly material is the statement that if the *šāra^cat* covers the entire body, the *mēšōrā^c* is pronounced clean (13:12–13). This regulation has received a variety of interpretations, but in any light it seems clear that any relationship with sin is counterindicated by this ruling. Jacob Milgrom

argues that the complete whiteness of the skin is a sign that the *šāra^cat* has healed.⁹ If this is so, then an origin in sin is precluded, for this would suggest that the sinner has been healed (i.e., forgiven) without any sort of penance or even sacrifice, a concept entirely contrary to the rest of Priestly law. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Erhard S. Gerstenberger tentatively raises the possibility of social “consideration for the person already marked by death,” or perhaps “a positive estimation regarding the rare instance when total infection appears.”¹⁰ Neither of these possibilities is indicated in this text or any other in the Priestly source, and in neither case is it possible that the *mēšōrā^c* is being punished for having sinned. Kiuchi similarly proposes that the complete whiteness of the *mēšōrā^c* is an indication that he is in fact approaching death.¹¹ Yet if the *šāra^cat* is considered the result of sin, one must ask how the return to cultic purity of a person who has sinned badly enough to die by *šāra^cat* conforms to any aspect of Priestly legislation.¹²

An ostensible difficulty with the sharp division between *šāra^cat* and sin in the Priestly legislation would seem to be the requirement that the sufferer offer the *ʔāšām* sacrifice (Lev 14:12), generally translated and understood as “guilt-offering” and prescribed in Lev 5:14–26 when an Israelite has trespassed against the sacred sphere.¹³ But the presence of the *ʔāšām* sacrifice cannot be taken as a definitive indication that the *mēšōrā^c* is being punished for a sin, as Milgrom suggests.¹⁴

⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 785. So also Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: ויקרא*. *The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 78; August Dillmann, *Die Bücher Exodus und Leviticus* (3rd ed.; Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament 12; Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1897), 556. The same interpretation is brought by Schwartz (“Leviticus,” 235), but, as he does not see any concept of sin in this section, there is no tension in his reading.

¹⁰ Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (trans. Douglas W. Stott; OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 163.

¹¹ Kiuchi, “Paradox,” 508.

¹² Hartley (*Leviticus*, 197) suggests that a reparation offering is required because the disease has “marred a person who bears the very image of God.” It is unclear why the sacrifice would not also be necessary for other physical injuries, especially those that might lead to permanent scarring (at the very least). An entirely different interpretation is given by Hanna Liss (“Ritual Purity and the Construction of Identity: The Literary Function of the Laws of Purity in the Book of Leviticus,” in *The Books of Leviticus and Numbers* [ed. Thomas Römer; BETL 215; Leuven: Peeters, 2008], 329–54), who distinguishes between the “dynamic” state of *šāra^cat*, in which the skin is patchy and the disease spreading, and the “static” state described in Lev 13:12–13. She argues that in the static state, impurity does not transfer, and that therefore the *mēšōrā^c* may be declared clean, since he represents no danger to the community or the sancta. In Liss’s interpretation there is no connection between *šāra^cat* and sin.

¹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 856. Schwartz (“Leviticus,” 216) suggests that a better translation would be “reparation offering,” as the verb literally means “to incur liability” and the noun means “the payment of damages”; he considers the prescription of the *ʔāšām* sacrifice in this context “a mystery.”

¹⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 856.

Indeed, the very placement of the ṣāšām sacrifice within the order of events regarding the mēšōrā^c militates against this idea.¹⁵ According to the regulations of the ṣāšām sacrifice in Lev 5:14–26, the offering is to be made upon the Israelite's realization of his sin, and the guilt is removed from him (i.e., he is forgiven) after the sacrifice is successfully concluded. Yet this is not at all the process for the mēšōrā^c in Leviticus 14. Rather, the ṣāšām is offered only after the sufferer has healed. Were šāra^cat truly an indication of sin, then the healing of it should be the result of having paid reparations for the cultic liability incurred; that is, it should follow the sacrifice, not precede it.¹⁶ Further, the fact that **the rituals in Leviticus 14 do not result in forgiveness but rather in cultic purity (14:8, 9, 20b)** indicates that the concern of the Priestly legislation—and the purpose of the ṣāšām sacrifice required of the person healed from šāra^cat—is not to make reparations for some sin, since none has been committed, but rather to effect the process of purification, particularly by virtue of the ṣāšām's unique utilization of blood.¹⁷ In short, the ṣāšām sacrifice in Leviticus 14 does not seem to conform to the model of the ṣāšām prescribed in ch. 5, at least not in its purpose or timing.¹⁸ It must be admitted that, unlike the reg-

¹⁵ On the irregular placement of the ṣāšām in Leviticus 14, see Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus* (FAT 2/25; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 278–79.

¹⁶ Cf. David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (SBLDS 101; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 84–85.

¹⁷ Thus, Schwartz (“Leviticus,” 239) suggests that the ṣāšām sacrifice is employed here “simply to provide blood for the final removal of residual impurity.” Noth (*Leviticus*, 108) suggests that the ṣāšām sacrifice may be understood here as simply a part of the process of ritual cleansing, rather than as a marker of guilt per se. Levine (*Leviticus*, 87) proposes that the ṣāšām “served as a sacrifice for purification. It provided sacrificial blood for sprinkling on the extremities of the individual being purified; blood from the burnt offering and the sin offering could not be applied to the body of a human being.” Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 851) cogently argues that the ṣāšām sacrifice is necessary because “his daubing with the ṣāšām blood renders him henceforth fit to enter the sanctuary and partake of sacred food”; in other words, it is required for procedural purposes; so also Christophe Lemardelé, “Une solution pour le ṣāšām du lépreux,” *VT* 54 (2004): 208–15, at 213. On the ritual of Lev 14:1–20 as divinatory and exorcistic, see most recently Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, “The Ritual for the Leper in Leviticus 14,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context* (ed. Philip F. Esler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 66–77. Their argument that the ritual preserves formal elements of divination and exorcism, though without the accompanying belief in such ideas, is plausible; it should at least be contrasted with the older view that these rituals are evidence of actual belief in demons and the like, and that šāra^cat is a manifestation of demonic inhabitation (see, e.g., Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* [trans. John McHugh; repr., Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 462–64).

¹⁸ Note also that in the only other place in which the ṣāšām is specifically prescribed—the case of the Nazirite who unintentionally defiles his consecrated head by accidental proximity to a corpse (Num 6:9–12)—the sacrifice is the last offered rather than the first, as in Leviticus 14. The fact that the case of the Nazirite conforms in function to the prescriptions of Leviticus 5, but the

ulations regarding the other impurities of genital discharge, childbirth, and corpse contamination, only in the case of *šāra^cat* is the *ʔāšām* sacrifice prescribed, suggesting perhaps that there is something distinctive about this particular impurity.¹⁹ Yet the primary distinction, and the one with which the *ʔāšām* should be connected, is the expulsion of the *mēšōrā^c* from the camp or city for the duration of the severe impurity; crucially, according to Leviticus 4–5, this expulsion is not required for those who have sinned.²⁰

Were it the case that the prescription of the *ʔāšām* sacrifice is consistent throughout the entire Priestly source, it would be more difficult to claim that its use in Leviticus 14 is exceptional. A similarly problematic case is found, however, in Lev 19:20–22 (H), in which there is also no clear desecration of the sanctum.²¹ The case of 19:20–22 provides another counterexample to the strange appearance of the *ʔāšām* in ch. 14: in the case of the slave girl, the law specifically states that the sacrifice is brought as expiation for a sin, *ḥattā^t*, with the concomitant language of forgiveness (*wēnīslah lō*), elements that are absent, as already observed, from Leviticus 14.²² Although the *ʔāšām* sacrifice as described in Leviticus 5 is still to be understood as required in cases of sancta desecration of some sort, the case of the *mēšōrā^c* in ch. 14 (along with that of 19:20–22) does not seem to conform to the standard understanding of *ʔāšām*, and the way in which it fits into the larger Priestly scheme of sacrifices remains an open question.

A final element of Leviticus 13–14 that points away from any connection between *šāra^cat* and sin is the presence in these chapters of regulations regarding *šāra^cat* on fabric (13:47–59) and houses (14:34–53). It is obvious that neither cloth nor a house can sin; yet both can be afflicted with *šāra^cat*; neither can cloth or a house repent, atone, repay, or offer sacrifice, yet they may be declared clean.²³ It is

timing differs from that of Leviticus 14, highlights the distinctive nature of the ritual for the *mēšōrā^c*.

¹⁹ Cf. Lemardelé, “*ʔāšām*,” 212.

²⁰ Thus, Gordon Wenham (*The Book of Leviticus* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 210) suggests that the *ʔāšām* sacrifice is required “to repay all the sacrifices, tithes, and firstfruits which the afflicted man had been unable to present during his uncleanness.” See similarly Samuel J. Schultz, *Leviticus: God among His People* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1983), 83–84. Yet the *ʔāšām* sacrifice is not required in similar cases of lengthy impurity, such as the week required for a man with a genital discharge (Lev 15:13); although this man is not expelled from the community, as is the *mēšōrā^c*, he is unable by virtue of his impurity to offer sacrifices.

²¹ See Baruch J. Schwartz, “A Literary Study of the Slave-Girl Pericope—Leviticus 19:20–22,” in *Studies in Bible* (ed. Sara Japhet; ScrHier 31; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 241–55, esp. 251–55.

²² See n. 18 above.

²³ Gerstenberger’s opinion that the Priestly writer’s description of fabric and houses as having *šāra^cat* is a result of the ancient belief that “every object has a soul. Every phenomenon is personal and grounded in will, so why not also such mold formations on textiles and leather articles?”

not by chance that the final sentence regarding the purification of the house (14:53b) is virtually identical to that regarding the purification of the human sufferer (14:20b). We cannot understand the *ṣāraʿat* of fabric or a house to be in any way a verdict on their owner, since nowhere in the legislation regarding these items is the owner involved, except to notify the priest that his house might have *ṣāraʿat*.²⁴ The fact that the laws of *ṣāraʿat* in fabric and houses are interwoven with that of *ṣāraʿat* in humans indicates that *ṣāraʿat* is to be considered one common affliction, with, presumably, one common origin.²⁵ The concluding statement of this legal section emphasizes this equality: “This is the *tôrâ* for every plague of *ṣāraʿat*: for scalls, for *ṣāraʿat* of fabric or of a house, for swellings, for rashes, and for spots on the skin, to determine when they are impure and when they are pure; this is the *tôrâ* of *ṣāraʿat*” (Lev 14:54–57).²⁶ Note that the emphasis remains on the question of ritual impurity rather than on sin or guilt.

If it is accepted that the Priestly legislation in Leviticus 13–14 does not attribute the outbreak of *ṣāraʿat* to sin and divine punishment, how can we understand the relationship between the Priestly and non-Priestly texts, the latter of which decidedly do connect *ṣāraʿat* and sin? First, it is evident from the overlaps between the Priestly and non-Priestly texts that there was a social reality in ancient Israel regarding the existence of *ṣāraʿat* and the treatment of those who suffered from it.²⁷ All sources use the same word to describe what appears to be the same general ailment or ailments, that is, broadly, some sort of external affliction of the skin.

(*Leviticus*, 171) is astounding. Equally so, though for different reasons, is his assertion that “from daily experience, every woman intuitively senses the connection between humidity and the formation of mold,” and that the process of ritual purification is undertaken “much to the annoyance of thrifty housewives” (*ibid.*, 172). One might be equally interested in his revelation of the “male perspective that delights in hair-splitting systematization” (*ibid.*).

²⁴ Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 808) concludes that “another presupposition of this pericope [*ṣāraʿat* of fabrics] is that a moldy garment in no way reflects on the character of its bearer; otherwise sacrifices or some other rite would have been prescribed for the owner of the garment, so that he could make expiation for his suspected wrong. The nexus between malady and sin has been severed.” He makes the same case regarding *ṣāraʿat* of houses (*ibid.*, 867).

²⁵ Even if we understand the use of the term *ṣāraʿat* in regard to fabric and houses as a secondary development from its original context in the human sphere (cf. Noth, *Leviticus*, 106–7; Levine, *Leviticus*, 83), this does not negate the fact that for the Priestly author here the word serves the same purpose across all three categories.

²⁶ The very fact that the same term, *ṣāraʿat*, is used to describe something that strikes fabric and houses as well as humans suggests that the translation “skin disease,” or any other that is specific to the human body, is inaccurate. The word may in fact be descriptive only of the symptoms common to skin disease and fungal growth on fabrics and houses, that is, patchiness, scaliness, and change of color. It is for this reason that we have chosen not to translate the word in this article.

²⁷ See Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 167.

Further, it is agreed that Israelites suffering from this ailment were kept outside the community until they had healed, as is clear from both Lev 13:45–46 and the narratives of Num 12:14–15; 2 Kgs 7:3–10; 15:5; 2 Chr 26:21.

An important commonality between the Priestly and non-Priestly concepts of *šāraʿat* is the divine origin of the affliction. That the *šāraʿat* comes from YHWH is very clear in the narratives, in which this is frequently stated explicitly. In the Priestly laws too, however, we can say that YHWH is to be understood as the origin of the ailment, though perhaps in a less direct manner. As argued above, *šāraʿat* according to the Priestly writings is a natural phenomenon, like genital discharge and childbirth. We are misunderstanding Israelite religion anachronistically if we draw a sharp distinction between natural phenomena and the work of YHWH. Certainly for the Priestly authors, nature, indeed the entire cosmos, is under the command of YHWH, and, although not everything that comes from YHWH is necessarily a reward or punishment, everything does come from YHWH.²⁸ Thus, we need not read the statement in Lev 14:32, “When you enter the land of Canaan, which I am giving to you as a possession, and I place a plague of *šāraʿat* on your house . . .,” as signifying divine punishment.²⁹ Rather, these words simply make explicit what is otherwise implicit in these chapters: that *šāraʿat*, like all natural phenomena, comes from YHWH. It is to be noted, however, that Lev 14:33–34, the sole mention of the divine origin of *šāraʿat* in this passage, is most likely an addition of H.³⁰ If this is the case, then we may connect the divine origin of *šāraʿat* in Lev 14:34 with H’s clear statement that disease in general is a sign of divine disfavor (Lev 26:16, 25).³¹ The isolation of this view of disease to the H corpus serves only to highlight the lack

²⁸ The Priestly view of YHWH’s dominion over nature is established in Genesis 1. The non-Priestly sources of the Pentateuch are far more clear in claiming that disease and healing derive from YHWH. This notion is prominent in Gen 20:17–18; Exod 15:26; 23:25; Numbers 12; Deut 7:15; 28:21–22, 27–28, 35, 59–61; 29:21; 32:39. We may also consider in this category the stories of matriarchal barrenness in Genesis and YHWH’s granting of fertility (Gen 16:2; 18:14; 25:21; 29:31; 30:22). It is noteworthy that this theme is not employed in the Priestly source: Sarah has not borne Abraham children (Gen 16:1), but infertility is never given as the reason, and it is only her old age that makes the birth of Isaac miraculous (17:17–19)—in fact, Abraham’s advanced age is given greater prominence in the narrative (Gen 21:2, 5). There is no mention in the Priestly source of barrenness or any difficulty in childbirth for Rebekah, Leah, or Rachel.

²⁹ As does Hannah Harrington, “The Rabbinic Reception of Leviticus,” in *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception* (ed. Rolf Rendtorff and Robert A. Kugler; VTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 383–402, at 392–93.

³⁰ See Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 95 n. 119. Knohl’s delimitation of H to only these two verses is more compelling than that of Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 886–87), who attributes all of 14:33–57 to H.

³¹ It should be noted, however, that the punishments described in Leviticus 26 are corporate, not individual: it is the entirety of Israel that will suffer this variety of evils for their national failure to observe the laws, not the individual sinner.

of such a claim in the earlier Priestly legislative stratum: were the notion of *ṣāraʿat* as resulting from divine punishment evident in the original Priestly laws, then presumably H would not have needed to supplement them in this manner.

What is common to all the sources is the social reality of *ṣāraʿat* and the culturally accepted treatment of those who suffered from it, as well as the idea that the affliction originated with ΥHWH . What is distinct, however, is the etiology of the disease: according to the non-Priestly authors, *ṣāraʿat* is punishment for sin; according to the Priestly writers (perhaps with the exception of the later H), it is simply a part of nature. The Priestly legislation and non-Priestly narratives on *ṣāraʿat* are literarily unrelated; there is no sign of dependence in either direction, nor do most scholars argue for one. Furthermore, there is no indication that the Priestly laws of *ṣāraʿat* must be a later religious development relative to the non-Priestly narratives, despite the common view that the Priestly writings belong to a late stage of Israelite religious thought—indeed, the connection of *ṣāraʿat* and sin in both early texts (Numbers 12) and late (2 Chronicles 26) makes the question of relative dating moot. Rather, what the texts demonstrate is the existence of two conceptualizations of *ṣāraʿat*, similar in many ways but distinct in the crucial area of etiology. These two concepts, like so many others that are at odds in the various biblical traditions, need not be placed in any chronological order but should rather be seen as existing simultaneously and independently, each representing the different worldview of its particular author.³²

II. THREE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES

Precritical Interpretation

Although the Priestly and non-Priestly texts present very different notions of the origins of *ṣāraʿat*, the distinction between the two has frequently been either missed or consciously blurred. In the precritical era, when the essential unity and divinely inspired authorship of the Bible were taken for granted, interpreters naturally sought to connect the Priestly laws of *ṣāraʿat* in Leviticus 13–14 with the narrative traditions related to *ṣāraʿat* elsewhere in the Bible. Josephus, in describing the procedure for the banishment of sufferers from the city described in Leviticus 14, added the possibility that one could “by supplication to God obtain release

³² The simultaneity of the concepts is not necessarily dependent on the simultaneous dating of the sources in which they are found. Rather, the lack of obvious development in the concept of *ṣāraʿat* in either direction opens the possibility that the sources have preserved notions older than the texts in which they are embedded, a possibility that, without any clear textual refutation, must be taken seriously. We must also be aware of the possibility that Leviticus 13–14 in fact contains earlier material that has been reworked in its present context; see, e.g., Noth, *Leviticus*, 103–5.

from this disease and recover a healthy skin” (*Ant.* 3.264), a possibility put forward nowhere in the laws, but rather drawn obviously from the narrative materials. Philo, in his interpretation of these laws, took *ṣāraʿat* as a symbolic manifestation of sin (*Deus* 127–30).³³

The classical rabbis further developed this procedure, interpreting the laws on *ṣāraʿat* in terms of sin, even frequently identifying various unnamed biblical plagues and punishments as *ṣāraʿat*.³⁴ They drew specific connections between the laws and the narratives dealing with *ṣāraʿat*,³⁵ of particular note is *Lev. Rab.* 15.8, in which the rabbis explicitly attempted to integrate the Priestly regulations of Leviticus 13–14 into the narrative of Numbers 12. They further claimed that the *ṣāraʿat* in garments and houses served as warnings to the sinner, encouragements to repent, before that person was actually struck.³⁶ The fact that the rabbis frequently relied in their interpretation of *ṣāraʿat* on the creation of a pun—reading *mēšōrāʿ* as *mōšîʿ raʿ*, “slanderer”³⁷—may be taken as indicative of the lack of any explicit reference to sin in the text of Leviticus itself.

Medieval Jewish commentators followed a similar path. Ibn Ezra (ad Lev 13:45; 14:10) stated simply that the sufferer had been afflicted as a result of his evil actions, in particular those committed through word or thought.³⁸ Here he may have been referring to the aforementioned midrashic pun, although without using the precise language of it. Naḥmanides (ad Lev 13:47) was particularly forceful in his claim that it is when an Israelite sins that his flesh, clothes, or house appear contaminated, as a sign that God has turned away from him.³⁹ He rejected the notion that these might be natural events, stating repeatedly that *ṣāraʿat* is divinely inflicted (ad Lev 13:47; 14:34, 43–45).⁴⁰ Recognizing the difficulty of the ʿāšām sacrifice, Naḥmanides (ad Lev 14:8) tentatively suggested that the ʿāšām served to expiate the sins committed before the disease struck, that is, the sins that led to the

³³ Early Christian exegetes were similarly unanimous in attributing *ṣāraʿat* to sin. See Gerard Rouwhorst, “Leviticus 12–15 in Early Christianity,” in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus* (ed. M. J. H. M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz; Jewish and Christian Perspectives 2; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 181–93.

³⁴ See *Lev. Rab.* 15.9; 16.1; 17.3; *Num. Rab.* 7.1, 4, 5, 10; *Tanḥ. Mešorah* 4; *b. Soṭah* 5a–b; *b. Sanh.* 26a; *b. ʿArak.* 16a. On the rabbinic view of *ṣāraʿat*, see Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (SJLA 1; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 90–102.

³⁵ See *Sifra Meš.* 5; *Lev. Rab.* 15.1, 5; 16.1; 17.3; *Num. Rab.* 7.5; *b. ʿArak.* 16a.

³⁶ See *Lev. Rab.* 17.4; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 7.10.

³⁷ See *Lev. Rab.* 15.1, 2, 3, 4, 6; *b. ʿArak.* 15b.

³⁸ Ibn Ezra (ad 14:8) also drew the comparison with the case of Miriam in Numbers 12, although only in respect to the seven days of quarantine.

³⁹ Naḥmanides relies here on the proof-text of 14:34; see discussion above.

⁴⁰ So too Abarbanel, ad Lev 14:34. The rejection of such an idea may suggest that these commentators recognized the implication of the Priestly laws, even while arguing against it.

disease, while the *ḥattā^t* sacrifice might do the same for sins committed while in quarantine. Most dependent on both the earlier rabbinic treatments and the non-Priestly narratives was Sforno (ad Lev 14:12), who both cited the rabbinic connection of *šāra^cat* and evil speech and referred to the narrative of 2 Chr 26:19.

Given precritical assumptions about the nature of the biblical text and its authorship, these readings of the *šāra^cat* pericope in Leviticus 13–14 are not surprising. The relative obscurity of the legislation was well served by the standard rabbinic hermeneutic of intentionally reading one text in light of another. As this approach was used to connect numerous otherwise unrelated verses, it was certainly easy enough to draw the connections between the laws and narratives of *šāra^cat*. The medievals for the most part disdained the classical hermeneutic, but even in their attempt to get at the plain contextual meaning of the text (the *pěšat*) we can see that they retained the significant features of the earlier reading. The connection in precritical interpretation of *šāra^cat* and sin, of Leviticus 13–14 and the non-Priestly narratives, is both expected and entirely logical. What is less expected is that the same connections should be drawn by historical critics who are fully aware of the difference in authorship between Leviticus 13–14 and the other texts dealing with *šāra^cat*.

Historical-Critical Analyses

If there is one element of pentateuchal criticism on which virtually all scholars are agreed, it is the theological singularity of the Priestly writings. Nevertheless, the majority of critical scholars continue to understand *šāra^cat* in the Priestly legislation as the result of sin, a concept that, although common in non-Priestly texts, is, as we have seen, foreign to the Priestly notion of *šāra^cat*. Despite his keen insights into the distinction between impurity and sin in general, and his appreciation for the absence of sin in the cases of *šāra^cat* on fabrics and houses, Milgrom is one of the strongest voices for the connection of *šāra^cat* and sin. (He even cites with approval some of the rabbinic interpretations mentioned above.⁴¹ Hannah Harrington has similarly defended the association in *Lev. Rab.* of *šāra^cat* and sin, claiming that it has its origins in a close reading of Leviticus.⁴²) In his initial discussion of Leviticus 13–14, Milgrom adduces both Mesopotamian and Greek comparative evidence to argue that the nexus of sin and skin disease is “a universal phenomenon that cannot be confined to cultural bounds.”⁴³ He goes

⁴¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 823.

⁴² Harrington, “Rabbinic Reception,” 392–93. Although her focus is mainly on the rationale for the rabbinic view, Harrington does suggest that the connection seen by the rabbis is authentically present in the biblical text.

⁴³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 821.

on to cite the non-Priestly texts as confirmation that *šāraʿat* has “its origin in divine wrath.”⁴⁴

The use of the non-Priestly narratives as evidence for the interpretation of the Priestly laws is followed by other significant scholars and commentators. Baruch Levine claims that, “generally speaking, all disease was regarded as a punishment from God for some wrongdoing. In the case of *tsaraʿat* specifically, there was a tradition that it represented a punishment from God for acts of malice such as Miriam’s malicious criticism of Moses, reported in Numbers 12:1–3.”⁴⁵ Gerstenberger similarly writes that “the stories of ‘lepers’ in the Old Testament . . . show all too clearly that the skin eruptions in question are viewed as God’s punishment. Any healing can occur only if the cause, namely Yahweh himself, rescinds the punishment.”⁴⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky used the non-Priestly narratives as evidence for her statement that “the only instance [in the Priestly impurity laws] in which there was any moral opprobrium attached to a polluted state is in the case of the leper.”⁴⁷ Christophe Nihan refers to “the specific meaning of this disease which, in Israel as elsewhere in antiquity, was typically believed to be a sanction of the deity for a major offense.”⁴⁸ We can even see scholars making the connection between the Priestly legislation and the non-Priestly narratives in reverse, so to speak, reading the narratives in light of the laws: Gerstenberger, for example, argues that the narrative of Numbers 12 is in fact based on the ritual prescriptions of Leviticus 13–14.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid., 820–23. Despite his strong statements here, Milgrom elsewhere is somewhat more ambivalent, acknowledging that the “disease is not traceable to sancta or for that matter to any other cause,” but “other sins may have been responsible for his affliction” (ibid., 856).

⁴⁵ Levine, *Leviticus*, 75.

⁴⁶ Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 157.

⁴⁷ Frymer-Kensky, “Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O’Connor; ASOR Special Volume Series 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 399–414, here 403. Like Milgrom, Frymer-Kensky displayed some ambivalence on this point, stating elsewhere that “the formal tradition of Israel attached no blame to lepers, only impurity. Ritual pollution, even in the case of lepers, was not a moral issue” (ibid., 404). See also Henning Graf Reventlow, “Krankheit—ein Makel an heiliger Vollkommenheit. Das Urteil altisraelitischer Priester in Leviticus 13 in seinem Kontext,” in *Studien zu Ritual und Sozialgeschichte im Alten Orient/Studies on Ritual and Society in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Thomas Richard Kämmerer; BZAW 374; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 275–90, esp. 286–87; he reads the rituals of Leviticus 13–14 in conjunction with Psalms 32 and 33.

⁴⁸ Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 279.

⁴⁹ Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 167. He seems to base this opinion on the seven-day period in which Miriam stays outside the camp (Num 12:14–15), which he sees as the narrative representation of the seven-day periods in Leviticus 13 (here he follows Ibn Ezra; see n. 38 above). Functionally, however, these two seven-day periods differ: in the Priestly legal section, a week is prescribed as the necessary time it takes to judge with any certainty whether the *šāraʿat* has pro-

In defending the association in P of šāra^cat and sin, Milgrom focuses particularly on the narrative of 2 Chr 26:19–21, because there the mēšōrā^c Uzziah is described as committing ma^cal, “sacrilege.” The collocation of the words šāra^cat and ma^cal in 2 Chronicles 26 Milgrom then compares with the close connection of ma^cal and the ʾāšām sacrifice in Leviticus 5.⁵⁰ Drawing the circle to a close, Milgrom argues that the use of the ʾāšām in Leviticus 13–14 therefore entails the notion of ma^cal, and that thus šāra^cat is associated with sacrilege. Milgrom does not take into account the fact that ma^cal is a frequent and freighted term in Chronicles for cultic offense—indeed it is used more frequently in Chronicles than anywhere else—and occurs regularly without any reference to šāra^cat.⁵¹ It is thus overhasty to draw the conclusion that the Chronicler is, in this instance, using ma^cal with intentional reference to Leviticus 5. Even if one wishes to make this argument, however, it does not mean that Leviticus 13–14 has ma^cal in mind, only that the Chronicler drew the connection—as has Milgrom—between the two uses of the ʾāšām sacrifice.⁵²

Any use of the non-Priestly texts to explain the meaning of the Priestly legislation—here and elsewhere—is methodologically problematic. The distinctiveness of the Priestly theology is well established; it in fact forms the basis of much pentateuchal criticism. Yet scholars continue to try to understand the Priestly concept of šāra^cat as if it is not only related to that of the non-Priestly texts but in fact identical to it. Critical scholarship, rather than understanding the Priestly material on its own terms, reproduces the same intertextual mode of analysis as its pre-critical forebears, at least in this instance.

gressed or regressed; in the narrative, it is a period of punishment and shaming, explicitly said to be analogous to the period of shame a woman would endure if her father spat in her face (Num 12:14; the seven-day period of shame associated with being spat upon is otherwise unattested in the Hebrew Bible, although the link between spit and shame is known; cf. Deut 25:9; Job 30:10; Isa 50:6). The period of seven days is a standard trope in the Hebrew Bible, in both Priestly and non-Priestly contexts, and by itself cannot stand as evidence of textual dependence, especially when there are significant discrepancies in the function of the period in its respective contexts. For reasons that are entirely unclear, Gerstenberger also assumes that Miriam is covered with šāra^cat “from her head to her feet” (ibid., 162), and he uses this assumption to highlight the confusing nature of the regulation in Lev 13:12–13. There is, however, no indication in Numbers 12 that Miriam’s entire body is covered.

⁵⁰ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 821; see also his discussion of this passage in *Cult and Conscience: The Asham and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance* (SJLA 18; Leiden: Brill, 1976), 80–81.

⁵¹ See 1 Chr 2:7; 5:25; 10:13; 2 Chr 12:2; 28:19, 22; 29:6; 30:7; 36:14. See Pancratius C. Beentjes, “They Saw That His Forehead Was Leprous’ (2 Chr 26:20): The Chronicler’s Narrative on Uzziah’s Leprosy,” in Poorthuis and Schwartz, *Purity and Holiness*, 61–72, here 63–64.

⁵² In this light we might see the Chronicler as the first author to make this association. See also Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 179; Lemardelé, “ʾāšām,” 208–15; Dillmann, *Exodus und Leviticus*, 563–64.

Disability Studies Analyses

In recent years, critical theorists and social scientists outside the enclave of biblical scholarship have begun to challenge the manner in which the interlacing categories of disability and disease are constructed in modern discourse. Disability scholars have divided historical treatments of disability into three models; a religious model, a medical model, and a social or cultural model.⁵³ Of these, the religious model, which was operative until the Enlightenment, is the most pertinent. It posits that disability is caused by sin and removed using religious measures and divine intervention; both the disability and the disabled person are therefore aligned with sin and evil.⁵⁴

The advent of critical disability theory and the recognition that the category of disability is both constructed and representative of social experiences and

⁵³ The social model emphasizes the social constructedness of “disability” in contradistinction to “impairment.” According to this view, the impairment that leads an individual to use a wheelchair becomes a disability only when this individual encounters discrimination in society that acts to disable them (Colin Barnes, *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination* [London: Hurst, 1991]). The cultural model blurs the boundaries between impairment and disability, positing that the social experience of disability includes a larger complex of social structures (see Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* [London: Verso, 1995], 2, 11; and Rosemary Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997], 1-22). With respect to the distinction between the social model and the cultural model, a certain ideological cleft can be plotted between scholars in the United Kingdom and scholars in the United States. This in turn can be attributed to the varying underlying commitments of their work. In the United Kingdom, disability studies grew out of Marxist concerns for an oppressed underclass and over-emphasized society as the root of disability. For a discussion of the historical and political underpinnings of UK research, see Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement: A Sociological Approach* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990), 1–10. The cultural model as advocated by Davis, David Mitchell, and Sharon Snyder dominates in North American scholarship and has become the theoretical underpinning of American biblical scholarship on disability. See, e.g., Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 445; New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 1–18. For a succinct summary of the history of disability studies, see Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 441; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 15–22.

⁵⁴ See the assessment of David Braddock and Susan Parish, that “writings from the Old Testament suggest paradoxical attitudes, which exhorted society to be generous and kind toward individuals with impairments, while also declaring that impairment was a mark of the wrath of God” (Braddock and Parish, “An Institutional History of Disability,” in *Handbook of Disability Studies* [ed. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Selman, and Michael Bury; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001], 17). The “paradox” for Braddock and Parish is the contrast between kindness and God’s wrath; there is no acknowledgment that the etiology of disease might not be divine punishment.

culture has had a profound impact on historical studies. This, in turn, has led to a renaissance in the study of diseases and disabilities in the Hebrew Bible and of the application of the “religious model of disability” to scriptural texts. The construction of categories of disability, especially in the Priestly literature, has been the subject of renewed interest. Much of this work has taken up the methodological finesse of disability studies as a redress to the unreflected diagnostic approach of historical criticism, and to great effect.⁵⁵

With respect to disability analyses of the Hebrew Bible, *ṣāraʿat*, uniformly translated as “skin disease,” has remained something of a central topic. The alienating and isolating treatment of *ṣāraʿat*, its importance in the selection of priests,

⁵⁵ The practice of medically diagnosing biblical characters has a storied history. It is a testament to modern intellectual arrogance that biblical scholars presume they can “identify” with modern medical categories conditions that are described using ancient terminology in a manner that resists such diagnosis. In the case of *ṣāraʿat*, virtually every commentator has something diagnostic to say, even if only negative. Thus we are regularly reminded that *ṣāraʿat*, though frequently translated as “leprosy,” is in fact not actually related to modern Hansen’s disease, and often that it cannot be connected with any specific disease known to modern science. Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 817) goes so far as to relate a personal anecdote about bringing a dermatologist into the classroom to discuss the possible identification of *ṣāraʿat* with a modern disease (the dermatologist failed). There have been, however, some very detailed attempts to diagnose *ṣāraʿat*, which, for all their erudition, contribute little to our understanding of the biblical text; see esp. E. V. Hulse, “The Nature of Biblical Leprosy and the Use of Alternative Medical Terms in Modern Translations of the Bible,” *PEQ* 107 (1975): 87–105.

Even apart from the methodological difficulties that ancient texts present to trained medics (e.g., brief descriptions of conditions, the absence of important medical data such as blood tests, the incomplete nature of the medical history, etc.), this practice ignores the different cultural value ascribed to these conditions. Even if the terms “sacred disease” and “epilepsy” do refer to the same condition, equating the sacred disease with epilepsy obscures the specific cultural value attached to the sacred disease in the ancient world. In the words of M. Lynn Rose, “It is not appropriate to investigate the phenomenon of disability in ancient societies from the perspective of a medical model” (“Deaf and Dumb in Ancient Greece,” in *The Disability Studies Reader* [ed. Lennard J. Davis; 2nd ed.; New York: Routledge, 2006], 17). Diagnostic biblical scholarship persists, however, in JoAnn Scurlock and Burton R. Andersen, *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine: Ancient Sources, Translations, and Modern Medical Analyses* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005); and Donald Capps, *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

Recent work replacing these diagnostic analyses include Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel* (HSM 54; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); idem, *Health Care and the Rise of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999); *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper; SemeiaSt 55; Leiden: Brill, 2007); Raphael, *Biblical Corpora*; Sarah J. Melcher, “Visualizing the Perfect Cult: The Priestly Rationale for Exclusion,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice* (ed. Nancy L. Eiseland and Don S. Saliers; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 55–71; Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

the manner in which sufferers were excluded from temple rituals, and its prominence in historical narratives are frequently discussed. The etiology of the condition is rarely the subject of debate but lingers beneath the surface of scholarly treatments of the subject. In her article "Visualizing the Perfect Cult," Sarah J. Melcher reevaluates the social function of laws regulating purity and impurity in Leviticus. While her argument is not primarily concerned with the connection between *šāraʿat* and divine punishment, she states at the outset that "the mark of *saraʿat*, according to the texts of the Hebrew Bible, was placed on the person's skin as a punishment for an encroachment against G-d, so *saraʿat* is a sign of moral failure, much as stigma was for the Greeks."⁵⁶ The phrase "according to the texts of the Hebrew Bible" is problematic: it assumes an anachronistic homogeneity of the canonical text of the Hebrew Bible. Later in her article Melcher notes that in Lev 14:33–53 the *šāraʿat* on a house is explicitly said to derive from ὕμνη; she reasonably extrapolates that *šāraʿat* on people originates from the same source. The difficulties arise when she attempts to connect this observation to the notion of divine punishment. Melcher fails to recognize, on the one hand, that the divine derivation of *šāraʿat* does not necessarily imply that it is a punishment for sin and, on the other, that the parallel with *šāraʿat* on a house speaks against, rather than in support of, the origin in sin of the affliction on people.⁵⁷ Crucially, she notes that *šāraʿat* "is invested with the connotation of divine punishment throughout the remainder of its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible," this time citing Numbers 12 as evidence for her argument.⁵⁸ Melcher's argument, therefore, rests almost entirely on her use of non-Priestly sources in her interpretation of Priestly material and is thus largely indistinguishable from the standard historical-critical treatments.

Similarly, in his otherwise careful study *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, Saul Olyan rightly categorizes *šāraʿat* with a group of "physical disabilities not classified as 'defects.'"⁵⁹ Yet even as he remains ambivalent on the association between sin and disease he still asks, "Were skin afflictions such as these always understood to be punitive?"⁶⁰ Much of Olyan's primary material is drawn from non-Priestly sources (Num 12:10–15; 2 Kgs 15:3–4; 2 Chr 26:16–21), yet, like Milgrom, he assumes that these sources can be used to describe *šāraʿat* in general: "Whether 'skin disease' is often understood to be a divine punishment or always understood to be so, its frequent association with transgression and curse is nonetheless stig-

⁵⁶ Melcher, "Visualizing," 58.

⁵⁷ Melcher adds the requirement of the *ʿāšām* in Leviticus 14 as further evidence that *šāraʿat* connotes divine punishment (ibid., 65). As noted above, Leviticus 14 does not present compelling evidence that the condition was a form of punishment for sin.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁹ Olyan, *Disability*, 47–60.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 56.

matizing for all afflicted persons.”⁶¹ While Olyan is more nuanced than most, his summary assumes that statements about *ṣāraʿat*, drawn from disparate sources in the Pentateuch, were read together to create a single general impression. Olyan, like many others, reads the Priestly sources using the decidedly non-Priestly model of divine punishment.

Analyses of disability in biblical literature can make impressive inroads into our understanding of the ancient texts. A difficulty emerges, however, with the subtle importation of the “religious model of disability” into scholarly treatments of the Bible. When faced with the unique Priestly characterization of *ṣāraʿat*, disability scholars, like historical-critical scholars, feel compelled to look outside the Priestly material to explain the etiology of the condition. Given the choice between allowing the Priestly view of *ṣāraʿat* as a naturally occurring impurity to stand and imposing a blanket religious model of “divine punishment” across the biblical corpus, disability scholars opt for the latter. In electing to use non-Priestly material to interpret Priestly texts, an implicit, perhaps even unconscious, commitment to the religious model of disability is betrayed. Glazing the surface of the scriptural text with a theoretically constructed model conceals the nuanced variations in the presentations of specific ailments in the Hebrew Bible. Ironically, when applied to biblical texts, the religious model of disability only replicates itself in modern scholarship. Rather than recognizing the diversity among ancient views of disability, scholars reproduce the old philosophy that “skin disease” is the result of sin.

III. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, in the Priestly presentation, the connection between sin and *ṣāraʿat* is absent. While there is a certain ambiguity in the presentation of the condition, the widespread assumption that *ṣāraʿat* is a consequence of sin has no grounding in the priestly legislation itself. In accounting for the etiology of *ṣāraʿat*, scholars have framed their discussion of the condition’s origin using a model of the condition imported from non-Priestly literature. This interpretive move entails two assumptions: first, that there was a single understanding in ancient Israel of the origin and nature of “skin disease”; second, that the etiology of the condition provided by the Priestly author is somehow insufficient. In fact, read on its own terms, taking into account the context of the passage within the larger section on impurities, P’s view of the etiology of skin disease is relatively clear: it, like the other impurities described in Leviticus 12–15, originates with *YHWH* and forms part of the natural order. The recourse to the non-Priestly material for some supplementary explanation may be a result of the long-standing belief that physical anomalies in

⁶¹ Ibid.

general, and this anomaly in particular, cannot have been, in the ancient world, viewed as natural and must have been seen as incurred by sin. The pervasiveness of this belief, from the non-Priestly biblical texts through many generations of interpretation, perhaps accounts for the fact that, despite their hermeneutical differences, all the authors we have surveyed—precritical, historical-critical, and disability studies—read the Priestly texts in light of the non-Priestly narratives. We must, however, be on guard against reading one source in light of another, or in light of the canonical text as we have received it. The Priestly theology and world-view must be understood on its own terms first and foremost, and the Priestly construction of *šāra^cat* must be accorded its proper standing in scholarly accounts of ancient Israelite thought, regardless of hermeneutic. Only then can the diversity of Israelite views on sin, impurity, and disease, and the intersection of these views, be recognized and appreciated.

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