

## Profit over Prophet?

### A Critical Analysis of “Moses” in Advertising

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#### Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of the figure of Moses in advertising. While representations of Exodus 14 have moved into popular culture through film, the parting of the seas is also a popular, and hitherto unexamined, trope in advertising. The transfer from biblical text to advertising has resulted in one major omission: the prophet Moses himself. In the spirit of Katie Edwards’ (2012) pioneering work on Eve and Genesis 2-3, I am similarly interested in the afterlife of biblical characters in advertising, with a specific focus on Moses. I examine six advertisements, analysing their portrayals in light of the biblical passage and considering their representations of gender and (dis)ability. Drawing on the work of Rhiannon Graybill (2015, 2016), I argue that Moses’ disabilities and unconventional masculinity may account for the prophet’s absence in advertising, and that this absence is connected more broadly to the lack of representation of disabled people in advertising.

#### Key Words

Exodus 14; Moses; advertising; disabilities; gender representations; popular culture.

#### Introduction

Moses’ miraculous parting of the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14) is a biblical story that has enjoyed multiple adaptations and retellings through its journey into popular culture, including the DreamWorks animated film, *The Prince of Egypt* (1998). Another lesser-documented adaptation of this biblical passage can be seen in its use and function in advertising. While Moses’ miracle appears in advertisements, it does so with one major omission: Moses himself. Yet removing the prophet from his own narrative only serves to further veil him (Exod. 34:33). In this article, I explore Moses’ absence from these advertisements and the implications of this in relation to his gender and disabilities. I begin by discussing the social and cultural legacy of Exodus 14, before turning to contextualize the use of biblical texts in advertising. I then draw on the work of Rhiannon Graybill (2015, 2016) to reflect on Moses’ disabilities as they are depicted in the biblical text: his scaly skin (Exod. 4:6), his speech impediment (Exod. 4:10), and his physical weaknesses (Exod. 17:9-11). Next, I consider depictions of Exodus 14 in six

advertising images,<sup>1</sup> focusing on their representations of gender (Goffman 1987) and *non*-representation of disability, interpreting the latter through the lens of disability criticism. I argue that Moses' absence in these advertisements is connected to the (in)visibility of disabled people and unconventional masculinities in contemporary advertising.

## The Social and Cultural Legacy of Exodus 14

Exodus 14 narrates the Israelites' escape from Egypt under Moses' leadership. As the Israelites are fleeing, Pharaoh organizes his officers to ride six hundred chariots, plus all the other chariots in Egypt, in order to pursue them (vv.7-8). The Israelites doubt their escape will be successful and are afraid. They tell Moses that they wish they had stayed in Egypt to serve Pharaoh, rather than die in the desert (v.12). Moses tells them not to be afraid, but to "stand firm" and the Lord will bring deliverance (v.13). The Lord then instructs Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea in order to divide the waters so that the Israelites can pass through on dry ground (v.16). Moses does as he is commanded: he stretches out his hand over the sea and the Lord drives the sea back with a strong east wind, dividing the waters and turning the seabed into dry land (v.21). The Israelites pass across on the dry land, with a wall of sea on both sides (v.22). As the Egyptians continue in their pursuit, the Lord tells Moses to stretch his hand over the sea once again (v.26) and the waters flow back over the horsemen and their chariots, destroying Pharaoh's army (v.28).

The exodus story has exerted a cultural influence across the centuries, with prominent representations found in music, poetry, film, and art. Moreover, Scott Langston (2005) observes that the text's emancipatory features have also allowed it to serve as a tool of liberation and a reflection of struggles against tyranny within recent history.<sup>2</sup> For example, he mentions the Great Migration of approximately six million African Americans from southern states to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970. This migration was due to the poverty, racism, and discrimination that Black people were experiencing in the South. As a mass

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the six picture advertisements that draw parallels with the biblical passage discussed in this article, three additional advertisements are referenced in footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Eslinger (1991) queries the theme of liberation, noting how the text is not about the liberation of the Hebrews, but instead is an assertion of YHWH's dominance, control, and power. Eslinger problematizes triumphalist legacies of the biblical passage, noting the theological tradition of praise for God's salvific event by reminding the reader that God was actually responsible for Israel's woes in the first place. Eslinger comments: "Triumphalist readings of scripture proceed by ignoring the context of statements within scripture. Just as certain books or passages are selected from the canon for isolated interpretation and theological meditation, so the statements of God (and Moses) are plucked out of their narrative context. Isolated and distilled, the triumphal theological derivatives are swallowed by the interpreter who then sees the text through the euphoric fog induced by this theological tonic" (1991, 55).

movement of people, the connection to the biblical passage was clear,<sup>3</sup> and Langston describes it as “an exodus without a Moses, because the movement emerged from the masses rather than an individual” (2006, 148).<sup>4</sup> Another example he offers of an exodus-style migration is “Operation Moses,” a mission that took place in 1984 during the Ethiopian famine. Thousands of Ethiopian Jews who had fled to Sudan were airlifted to Israel in an effort to liberate them from the malnutrition and disease that plagued the Sudanese refugee camps (Langston 2006, 151-152; see also Katz and Kessler 2000).

In other contexts, the liberation motif in Exodus 14 has been drawn upon in discussions around non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Alpert 2006; Focht 2019). Exodus resonates deeply for some LGBTQ+ people, akin to its significance for Black people, as a narrative of escape from oppression. Moses was raised as an Egyptian, rather than a Hebrew (see Junior and Schipper 2008), and thus his experiences are those of an “outsider” in terms of his own identity. As Alpert notes:

People who are labelled as different by society because of their racial, ethnic or religious orientation usually have a family whom they resemble and from whom they learn about who they are. This is not true for translesbigay people (or disabled people or some adopted children), and so Moses is a model ... as someone who was raised by people from whom he couldn't learn about his identity. (2006, 63)

As I discuss further below, Moses’ “outsider” status is also accentuated by his characterization as a man who has several disabilities that do not cohere with traditional notions of “ideal” masculinity. His physical weakness, his speech impediment, and his scaly skin all stand in stark contrast to the warrior-like characteristics ascribed to many other biblical leaders, and inhibit his ability to perform idealized masculinity. Moses’ disabled body therefore resists hegemonic masculine standards and demonstrates other forms of non-normative masculinity that may render his leadership more difficult, but do not ultimately prevent him from fulfilling this divinely-given duty.

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<sup>3</sup> The exodus story has played a significant part in Black history, connected as it is to slave-spirituals and the hope of liberation. See Glancy (1998), Raboteau (2004) and Callahan (2008) for discussion about the discourse of slavery in biblical and cultural studies. It is ironic that the story of the exodus has a legacy of liberative interpretations, while elsewhere biblical texts have been weaponized as an authoritative source that promotes slavery (e.g. 1 Tim. 6:1-2). In the nineteenth century, “Slave Bibles” were created for use in British colonies, where parts of the Bible that referenced emancipation or liberation were removed, with an increased focus on the need for slaves to be obedient and submissive (see Katz 2019). This is an example of the conscious selection and abuse of certain biblical texts, offsetting them against other texts in order to continue to justify prejudices, discrimination, and inequalities.

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the advertisements represented in this article reflect an exodus without a Moses as he is portrayed in the Hebrew text (except for one, see footnote 14).

Despite the centrality of Moses in some of these cultural adoptions of the exodus story, and despite his potential to be a figure of liberation from hegemonic masculinity, the prophet is absent in advertising images that employ this biblical tradition. As the biblical passage narrates freedom from oppression, this liberation motif, in combination with Moses' depiction as a man with disabilities, would lend themselves to use and adaptation in advertising images that represent and include disabled people. It is disappointing, then, that advertisers seem oblivious to the story's liberatory potential.

## **Biblical Representations in Advertising**

The world of contemporary advertising sits in direct opposition to some of the values espoused in the biblical text. Advertising relies on the need to sell a brand and promote the benefits of purchasing the product to a consumer, so advertisers employ tactics of tease and temptation. The product is presented to be as desirable as possible and to fulfil a need in the consumer. Yet there is a tension between the function of advertising and the biblical text, littered as it is with warnings against coveting items (Exod. 20:17), indulging the flesh (Gal. 5:13), greed (Prov. 28:25; 1 Cor. 5:10-11), and self-indulgence (Matt. 23:25; Luke 12:15). Martin Mayer notes the process by which these biblical values are rendered compatible by advertisers:

Lust, sloth, greed and pride ... In the advertising community these words are frowned upon. They have a bad connotation, so they must be changed. Lust becomes the desire to be sexually attractive. Certainly no one can complain if a woman desires to be sexually attractive; it is her birthright. Sloth becomes the desire for leisure—for rest and recreation—and certainly all of us are entitled to that. Greed becomes the desire to enjoy the good things of this world. Why were they put here if not for us to enjoy? Pride, of course, becomes the desire for social status. (1961, 128; cited in Pollay 1986, 30)

The relationship between religious imagery, biblical symbolism, and advertising has often been shrouded in taboo. Karen Mallia (2009) examines the appropriation of religious imagery by advertisers, observing how nudity, sex, and bad language have resulted in failures for particular advertising campaigns, while religion is another significant taboo worthy of exploration. The relationship between religious imagery and biblical stories is bifurcated: on the one hand, there are advertising campaigns that are designed to shock, thereby gaining further attention by fuelling moral outrage; on the other hand, there are campaigns that do not violate or challenge religious beliefs. Mallia suggests that the appropriation of religious symbolism in advertising is not necessarily offensive per se, and offers examples of advertisements that ran between 1995 and 2007, some of

which provoked outrage and others that caused little or no public response.<sup>5</sup> She observes that an “attribute of noncontroversial advertising is that the advertising concept does not violate an accepted religious belief or understanding—but is in keeping with it” (2009, 184).

One of the most ubiquitous examples of a biblical text’s use in advertising can be seen in the profitable afterlife of Eve (Genesis 2-3). Katie Edwards’ (2012) pioneering scholarship examines the afterlives of this biblical character through contemporary advertising, with her focus on Eve’s popularity between the pages of glossy magazines. Her monograph, *Admen and Eve* (2012), examines how advertisers mobilize the well-established story of the Garden of Eden. Eve is portrayed as the biblical bad girl: a temptress who is both sexy and impossible to resist. As Edwards comments:

Eve is quite a money-maker, and so long as she can bring in the revenue she will be out there in cinemas and magazines with her trusty apple and snake to lure in the consumers to take a bite of whatever product she is selling. Both advertisers and consumers love Eve’s assertive, sexy, forbidden fruit-offering character. (2012, 34)

Eve is clearly the temptress par excellence in her interpretative biblical and theological legacy. Her function in advertising is obvious: female consumers see Eve as representing empowerment and sexual autonomy, and thus might be swayed to purchase products that are associated with her. Edwards’ perceptive argument is bolstered by the prolific examples offered from advertising images, which sell products largely aimed at women, such as perfume or clothing. But, as Edwards notes, the connection with the biblical text is no accident on the part of the advertising executives. The biblical references function so well because people possess a familiarity with the story.

Pertinent to my discussion here about Moses, I take heed of Edwards’ assertion that “analysing contemporary advertising is similar to looking at a collage of images simultaneously reflecting and dictating the ideals, ideologies and iconography that inform the whole of Western culture” (2012, viii). Robert Myles agrees, stating that:

Advertising is possibly one of the most influential institutions of socialization in contemporary popular culture. It not only plays a key role in the construction of gender, racial and class identity, but it also structures much of the mass media content we

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<sup>5</sup> I offer two contrasting examples from Mallia to illuminate this point. The first is an advertisement from the British Safety Council (1995) that provoked public outrage. It showed a picture of Pope John Paul II in a safety helmet in order to promote condom use. The headline read, “Eleventh commandment: Thou shalt always wear a condom.” The UK’s Advertising Standards Board received 1,192 complaints (Mallia 2009, 178). Conversely, an advertisement for Tabasco sauce that had a God-like figure shaking tabasco sauce on his food and thereby creating meteor showers on earth resulted in little or no public criticism (2009, 182).

consume and has an impact on the creation and mediation of wants and needs. (2014, 14)

Near the beginning of *Admen and Eve*, Edwards asks, “What aspects of the biblical texts are *exaggerated* in the advertising images and why?” (2012, 8, my emphasis). In reframing Edwards’ question, I consider what aspects of the biblical texts are *omitted* and why. Moses’ imperfect masculinity and his disabilities do not cohere with notions of “ideal” masculinity, and this is the reason, I argue, that he is absent from advertising images that depict the Exodus story of his parting the seas. In the following section, I consider Moses’ disabilities, and suggest that the absence of the prophet’s body in the advertising campaigns discussed in this article reflects the wider invisibility of disabled people in advertising.

## Moses’ Disabilities

The descriptions of Moses’ body in the biblical text make the prophet’s corporeality distinctive. At his birth, Moses is described as a “fine child” (Exod. 2:2),<sup>6</sup> who was hidden by his mother for three months. At his death, Moses was one hundred and twenty years old, his vision was intact, and his strength had not gone (Deut. 34:7).<sup>7</sup> Despite the perfect portrayal of his body at death, his body is marked throughout his life, as Moses experiences temporal disabilities on numerous occasions. Moses’ body is a disabled body on five counts at least (Graybill, 2016): he needs a staff (Exod. 4:2); he has scaly skin (Exod. 4:6-7); he has a speech impediment (Exod. 4:10); he suffers physical weakness (Exod. 17:11); and he has a shining face that made people afraid (Exod. 34:30). Graybill examines Moses and the materiality of his body through the lenses of disability, feminization, and queering (2016), as well as exploring the demands that his prophecy places on his body (2015). Graybill concludes that the question of Moses’ masculinity and corporeality are intertwined, as she observes that “Moses’ body breaks with the

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<sup>6</sup> Graybill (2015) comments on the translation of the Hebrew here: *tôb* “can refer to good looks, though usually it bears this meaning when used in conjunction with a longer description or phrase. It may also predict Moses’ future importance, which his mother somehow perceives as she looks upon his infant form. Or *tôb* may mean not ‘good’ or ‘good looking’ but simply ‘viable,’ implying that the infant Moses is less exceptional than (barely) acceptable” (Graybill 2015, 524).

<sup>7</sup> Schipper (2007) observes how disability becomes connected with leaders of Israel in the Deuteronomistic History, particularly in terms of their vision. Unlike Moses, his successors are often blinded, and die without their sight. Schipper offers numerous examples, such as Samson who has his eyes gouged out (Judg. 16:21) and Eli whose eyes become so weak he can barely see (1 Sam 3:2). For Saul, the text does not mention any visual impairment, but his daughter is infertile and his grandson Mephibosheth is lame, so images of disability remain lingering in the household. Regarding other prophets, Schipper comments, “Nevertheless, even David’s body does not live up to the extraordinary non-disabled standard set by the elderly Moses at the end of Deuteronomy. Unlike Moses whose vigor never leaves him even in old age, when David dies at an old age, he cannot keep himself warm even with the aid of blankets (1 Kgs 1:1). Likewise, other Davidic rulers end their lives with chronic disabilities (1 Kgs 15:23; 2 Kgs 15:5)” (2007, 111).

hegemonic masculine norms of the text. Moses presents an alternate performance of masculinity and an alternate mode of masculine embodiment” (2016, 24).

The reader’s first encounter with Moses’ disabilities is laid out in Exod. 4:1-17. God asks Moses what he is carrying, and Moses replies that he has a staff.<sup>8</sup> God tells him to throw it to the ground and the staff becomes a snake. God tells him to reach for the snake by the tail, which Moses does, and it resumes its form as a staff (Exod. 4:2-5). Immediately following this, God engages in another game of trust with Moses, where God asks Moses to put his hand inside his cloak. Moses does so and takes his hand back out, where he sees it is leprous and white.<sup>9</sup> In the following verse, God asks him to put it back in his cloak; when he removes it this time, it is restored to health. Both Moses’ need for a staff and his (albeit temporary) scaly skin demonstrate God’s exertion of power (Eslinger, 1991), but, more importantly for this article, they also reveal that Moses’ body is a disabled body.

Readers discover Moses’ third disability a few verses later, when he attempts to avoid God’s prophetic calling on the grounds that he is slow of speech and slow of tongue (Exod. 4:10). Indeed, Moses describes himself as having speech difficulties on three different occasions (Exod. 4:10; 6:12, 30). Jeffrey Tigay examines the Hebrew connotations of the text, stating that there are two options to interpret Moses’ statements here: “(1) a speech impediment, often said to be caused by a structural defect or injury of the mouth, and (2) a linguistic problem” (1978, 60). Tigay references the twelfth-century biblical commentator Rashbam, who claimed Moses had a problem with language, having perhaps forgotten Egyptian or having a heavily marked accent. Rashbam considered it impossible that “a prophet whom God knew face to face and who received the Torah from His hand was a stutterer” (cited in Tigay 1978, 60). Nonetheless, Tigay reveals how Rashbam’s view has little credence, and that it is largely accepted in rabbinic and medieval Jewish exegesis that Moses *did* have a speech impediment. Furthermore, through contemporary eyes, Rashbam’s interpretation is loaded with prejudice about disability, suggesting that someone with a stutter would be too “imperfect” to know God. Marc Shell narrates his own experience of stuttering and having difficulty with some Hebrew vowels; he suggests the following:

On the face of it, God’s choice of Moses to be his dummy spokesperson is odd. Moses is not a person who speaks well. Presumably, an omnipotent God could cure Moses of his speech

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<sup>8</sup> While a staff might be common for shepherds to carry (to navigate rocky terrain, fend off predators, herd the sheep), equally it may well reflect a weakness. Alongside the description of Moses’ weakening arms in Exod. 17:13, there is a suggestion of physical restriction or limitation.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Mechler describes Moses’ skin disease, noting its temporality, as a “signature disease” (2018, 48), and explaining how gods of the ancient Near East used this affliction, usually as a form of punishment.

impediment ... If God could make an ass speak, and could make an enemy speak well of Israel, surely God could heal Moses' tongue. (2006, 152-153)

Shell's point is further confirmed by God's response to Moses in the following verse: "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exod. 4:11). This verse is contentious and problematic from a disability perspective, as it suggests that disabilities are God-given. Graybill observes this to be YHWH's confirmation of Moses' disability:

[YHWH] himself acknowledges Moses' assessment of his powers of speech as valid. Instead of refuting or dismissing Moses' complaint, he provides Moses with a solution: a prophetic mouth in the form of his brother Aaron ... This response validates Moses' assessment of his own bodily lack without, however, healing or otherwise altering it. (2016, 28)<sup>10</sup>

Rather than being unfortunate or problematic, Moses' disabilities become an integral part of his prophecy. Sarah Mechler comments on both the positive and negative interpretations of Exod. 4:11, as she states, "Some with disabilities would take issue with the idea that God deliberately causes a disability to some while letting others be free of that disability. Yet others might find it comforting to know that God somehow intends for human beings to have diverse abilities" (2018, 49).<sup>11</sup> The verse also raises significant questions about God's own image, as traditional theology teaches that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*).

Moses displays a fourth form of disability: his arms are physically weak. In Exod. 17:9, Moses stands at the top of a hill with the staff of God in his hand, overlooking the battle between the Israelites and Amalekites. The Israelites win only when Moses holds up his hands (v.11). Moses' hands grow tired, so Aaron and Hur have to hold them up in order to keep them steady (v.13). Along with his use of a staff, this depiction of Moses' physical weakness hints once more at his failure to adequately perform masculinity, which may be considered a form of "disability" in the patriarchal world of the biblical text and even today. Most able-bodied men would, like Moses, be hard pressed to elevate their hands for an extended period without experiencing fatigue. Nevertheless, male weakness of any form is often viewed through the discursive lens of ideal masculinity, where heroic men are expected to be free from *any* physical limitations.

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<sup>10</sup> Graybill contrasts the validation of Moses' corporeality against Isaiah (6:5-7), who was relieved of his difficulty (2016, 34).

<sup>11</sup> In the Qur'an, Moses actually asks to be cured of his stutter (Sura 20:26-29), as he says "Lord, open my breast, and do Thou ease for me my task, / Unloose the knot upon my tongue, that they may understand my words," and Allah responds by curing him (cited by Shell 2006, 153).



The fifth and final description of Moses' "othered" body is when he returns from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant. His face is described as radiant, and Aaron and the Israelites were "afraid to come near him" (Exod. 34:30). Moses has to cover his shining face with a veil (vv.33, 35). Graybill notes that the Hebrew verb used to describe the light emanating from Moses' face (*qrn*) is used elsewhere to mean "to sprout horns" (2016, 31). E. G. Suhr likewise notes that, "When we turn to the Hebrew version or the Vulgate we find another word used in place of 'shone' ... Here we are told that the face of Moses was 'horned'" (1963, 388).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, so significant is this translation that Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses (c. 1513-1515) has two clear horns on his head. While a dazzling face or sprouting horns on one's head may not constitute a disability according to our contemporary understanding of the term, Moses is clearly "othered" as an outsider once again in the biblical text, and this is reflected by the fearful response his appearance draws from those around him. Likewise, his masculinity is placed into question by his infirmity, his leprosy, and his speech impediment. Yet these markers of Moses' disabling "otherness" are erased in the advertising images that allude to Exodus 14, as I now go on to discuss.

## Exodus 14 in Advertising: A Critical Discourse Analysis

My interrogation of advertisements in this section assesses the visual structures and strategies presented therein. Advertising, alongside other artistic and creative designs, are cultural goods. Using critical discourse analysis, I focus here on the social injustices and inequalities sustained by advertising. Following Norman Fairclough (2013), my analysis highlights the problematic nature of advertisements that fail to represent and include disabled people and which also perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes relating to both men and women. I argue that advertising therefore plays a role in sustaining the invisibility of disabled people in contemporary society and popular culture.

The advertisements discussed in this article are taken from the digital repository, "Ads of the World."<sup>13</sup> Of all the advertisements archived that reference Exodus 14, only one includes the figure of a man wearing robes and carrying a staff—an image traditionally associated with Moses.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> The Vulgate translates Exod. 34:29 as follows: "et ignorabat quod *cornuta* esset facies sua ex consortio sermonis Domini" ("and he knew not that his face was horned from the conversation of the Lord"). Verse 35 is translated as follows: "Qui videbant faciem egredientis Moysi esse cornuta" ("And they saw that the face of Moses when he came out was horned") (Suhr, 1963, 388).

<sup>13</sup> For copyright reasons, I cannot reproduce the images in this article, but in addition to the descriptions offered, I have provided hyperlinks at the end of the article to each advertisement in the database held at <https://www.adsoftheworld.com/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Moses, Help Us Keep the Ocean Clean" (2006). The advertisement is in black and white, with Moses and onlookers examining the seabed littered with pollution as the seas are

majority of advertisements depicting this biblical tradition present a “Moses-type” figure, whose appearance is far removed from any possible likeness to the biblical prophet (by virtue of their dress or their gender), and it is on these that I focus. My analysis is organized into two parts, both of which explore the ideas and values communicated through each advertisement. The first part considers how these images represent (or, more accurately, fail to represent) Moses’ masculinity and disabilities. Part two discusses advertising images that use an able-bodied female figure to represent a Moses-type character, thereby erasing Moses’ masculinity and disabilities entirely from the scene. Fairclough would call this “signification-without-reference” (2013, 99), as Moses does not form a physical or material subject of the advertising images, but merely the *illusion* of his presence is signified in the discourse. Combined, both parts of my discussion provide the necessary framework to raise questions about the invisibility of disabilities and non-hegemonic masculinities in advertising.

## Part One: Mosaic Men

According to Anthony Cortese:

Two general patterns seem to emerge concerning gender and advertising. First, ads tell us that there is a big difference between what is appropriate or expected behaviour for men and women, or for boys and girls. Second, advertising and other mass media inculcate in consumers the cultural assumption that men are dominant and women are passive and subordinate. A key component of the passive, subordinate role is that women lack a voice. (2008, 58)

Cortese is correct. The binary positions of masculinity and femininity are firmly fixed in advertising, and, in turn, these regulate the performativity of gender according to patriarchal, cisnormative, and heteronormative ideals. As a result, they deny voice and agency to women and LGBTQ+ people. Erving Goffman (1987) similarly argues that gender displays and behavioural representations in advertising are inextricably connected to cultural assumptions about the nature of men and women. In his analysis of many advertising images, Goffman (1987, 28-83) identifies the following features relating to the content and construct of advertisements: (i) relative size, where size is manipulated in the scene of an advertisement to ensure

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parted. It is aimed at raising awareness about environmental issues, specifically sea pollution. A further advertisement entitled “Moses” (2019) is ironically named, as Moses does not even appear in the image. The advertisement is selling paint products. The sea is parted, and a painting roller is colouring the seabed a vivid orange. Moses’ staff and hand are replaced with the painting apparatus. While the absence of a Moses figure may mean that the biblical reference goes unnoticed, the biblical motif is made explicit through the use of a slogan inspired by Exod. 14: 21-22: “then he raised the roller and the waters were divided.” As the biblical passage notes that the land was dry, the advertisers seem to imply that the paint will dry with an equally miraculous speed.

that women are smaller or positioned lower than men in order to illustrate a difference in power or status; (ii) the feminine touch, where women are frequently depicted touching or caressing a person or object in a manner that contrasts with a masculinized firm grip; (iii) function ranking, where men are actively performing an important role in the scene, while women are either passive or taking responsibility for a lesser or menial task; (iv) the family, where parents and children of the same gender are closer together, and men are sometimes distant from the rest of the family to show their alert, protective status; (v) the ritualization of subordination, used to observe the positioning of women's bodies in order to depict a helplessness or a need—a knee bent, lying down, etc.; and (vi) licensed withdrawal, where the subject is psychologically not present in the scene—looking away, appearing lost or inattentive.

Building on Goffman's analysis of gender performativity in advertising, Sut Jhally examines how gender is ritualized as a commercial performance in his video documentary, *The Codes of Gender* (2009). Jhally examines Goffman's discussion of gender in advertisements and how advertising communicates normative ideas about masculinity and femininity. Jhally's observations about representations of masculinity are pertinent to my examination of the advertisements in which Moses is erased and replaced with able-bodied, active, muscular men, as illustrated in the examples below.

The biblical trope of a parted sea and walking along the seabed is used in an advertisement for a sea-life centre ("Ocean" 2014). Here, the parted seas are full of sea-life, while a normative family unit (mother, father, son, and daughter) look at the creatures. While the biblical scene is used as a visual metaphor, Moses—with his disabilities—is replaced with a more wholesome, abled-bodied, heteronormative family unit. Goffman examines the staging of family situations in advertising, observing how "one usually finds that the allocation of at least one girl and at least one boy ensures that a symbolization of the full set of intrafamily relations can be effected" (1987, 37). In "Ocean," the male protagonist steps further away from the family to draw the viewer's attention. According to Goffman, this is a staged move: "often the father ... stands a little outside the physical circle of the other members of the family, as if to express a relationship whose protectiveness is linked with, perhaps even requires, distance" (1987, 39). The image represents the privilege of heterosexuality and gender complementarity of both the parents and the children (one son and one daughter). Each member of the family is looking in a different direction, and both children are pointing, but neither parent looks in the direction of their signals. Cortese's assertions ring true here (and for each of the advertisements in which Moses' disabilities are obfuscated), as he asks, "What kind of representations does advertising produce? It creates a mythical, WASP-oriented<sup>15</sup> world in which

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<sup>15</sup> WASP is an acronym for "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant," and is used to describe the upper-class as an elite group with a disproportionate measure of social power and influence.

no one is ever ugly, overweight, poor, toiling, or physically or mentally disabled” (2008, 57).

In an advertisement for Stihl leaf blowers (“Moses” 2018), the seas are replaced by a mass of trees and foliage, which are parted (by the leaf blower, we presume) to leave a pathway of grass. In the foreground of the image, a man stands on the pathway, his back to the viewer, leaf blower in hand. The impression of Moses we have from the biblical text is replaced by a more able-bodied, youthful model. The man’s physique attests to his muscular, athletic physique. His shoulders are broad, carrying the weight of the appliance. He is standing upright and alert, conscious of his surroundings. Focused on his task, he illustrates Goffman’s observation about men being *active* figures in advertising, compared to more passive female figures. The man has a tight grip on the leaf blower, demonstrating his (or its) almost divine power in creating a clear pathway. In the sky above, beams of heavenly light shine through dark clouds, a typical trope used in visual culture more broadly to represent divine involvement and heavenly favour. The slogan (“The battery performance you shall use”) contains the imperative “you shall use,” a semantic allusion to the “You shall” commandments given to Moses in the Decalogue (Exod. 20:2-17).

Athleticism, able-bodiedness, youth, and whiteness are all characteristic of the male protagonist in another advertisement titled “Moses” (2010) for clothing brand Allan Solley. Here, a youthful man stands against a cartoon backdrop, in which the sea is parted and sea-life is visible. The man is wearing dark eye make-up, and his hair is gelled into a contemporary style. He wears jeans, a T-shirt, and a short-sleeved chequered overshirt, representing the fashion brand he is advertising. Cortese remarks that “media images of muscular and vascular yet thin men in advertising—on billboards and in magazines—resemble the mythical Adonis—handsome, chiseled, smooth, well groomed, healthy looking and a hairless body” (2008, 69). The Moses-substitute connoted here has no visible disabilities. Moreover, it is not just his looks that portray his perfect masculinity—his actions do too. Jhally (2009) notes how male protagonists in advertising particularly are often upright, alert, and conscious of their surroundings; male bodies are controlled, their eyes are open, their pose is serious, and the man is physically active. The protagonist stares directly at the viewer in “a physically powerful look [that] validates masculine identity” (Cortese 2008, 72). His eye make-up, though not traditionally associated with masculinity, serves to accentuate the penetrating power of his gaze. The man is holding his arms out at forty-five degrees to his body, representing his (divine) power and authority to part the seas. Cartoon waves crash up behind him, giving the impression of angelic wings, while his outstretched arms also recall crucifixion images of Jesus. The “Moses” depicted in this image is decidedly seductive. As Cortese notes:

Men, too, are seducers—a male version of the perfect provocateur.  
The ideal man in ads is young, handsome, clean-cut, perfect, and

sexually alluring. Today's man has pumped his pecs and shoulders and exhibits well-defined abs ... He has tossed away his stuffy suit and has become a most potent provocateur. (2008, 70)

The male provocateur image is far removed from any notion of impairment or disability: he is the embodiment of ableism, not to mention masculine authority and control. Moreover, the male provocateur serves to foster gender-based inequalities, as he stands in stark contrast to the female provocateuse, whose readily sexualized image presents her as an object rather than an agent, as further demonstrated in the examples below.

## Part Two: Mosaic Women

In the ancient world of the biblical texts, women were not considered to be equal or complementary to men, but as lesser beings altogether. As Colleen Conway puts it, a “woman was understood not as the biologically opposite sex of man but as an imperfect, incomplete version of a man” (2003, 164-165). Certainly, biblical prophecy is a male-dominated profession, and portrayals of biblical masculinity (including masculine anxieties) are connected to a fear of feminization (Greenough, 2020). There are warnings throughout the biblical texts about the threat of feminization (e.g. 1 Sam 4:9), and Graybill (2016) reads Moses as a feminized figure, whose transgression or rupturing of masculine ideals are often connected to his disabilities. She notes that his veiling (Exod. 34:33) is an act mostly performed by women, and his temporary affliction with scale disease (Exod. 4:6) associates him with his sister Miriam and her own condition of leprosy (Numbers 12). Moreover, in Num. 11:12, Moses even feminizes himself, when he draws on the language of motherhood to ask YHWH, “Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors?” Although the response to his two rhetorical questions at the start are clearly intended to be “no,” the verse is, nonetheless, loaded with maternal imagery.

Graybill's critical reading of Moses' feminized body can be connected to the depiction of a feminized Moses-type character in a number of advertisements. In three out of the six discussed here, Moses is physically represented by the figure of a woman. These depictions are problematic in that the prophet's non-normative masculinity and disabilities are entirely ignored—replaced by a female figure representing western ideals of beauty and femininity. Of course, these advertisements do not intend to portray the biblical scene with any accuracy. Their goal is not to offer an illustration of the text, but they do borrow details from the biblical tradition to ensure audiences recognize the exodus allusion. Key motifs are present in the scenes, including parted sea waters and the presence of a figure in the middle of this parting. The gender and portrayal of the text's protagonist, Moses, appears to be redundant, particularly when the figure of an attractive man or woman better serves the purpose of selling a specific product. That said,

questions can be raised if these stylistic decisions involve the concealment of this protagonist's disabilities and non-normative masculinity. The advertisements betray our cultural reluctance to associate these traits with strength and power. While a feminized and disabled Moses is undoubtedly a strong prophet and leader in the biblical traditions, advertising agencies ignore this, preferring to follow binary gender norms, including stereotypical portrayals of femininity and masculinity. The advertisements I discuss in this article bear witness to the ways that Moses is presented either as a strong, powerful man (as in the case of the Stihl leaf blower advertisement) or as a feminine, passive, weak, and sexualized woman (as I illustrate below). Not only do advertisers erase the notion of Moses' disabilities, but they also efface the queer potential of his biblical character. Moses offers the potential to disrupt normative bodies through his feminization and disabilities, yet advertisers are not brave enough to portray this.<sup>16</sup>

The advertisements based on Exodus 14 always feature the parting of seas. In the case of the advertisements that use women to depict the Mosaic figure, these women are invariably glamorous. In "Pool" (2010), a blonde woman in a skimpy white bikini faces away from the viewer as she walks along a pathway of water, while divers and sharks swim in the waters to her side. The advertisement is for Hawaiian Tropic sun cream, and its tagline is "extreme waterproof."<sup>17</sup> In the same advertising series for this product, there is an analogous image ("Ocean" 2010), where a brunette woman wearing a black bikini adopts a similar pose. Here, the seabed is sandy and rocky, and again, there are sharks and a diver swimming at either side of her. Themes of glamour and escapism are projected in these advertisements: they represent holiday scenes of relaxation and daydreaming, as though women consumers are being tempted with not just an effective sunscreen but an appealing lifestyle too. David Machin and Andrea Mayr (2012) highlight how the lighting of such scenes is often fuzzy or softened, which can give the advertisement symbolic value that communicates and invokes further meaning beyond the product itself. They also argue that the representations of women in such situations are rarely realistic: "Women's lives are

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<sup>16</sup> Moreover, while all the examples I use here have white protagonists, there is no intention on my part to prioritize white representations; simply, there are no available examples of people of colour being portrayed as a Mosaic figure. Like the examples of Eve in advertising noted in Edwards' work (2012), the men and women that appear in each of the exodus-themed advertisements are white, and this reflects contemporary advertisers' primary target—white, heterosexual consumers. Indeed, these racial substitutions are doubly paradoxical and problematic, given Moses' ethnicity as a Hebrew raised as an Egyptian.

<sup>17</sup> There is a further advertisement depicting a man in a similar scene, where the product being sold is also sunscreen. See "Opening the Sea" (2017). The scene and male protagonist are represented in cartoon form. Yet the topless man represented here is more active than the women represented in "Pool" (2010) and "Ocean" (2010). His arms are lifted, representing Moses' actions in Exod. 14:16: it seems he is actively parting the sea, creating walls of water and a sea floor. The Mosaic man turns to face the onlookers who have expressions of fear or shock on their faces. While this is not represented in the biblical passage in Exodus 14, it does echo the fear on the faces of Aaron and the Israelites as Moses returns from Mount Sinai with a shining face after speaking with God (Exod. 34:30).

presented as playful fantasies. Thus, the heritage of 1960s' feminism, with the idea of the woman as independent from the domestic situation, as fully able to enjoy her own sexuality, has become to some extent intertwined with consumerism" (Machin and Mayr, 2012, 53). Building on this idea, Myles judiciously observes:

This actually represents the illusion of choice under contemporary forms of capitalism: we are free to choose so long as we choose according to the limited array of options before us ... Contemporary capitalism paradoxically summons both the liberation and subjugation of women at the same time and this reflects a fundamental contradiction of neoliberal ideology. (2014, 13)

This perceived liberation and simultaneous subjugation of women is seen in these two Hawaiian Tropic advertisements, as the women represent relaxed escapism, yet they are sexualized and have no power of their own. Exodus 14:21-22 is connoted through the parted sea with walls of water on either side, allowing the protagonists to walk along the sea floor. The women who represent the Moses figure here reflect the seductive and attractive function of female sexuality: their role is to appeal to the male-normative gaze. Moreover, in "Pool" (2010), the woman raises her hands to touch her face. Goffman observes that a woman self-touching in an advertising image can convey "a sense of [the woman's] body being a delicate and precious thing" (1987, 31). With their passive postures, there is no hint that the women have power or authority to perform a miracle and part the seas. The produce—the sun lotion—effects the miracle, not the women. The use of a woman instead of a man in these advertisements confirm how women are more readily sexualized than men, and especially disabled men. In contrast to the divine sanctioning of the biblical Moses as leader and active catalyst of the Israelite exodus, the women in these advertisements are presented as subdued, passive, and subordinate.

Yet, there is one image that does challenge this idea of female subordination. The female Moses-substitute in the Sky Sports advertisement series "Miracles" (2011) subverts advertisers' ideations of traditional masculinity and femininity. In contrast to "Pool" (2010) and "Ocean" (2010), the female protagonist presents a powerful and impressive figure: she stands facing the viewer, head held high, thus adopting the characteristics that Goffman (1984) and Jhally (2009) would associate with male protagonists. Yet this Moses figure is the antithesis of the "disabled" body: she is an athlete, and is in peak physical condition. Wearing a wet suit and white robe, the athlete's arms are raised and the sea to her sides is parted as she stands on a hoverboard. If the religious imagery itself was not sufficiently representative of the biblical character, sun beams above her head hint at divine power and favour on her performance. This advertisement uses mixed metaphors: it depicts the parting of the seas in Exodus 14 but also references the New Testament story of Jesus' miraculous walking on water (Mark 6:45-52). The combination of both representations

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reflects an intertextual connection where a later biblical passage references an earlier one. More importantly for my argument here, though, the “Miracles” advertisement portrays divine authority bestowed on a perfectly normative, athletic female body, rather than representing a disabled male body. This strong and agentic female Moses-type figure is nevertheless the antithesis of the disabled Moses we encounter in the biblical text.

## Marketing Moses? The Disabled Prophet’s Absence in Advertising

My critical analysis of the six advertisements above raises pressing questions about the representation and portrayal of disabled people in advertising.<sup>18</sup> Disability is all but invisible in advertising. When disability *is* represented, it speaks directly *about* disability (e.g. in advertisements for the Paralympics). Disabled people may also be portrayed as having an inspirational story about overcoming adversity, or they represent a charitable concern, both of which are intended to draw an emotional response from the audience. Yet advertising’s obsession with and emphasis on bodily perfection<sup>19</sup> means that many disabled people are excluded from the medium. In turn, this lack of representation perpetuates discrimination. Accordingly, Marie Hardin (2003) criticizes the progress of advertisers in influencing cultural change:

In a capitalist, consumer-driven culture, members of groups without “acceptable” bodily status have also historically been excluded from advertising images, which by their nature focus on the “perfect” body. Their exclusion from the world of advertising—a powerful cultural force in collective cultural understanding of what is “normal” and even desirable—perpetuates societal discrimination. (2003, 109)

To return specifically to the prophet Moses, advertising agencies are less concerned with the prophet himself, but allude to biblical traditions about him in order to increase sales of the commodities they are promoting. They have to contend with the fact that Moses’ disabilities contrast sharply with the characteristics typically associated with idealized masculinity (including

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<sup>18</sup> A note on my analysis of disabilities in advertising. I am fully aware that disabilities can often be hidden, yet the focus of this article is the *representation* of disabilities. For disabilities to be represented in advertising, they need to be seen or acknowledged. In this way, I reject disability hierarchies (varying levels of value placed on different disability groups over others), as these only serve to fragment the disability community.

<sup>19</sup> Parashar and Devanathan (2006) examined 3947 adverts in magazines and found only 29 contained any textual or visual representation of disability, (0.73%). They looked at sports, fashion, and general interest magazines, including *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Time* and *Newsweek*. They argue that “advertising contributes to society’s emphasis on physical integrity, the ‘body beautiful’, personal appearance, health, athletic prowess, personal achievement, competitiveness and gainful employment” (2006, 14).



physical strength) in both the Hebrew Bible and contemporary western culture. Nevertheless, in spite of his disabilities and non-normative masculinity, Moses sets the benchmark of prophecy by which all others are compared in the Hebrew Bible: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deut. 34:10). Yet, despite his impressive biblical reputation, his absence from advertisements depicting Exodus 14 suggests that advertisers believe his disabled and non-normative body is somehow visually and aesthetically unfitting.

Biblical texts continue to have influence in popular culture. Depictions of biblical characters regularly appear in advertising because advertisers assume their audiences have enough biblical literacy to recognize these portrayals. Yet advertising regulates how biblical figures are represented, ignoring any aspect of their biblical persona that does not cohere with contemporary notions of normative bodies and normative gender identities. In turn, these normative bodies perpetuate capitalist culture. It is somewhat ironic that the biblical text, which has been responsible for creating some normative ideals of its own (specifically around gender and sexuality), actually represents Moses’ disabilities and genderqueer identity in ancient contexts, while contemporary contexts still have much more work to do in terms of disability representation, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

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