

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

WHETHER IT BE DAVID'S FEIGNED "MADNESS" IN THE PRESENCE of his Philistine overlord, Jacob's limping after wrestling with God, legal restrictions on the ritual participation and leadership of priests and others with physical "defects" (Hebrew *mûmîm*), or the transformation of blind and lame persons into those who can see and walk in prophetic visions of a utopian future, disability is ubiquitous in texts of the Hebrew Bible.¹ Yet, with few exceptions, scholars of the Hebrew Bible have barely acknowledged disability as a subject worthy of serious study.² When biblical specialists have discussed disability, it is usually not the focus of investigation, but incidental to the analysis of something else (e.g., priestly or sacrificial law and practice).³ In contrast, I make the representation of disability itself the focus of my investigation. Acknowledging that disability is our broad (and contested) analytic category – like race, class, sexuality, or gender – but convinced it is a useful analytic focus nonetheless, I seek to reconstruct the Hebrew Bible's particular ideas of what is disabling and the potential social ramifications of those ideas.⁴ I consider how biblical ideas of disability relate to notions of disability in the larger ancient West Asian cultural sphere, and also examine some of the ways in which ancient Jewish interpreters of biblical texts perpetuate or reconfigure biblical ideas of disability and biblical models of classification. Although the Hebrew Bible has no term that parallels our term "disability" precisely, it does categorize persons on the basis of physical or mental condition, appearance, alleged vulnerability, and the presence or absence of certain diseases, and such classification may result in the text's demand for the exclusion of affected persons from many aspects of social, economic, and religious life (e.g., participation

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in sacrificial rites, or living among others in community). Thus, disability as an analytic category has the potential to help us gain a deeper and more subtle understanding of the ways in which the biblical writers construct hierarchically significant difference and privilege certain groups (e.g., those with non-“defective” or “whole” bodies) over others (e.g., those with physical “defects” [*mûmîm*]). Furthermore, disability as an axis of analysis also provides us with insights regarding the ways in which ancient interpreters of the Hebrew Bible preserve or modify earlier biblical notions of disability and patterns of classification for their own particular contexts and their own particular ends.

DEFINING DISABILITY

As a contested category, there is no single agreed-on definition of disability in disability studies, although scholars working in the area have tended recently to opt for broader, more inclusive understandings of what constitutes a disability. This more comprehensive approach to disability is evidently the result of developments within communities of persons with disabilities, and is often justified by the claim that disabled persons share a common stigmatization and marginalization, at least in the contemporary West.⁵ There is, however, a virtual consensus among scholars in disability studies that disability, like gender, is a social construction rather than something “natural and timeless,” a cultural product that has contributed significantly to the generation and maintenance of inequality in societies.⁶ Disability may have some basis in physical or mental difference, but it is the social meaning attributed to such difference that makes it significant.⁷ I, too, am inclined to define disability broadly in order to enable me to look at the various categories of persons who are stigmatized and assigned marginal social positions in biblical texts on account of a physical or mental condition or state. Included are persons with physical “defects” (*mûmîm*) such as the blind and the lame, persons who are mentally disabled, persons with diseases cast as polluting (e.g., *šara‘at*, “skin disease”), and the deaf and the mute.⁸ These persons are subject to forms of stigmatization and marginalization in biblical texts, analogous in some respects to the common stigmatization and marginalization claimed for contemporary Western persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the biblical text itself will often bring a variety of disabilities into direct association,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS

3

as in Lev 19:14 (deafness and blindness), Deut 28:28 (mental disability and blindness), and Exod 4:10–11 (impeded speech, muteness, deafness, and blindness), suggesting that they share something in common.⁹ Thus, it seems fitting to speak collectively of persons with “defects,” with mental disability, with deafness and muteness, with “skin disease” (*šara‘at*), and with other stigmatized conditions or states, persons whom the text frequently seeks to devalue and marginalize, as the Hebrew Bible’s disabled persons. In the setting of this study, therefore, a disability is a physical or mental condition or state impacting negatively on affected categories of persons especially on account of the social meaning and significance attributed to the condition or state in the biblical context. Like other scholars, I understand disability to be preeminently a social production, and therefore, I focus primarily on its social dimensions.¹⁰ In a classic essay, Joan Wallach Scott argued that “gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power . . . [it] is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated.”¹¹ The same, I believe, could be said about disability in the biblical context. Thus, a primary goal of this study is to investigate the social dimensions of disability as it is represented, particularly the ways in which textual castings of disability function to realize and communicate patterns of social inequality.

TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS

It is worth emphasizing that the focus of this project is the textual representation of disability in several ancient corpora rather than the study of disabled individuals or groups from Israelite and Jewish antiquity. Because we know little or nothing about the lives of ancient persons with disabilities, textual representations of disability are virtually all that we have to work with.¹² Of these, many, if not most, focus on categories of disabled persons (e.g., “the blind,” “the lame”) rather than particular, historically situated individuals or groups. Biblical representations of disability come from different time periods and geographic/social locations, and are found in a variety of literary contexts, including prescriptive legal discourse, ancestral lore, historical narrative, prophetic oracles, and nonprophetic poetic compositions. In many cases, it is difficult if not impossible to date our texts, and questions of provenance must often remain unanswered. In short, our data are exceedingly limited, and in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the main, not conducive to reconstructing individual lives, regional or local ideological differences, or historical change over time.¹³ However, representations are central to our enterprise nonetheless because they are ideologically charged and function themselves to mold patterns of thought among those for whom they are intended. From them, we can learn something about how disabilities were constructed by the elusive writers of our texts, and how our writers' textual productions might have resonated with and shaped the thinking of their audiences. The study of the textual representation of topics such as the past, ritual, and gender in biblical and cognate materials has become increasingly attractive to biblical scholars in recent years, as the impact of the cultural turn in the humanities has spread in the international academy over the past several decades.¹⁴ Given that representations of disability must have played a part in the creation and shaping of social categories and therefore, social differentiation in ancient Israel, the study of such representations is an urgent desideratum if we hope to develop a more nuanced understanding both of disability and inequality in the literary works under consideration and in the ancient contexts that produced them. Hayden White's observation is in the main true for an investigation such as this: "The historically real, the past real, is that to which I can be referred only by way of an artifact that is textual in nature."¹⁵ Thus, I focus on *representations* of disability in the biblical text. Although these representations are anything but an unproblematic window providing direct access into the day-to-day lives of ancient persons, they do teach us something about the ways in which disability was constructed and infused with meaning in biblical and related contexts, and therefore, some of the ways in which ancient writers thought about disability and sought to shape the thinking of others.

CLASSIFICATION AND STIGMATIZATION

Classification has been much discussed over the past several decades in scholarship in the humanities. To classify or differentiate has been called "a process of making meaning" (J. W. Scott), classification has been described as "a necessary prerequisite" to explanation (J. Z. Smith), and taxonomies themselves have been characterized as both "epistemological

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

instruments” and “instruments for the organization of society” (B. Lincoln).¹⁶ Religions, in particular, have been described as “powerful engines for the production and maintenance of classificatory systems” (J. Z. Smith).¹⁷ As more than a few scholars have noted, binary oppositions such as clean/unclean or holy/common are central to many classificatory systems, and those evidenced in the Hebrew Bible are no exception to this pattern. I have argued elsewhere, in fact, that such dyads are frequently productive of hierarchy in biblical representations of cult.¹⁸ The representation of disability in the Hebrew Bible is in part the product of the operations of a number of native dual oppositions. These include non-“defective” or “whole”/“defective,” clean/unclean, holy/common, honored/shamed, blessed/cursed, beautiful/ugly, and loved/hated. The discourses that deploy these oppositions, discourses of valorization and stigmatization, are at times overlapping. Blindness, a “defect,” may also be cast as a curse, as it is in Deut 28:28. In the same way, the person classified as “without defect” might also be categorized as “beautiful,” as in Dan 1:4 and Song of Songs 4:7 (“You are entirely beautiful, my companion,” // “there is no ‘defect’ in you”).¹⁹ When deployed by the writers of our texts, these oppositional discourses function to create unequal categories of persons. For example, those whose bodies are understood by the text as lacking “defects” (*mûmîm*) are privileged in any number of ways over those whose bodies are cast as “defective.” According to Lev 21:17–23, priests with physical “defects” such as blindness, lameness, damaged genitals, or broken limbs may not offer sacrifices to Yhwh as other priests do; they constitute a distinct, secondary, stigmatized, and, in part, marginalized category of priests who are not allowed to perform the central, most highly esteemed priestly function according to this source: offering the deity sacrifices.²⁰ This privilege belongs exclusively to priests whose bodies lack “defects.” Similarly, serious polluters are stripped of opportunities for cultic activity and social intercourse that would be readily available to those cast as clean. For example, persons with “skin disease” (*šara‘at*) are constructed as highly polluting, and are therefore portrayed as physically and socially separated from the community, living on their own or with others similarly afflicted, and unable to participate in communal life (Lev 13:45–46; Num 5:1–4). Thus, through the deployment of disabling and enabling binary discourses alone or in combination, texts create categories of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

stigmatized persons whom they seek to marginalize, as well as their antitype: categories of privileged persons who lack negatively constructed, stigmatized characteristics and possess valued traits (e.g., those with non-“defective” or “whole” bodies, those who are blessed or honored, those who are clean and fit to participate in communal or familial cultic rites).

Biblical authors also seek to classify, stigmatize, and marginalize through several other moves. They deploy denigrating comparisons to devalue disabled persons (e.g., likening them implicitly to a parched desert) and speak of an ideal future in which Yhwh acts to eliminate disability entirely (Isa 35:4–10). Perhaps the most common way in which authors seek to categorize, devalue, and marginalize persons with disabilities is through association. Disabled categories of persons are brought into association with other stigmatized and socially marginal types, such as the poor, the widow, the fatherless, the alien, and, in the case of persons with non-“defective” disabilities, those cast as having “defects” (*mûmîm*); with devalued personal characteristics such as weakness, vulnerability, dependence, ineffectuality, ignorance, and bad judgment; with ideas such as divine rejection and contempt; and, in the case of males, with categories of women, suggesting their feminization. Job 29:12–16 illustrates some of these associations at work. In this text, the blind and lame are listed with the poor; the afflicted; the widow; and other categories of persons cast as weak, vulnerable, and dependent, who are helped by a vigorous, autonomous Job before his own calamities incapacitate him:

I was eyes for the blind,
feet for the lame was I.
I was a father for the poor,
and the lawsuit of the stranger I researched.²¹
(vv. 15–16)

By mentioning the blind and the lame with the poor, the widow, the stranger, and other dependent sufferers, Job 29:12–16 implicitly classifies blind and lame persons with these marginal groups, suggesting that they share the same devalued characteristics (e.g., weakness, dependency). These persons serve as a foil for Job, the ideal man, the paradigm of agency, strength, and autonomy.²² Ps 146:5–9 is similar. Here, the blind

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and other vulnerable categories of persons are said to be helped directly by Yhwh:

He executes justice for the oppressed,
 provides food for the hungry.
 Yhwh frees prisoners,
 Yhwh gives sight to the blind,
 Yhwh raises up the prostrate,
 Yhwh loves the innocent,
 Yhwh watches over the resident aliens,
 The fatherless and widow he helps.
 But the way of the wicked he subverts.
 (vv. 7–9)

Although texts such as these may have been intended to challenge negative representations of the blind and other dependent sufferers by suggesting that such persons are of special interest to the powerful, including the deity, they nonetheless affirm their weakness, vulnerability, dependence, and lack of agency, thereby stigmatizing them.²³ Other biblical texts associate disabilities such as blindness and deafness with ignorance, and muteness with ineffectuality. An example is Isa 56:10, in which dysfunctional Judean “watchmen” (presumably, Judah’s prophets) are described: “His watchmen are blind, all of them, knowing nothing,” // “All of them are mute dogs, unable to bark.”²⁴ In this passage, blindness signals ignorance, and muteness a dysfunction in communication. Two related legal formulations associate blindness with bad judgment and corruption: “A bribe you shall not take, for the bribe blinds (*ye’awwer*) the sighted, and twists (*yesallep*) the cause of the innocent” (Exod 23:8; cf. Deut 16:19). Many of these associations are also present in non-Israelite West Asian texts. For example, Babylonian *kudurru* (boundary) inscriptions often contain a formula suggesting that groups such as the deaf, the blind, and the mentally disabled can be manipulated into offenses on account of their ignorance and lack of judgment.²⁵ Furthermore, words for physical disabilities such as *akû* and mental disabilities such as *lillu* can be used in cuneiform texts as synonyms for “poor,” suggesting a close association between disability and impoverishment.²⁶

The stigmatizing association of disability with weakness, vulnerability, dependence, and ineffectuality constitutes an exceedingly widespread

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

literary topos in biblical texts. It is present even in materials that do not deal directly with disabled persons, such as the so-called idol polemics found in prophetic texts and the Psalms, in which divine images opposed by the writers are denigrated through the listing of their various physical disabilities and through emphasis on their dependence and inability to act.²⁷ Although texts such as these do not speak directly of disabled persons, their stigmatization of a variety of physical disabilities and of weakness and dependency is well worth our careful attention because it tells us something of the authors' thinking about these issues. Jer 10:5 is a primary example of the polemical denigration of "idols" by bringing their disabilities and lack of agency into relief: "Like a scarecrow in a cucumber patch are they. They cannot speak; they must be carried for they cannot walk. Do not fear them, for they can do no harm. Nor is it in their power to do good." The following verses, in contrast, speak of Yhwh's greatness, might, and incomparability (vv. 6–7). The "idols" under attack in Jer 10:5 are false gods according to the writer, lacking essential qualities of a real, living god; likewise, the scarecrow to which they are compared is an artificial substitute for a human being, lacking fundamental human characteristics. The quintessential qualities of the living – whether deity or human – privileged by this text are the capacity to speak; the capacity to walk; the capacity, in short, to function as an independent agent. The implication of the text is that those who lack these abilities, like the "idol" and the scarecrow, lack fundamental divine and human characteristics. The polemic of Psalm 115 is similar, contrasting the agency of Yhwh (v. 3, "all that he desires he does") with the disabilities of the "idols" of the nations (vv. 5–8):

They have mouths but cannot speak,
 they have eyes but cannot see,
 they have ears, but cannot hear,
 they have a nose but cannot smell,
 their hands cannot feel,
 their feet cannot walk,
 they utter no sound in their throat.
 Like them are those who made them,
 all who trust in them.

In marked contrast to Yhwh, who can do anything he wants to do (v. 3), the "idols" can do nothing at all. Any voluntary association with such

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ineffectual, false gods reduces the votary's own status. He also becomes a target of derision, said to share the ineffectuality of the "idols" themselves.

The evident resonance of what I call the weakness and ineffectuality topos with ancient audiences affords biblical authors the opportunity to use disabled characters to develop and complicate a plot, often in order to bring into relief a favorite theme: the magnificent power and agency of Israel's god Yhwh.²⁸ Because of Samson's blinding and fettering after his capture and his evident loss of superhuman strength, the Philistines believe that he is no longer a threat to them.²⁹ In fact, the narrative comes to focus on Samson's blindness as emblematic of his weakness and ineffectuality.³⁰ Philistine assumptions about Samson's disability allow them to forget his previous god-given physical strength connected to the growth of his hair, and they perish as a result when Samson is given an opportunity to grasp the pillars supporting the temple of Dagon and pull it down on them and on himself (Judg 16:25–30). The fact that Samson is able to wreak havoc among the Philistines and kill even more of them at his death than he killed previously – to paraphrase Judg 16:30 – does not suggest anything positive about his blindness; it only serves to underscore the deity's might, his receptivity to Samson's petition for revenge, and the foolish overconfidence of the Philistines. Even though he was blind and would have been ineffectual as an adversary under normal circumstances, Samson was nonetheless able to accomplish one last mighty feat against the Philistines as a result of Yhwh's willingness to intervene on his behalf.

A second example of blindness functioning in a narrative to bring into relief Yhwh's exceptional ability and agency is the story of the visit of King Jeroboam's wife to the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh in 1 Kgs 14:1–18. After Jeroboam's son Abijah becomes ill, Jeroboam sends his wife – who is never named – in disguise to consult the prophet Ahijah regarding the boy's future. Ahijah the prophet, we are told, is blind on account of old age. Before Jeroboam's wife arrives at Ahijah's house, Yhwh tells him that she is coming in disguise to seek information about her sick son's fate (v. 5). As Jeroboam's wife enters Ahijah's house, Ahijah says "come in wife of Jeroboam. Why do you pretend to be someone else? As for me, I am sent with hard (news) for you" (v. 6). Ahijah's blindness would, under normal circumstances, make him ignorant of the identity of his visitor who had not as yet uttered a word to him, even if she were not disguised. The fact that she is disguised and that he is able nonetheless not only to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88807-3 - Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Saul M. Olyan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

recognize her, but also to identify her mission (v. 5), underscores Yhwh's outstanding capacity to know all, and to communicate this privileged knowledge to his blind mouthpiece, the prophet.³¹ Ahijah's inability to see, which would have placed him at a disadvantage vis-à-vis Jeroboam's wife were he not a prophet of Yhwh, is rendered irrelevant in light of Yhwh's supreme knowledge and his choice to communicate it to his representative.

Several other biblical texts in which the central character has a disability of some kind function similarly to the Samson and Ahijah narratives. As in Judges 16 and 1 Kings 14, where Samson's and Ahijah's blindness provide an opportunity to bring Yhwh's own outstanding agency, knowledge, and power into relief, Moses' protest in Exod 4:10 that he is "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue," and so inadequate to the task of leading the people out of Egypt, provides the writer with an opportunity to emphasize the deity's contrasting ability and Moses' complete dependence on it: "Who gives a human a mouth, or who makes (someone) mute, deaf, sentient, or blind? Is it not I, Yhwh? Now then, go, and I myself shall be with your mouth, and shall teach you what you will say" (Exod 4:11–12).³² The fact that disability is characteristic of Moses in this text, as it is of Samson in Judges 16 and Ahijah in 1 Kings 14, does not pose a challenge to disability's stigmatization in the larger biblical narrative; if anything, it reinforces it. Disability in these texts remains associated with inadequacy, insufficiency, and dependence, and functions to provide the texts' writers with opportunities to emphasize Yhwh's contrasting ability, knowledge, and agency. Even Jacob's limping as a result of his wrestling with Yhwh in Genesis 32:25–33 (Eng. 24–32) signals the deity's unequalled strength and ability rather than something positive about Jacob: Jacob is disabled by Yhwh in order to allow the deity to prevail in his wrestling match with him and escape before the sun's rise. Jacob's lameness therefore demonstrates Yhwh's power over even the most capable of human adversaries, and is emblematic of his ultimate weakness vis-à-vis the deity.

CONTESTING DISABILITY'S STIGMATIZATION

Few alternative voices survive that contest the stigmatization of disability evidenced so broadly in extant biblical texts, in contrast to the wealth of material that challenges negative representations of the poor, the widow,