



## Disability in the Hebrew Bible

By Jeremy Schipper

The Hebrew Bible contains a great deal of language and imagery related to disability. Contemporary notions of disability can refer to a wide variety of human conditions, even though these conditions may not share many common medical or biological traits. For example, the term “disability” could refer to cerebral palsy, dyslexia, or blindness. Biblical Hebrew does not have one word that covers all these conditions. The Hebrew word *mum*, usually translated as “blemish,” refers to many conditions that we may consider a disability, such as blindness or lameness (cf. Lev 21:16-23). Yet the Bible does not use the word *mum* for conditions such as deafness or muteness, even though these conditions are sometimes paired with other conditions that qualify as a *mum* (e.g., the pairing of ‘blind’ and ‘deaf’ in Lev 19:14; Isa 29:18; 35:5; 43:8). The categories and terminology that we use to classify and interpret physical differences may change across time and cultures. Defining disability depends on more than just objective medical or biological differences between people identified as disabled or nondisabled.

Although many people associate the term disability with a medical diagnosis, we rarely determine whether a person has a disability based on a medical diagnosis alone. Instead, we consider a variety of factors. We could discuss disability as a medical issue, a legal issue, a religious issue, and so on. Few, if any, passages in the Hebrew Bible focus on medical diagnoses when discussing conditions that we might consider disabilities. More often, the Hebrew Bible approaches disability as a religious or theological issue under divine control (cf. Gen 16:2; 20:18; 25:21; 29:31; Exod 4:11; 23:26; Deut 7:14; Judg 13:2-3; 1 Sam 1:5; 2 Chron 16:12).

It is important to understand what the issue under discussion is when we come across language or imagery of disability in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Leviticus 13-15 contains detailed instructions for priests for when they examine a variety of skin diseases. Yet, these instructions aim to determine whether the skin diseases will transmit possible religious impurities onto the Israelite sanctuary. The instructions do not address these skin diseases as a medical issue in need of treatment. Instead, they approach the skin diseases as relevant to a larger religious issue that impacts the community. The health of the Israelite sanctuary is the central concern of these instructions rather than the person with the skin disease. We must pay close attention to the issue under discussion in a given biblical passage in order to understand how it uses disability language or imagery.

Many times, the Hebrew Bible uses disability language or imagery when discussing topics unrelated to disabled people. Frequently, biblical prophets use imagery of disability when delivering their message. For example, in Isa 56:10, the prophet declares, “Israel's lookouts are blind, All of them do not know; All of them are mute dogs that are not able to bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to be drowsy.” This verse does not discuss the disabled themselves. It uses the words “blind” and “mute” as metaphors to criticize the ineffective efforts of Israel's leadership. Similarly, several other biblical prophecies or curses use disability imagery to describe the moral or ethical conditions of a presumably nondisabled audience (cf. Deut 28:28-29; Isa 29:9; 59:10; Zeph 1:17). Such passages may tell us what a particular prophet thought about how the Israelites conducted themselves. They tell us very little, however, about the actual living conditions or everyday experiences of disabled people in ancient Israel (although it may indicate that the disabled suffered a social stigma). Instead, these passages frequently use language and imagery

of disability to describe the experiences and struggles of the presumably nondisabled.

While paying attention to the issues that the Hebrew Bible uses disability imagery to discuss, we should also develop an awareness of the many assumptions about disability that we bring to our reading of the Hebrew Bible. We should ask whether ancient audiences would have shared our assumptions about disability in relation to injury or age and other factors. For example, we often assume that serious injuries are temporary if the Hebrew Bible does not tell us otherwise. Yet, ancient audiences may not have shared this assumption. Considering the medical technology available at the time, ancient audiences may have expected serious injuries to result in permanent disabilities instead of a temporary condition as we often assume. For example, Jacob develops a limp after dislocating his hip during a wrestling match (Gen 32:31). His limp may seem temporary because the Bible never mentions it again even though Jacob lives for several more chapters. Nevertheless, in one of the rare instances in which the Hebrew Bible describes an injured body following a nonfatal accident, it associates the injury with a permanent disability rather than a temporary injury: a character named Mephibosheth was lame his entire adult life because his nurse dropped him as a child (cf. 2 Sam 4:4; 9:3, 13; 19:26).

In addition, we should not assume to know whether ancient audiences would have associated certain images with disability or old age. For example, ancient audiences may have understood blindness as a typical part of the aging process. Isaac (Gen 27:1), Jacob (Gen 48:10), Eli (1 Sam 4:15), and Ahijah (1 Kgs 14:4) all lose their eyesight in old age. Moses' perfect eyesight in old age (Deut 34:7) may have represented the exception instead of the rule for ancient audiences. They may have considered Isaac, Jacob, Eli, or Ahijah as elderly rather than disabled because of their social expectations for the aging process. Similarly, if a person today uses a cane during his or her sixties or seventies, we might consider the cane as a sign of old age. It would not seem unusual for an elderly person to use a cane. If another person uses an identical cane in his or her twenties or thirties, we might consider the same cane as a sign of a disability because we might not expect a younger person to use a cane.

This brief essay has discussed disability in the Hebrew Bible as more than a medical issue alone. When we find disability imagery in the Hebrew Bible, we should ask whether the passage uses the imagery to discuss disabled people or some other topic. Who or what does the imagery describe? Also, we should consider what ancient audiences would have understood as descriptions of disability rather than a temporary injury or old age. Interpreting the use of disability imagery in the Hebrew Bible requires us to read closely. Asking these types of questions helps us to become better and more sensitive readers of biblical literature.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

When reading about a disabled character (e.g. Genesis 32; 2 Samuel 9; 2 Kings 5), picture the character in your mind. What words or images in the text support the way that you visualize the character's disability? What words or images challenge the way that you visualize the character's disability?

When you read a passage that includes disability imagery or language, is it used to describe disabled people? If not, what type of people does this imagery or language describe?

If imagery or language related to disability is a metaphor, what does the metaphor represent? Is the way in which this text thinks about disabled people different or similar to how our culture typically views disabilities?

### **Further Reading**

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