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On the borderline – representations of disability in the Old Testament

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This article explores disability in the Old Testament. The discussion takes its starting point in a number of domains and arenas where disability was visualized and investigates the significance and meaning that can be attached to these domains in relation to the problem of inclusion and exclusion. The analysis highlights complex and contradictory phenomena, where the interpretation was not given but rather dependent on the cultural context and different mechanisms at work.

Keywords: disability; Bible; inclusion; exclusion

Introduction

Religion and disability can be discussed and analysed from various perspectives and on different levels. On one level, disability and religion touch upon issues concerning human rights and the extent to which someone is admitted to a religious practice. In that sense, religion becomes a matter of politics and rights. For instance, in the standard rules on the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities – which were adopted by the *UN* in 1993 as a *policy-making* instrument – religion is one field that touches upon discrimination and inclusion issues (Standard Rules…, 1993). Relevant policies can be seen in the context in which people with disabilities are not always accepted as integral members of religious communities (Schultz 2012). On another level, religion is intertwined with practices within social work and community activities. Faith-based organizations have a long tradition of working with vulnerable groups (Pierson 2002). In addition, faith and spirituality have also been identified as vital components in rehabilitation (Byrd 1999). The involvement of faith-based organizations in social work and assistance has been both contested and celebrated (Pierson 2002). All this coincides with an ongoing theological discussion on how to understand and explain disability in relation to religious messages (Bishop 1995). These processes not only place disability and religion in relation to rights and participation but also delegate part of the social work to the domains of religion. At the same time, this puts disability within various theological frameworks of interpretation. Thus a number of questions concerning the relationship between religion and disability are raised. For instance, how can we understand religious values and beliefs in relation to issues of normality and deviance? One way to start analysing these questions is to study how disability is treated in religious scriptures, such as the Bible. Studying the Bible from this perspective is also motivated given the fact that the Bible

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has 'clearly played a historical *role* in shaping the attitudes and practices of Western societies toward persons with disabilities' (Melcher 2010, 97).

How then is it possible to analyse disability in relation to these texts? First, one has to keep in mind that the Bible is not *one* single text. The Bible has been produced under various circumstances and contexts and by different authors over a long period of time (Friedman 1997). How we choose to interpret stories in the Bible is also a question of how to understand the meaning of religion. Religion can be seen as an instrument for manipulation in the interest of the ruling class, or as a cultural glue that binds society together and strengthens group solidarity. Religion is also a complex system that embeds various cultural symbols and weaves psychological components into the individual's own construction of meaning and self-understanding (Hamilton 1995). Even though religion is a complex phenomenon one can hardly overlook the fact that the *biblical* narratives relates to ideology. It ought to be clear that the stories of the Old Testament promoted the unification of the Israeli people under one God, and that the *biblical* authors constructed their texts in relation to political transformations and goals (Friedman 1997).

But what do these texts say about disability? Stiker (2006) argues that the changing discourses of time illustrate that man lacks the capability of dealing with deviance and, therefore, nourishes the quest for normality. For Stiker, the Old Testament is dominated by a discourse that stigmatized persons with disabilities, seeing them as unclean. This view has been further outlined by Mackelprang and Salsgiver (1996) who claim that the *biblical* answer to disability is ostracism, and that people with disabilities are portrayed in a very stereotyped manner. Another point that has been made is that *the other* 'signified "sinner" to the ancient Hebrews, and that people with disabilities were thought to be possessed by evil demons'. They also claim that the Old Testament 'forbade people who were blind or lame from entering the houses of believers' (Mackelprang and Salsgiver, 1996, 8). According to Lowenfeld (1975), the Hebrews regarded impairments as 'a result of sinning', and therefore, 'had the character of a stigma'. Furthermore, people with disabilities, Lowenfeld argue, were given a special *role* in society, since they made it possible for others to practice charity as a religious duty. He also suggests that there is a kind of hierarchy among impairments in the Old Testament and that 'blindness is considered the most severe' (Lowenfeld 1975, 26, 29). Enerstvedt (1996) also claims that the Old Testament puts blindness in relation to sin, and that the impairment was regarded as a 'curse' and a 'punishment'. At the same time, he traces elements of a humanist view in which 'ideas of the blind as helpless people and in need of pity and sympathy' flourished. Enerstvedt thus stress that the Old Testament holds a 'variety of attitudes on blindness' (7).

Olyan (2008) provides an extensive analysis of disability in the Old Testament. He seeks to understand representations of disability from a social dimension in which he concludes that disability, or 'defects', are frequently used in the *biblical* texts to construct stigmatization and marginalization, thus relating it to processes of devaluating discourses concerning social differentiation and equality. Moreover, Olyan sees the prominence of beauty as an indicator of how the Bible celebrates the strong, symmetric and powerful body:

> 'Defects' are typically devalued in *biblical* discourse. Their negative construction is made manifest through the text's efforts to stigmatize and marginalize those who possess them. Persons with 'defects' are stigmatized and assigned marginal social positions through the deployment of a number of devaluing discourses by the *biblical* authors. (46)

Schipper ([2005](#)), on the other hand, stresses that the *biblical* narratives containing references to disability must be read in the light of political rhetoric, where disability was used as part of a broader rhetoric technique, for instance, relating it to ongoing power struggles. Abrams ([2007](#)), claim that certain passages in the Bible that discriminate against people with disabilities have been given too much attention. One example is when it came to requirements to become a priest, a requirement which, he argued, however, would only affect a limited amount of people.

The problem with embracing a strong constructionist approach to historical texts, such as the Bible, is that it tends to simplify history and reduce various processes and mechanisms into one dominating discourse so that the theory runs the risk of becoming a 'straight jacket' that blocks different aspects, reasoning and understandings from being visualized (Gustavsson [2004](#)). As previously noted, prior research in the area largely accentuates how the Old Testament is governed by a dominating idea or discourse that relegated persons with disabilities into a less valued out-group and thereby separated them from the rest of the community. The ambition in this study is to discuss and analyse these issues further.

This article aims to analyse exclusion and inclusion processes related to disability, and how different phenomena are described and used in the stories in the Old Testament. The analysis is guided by the following questions: In what types of arenas or domains is disability being visualized and what does it mean? To what extent is disability conceived and dealt with in terms of threat *and/or* empathy? And finally, what kind of rhetorical function is disability given in relation to its *biblical* context?

Analysing disability

Disability as a phenomenon and a concept can be understood from a number of various perspectives and theories. The traditional way to approach disability is from a medical or individual model in which disability is explained in terms of biological and physiological deficits. This medical view has been challenged by a social model that embraces the idea that disability is rather a consequence sprung from social barriers and, therefore, becomes a matter of human rights and politics (Tøssebro [2004](#)). Some scholars, such as Foucault ([2010](#)), stress that disability is not given but rather constructed by governing normality discourses that affect shifting societal processes. This line of thought has been accentuated by Szasz ([1972](#)), who argues that mental illness is simply a construction and a myth. According to critical realism this way of thinking, disability is neither to be reduced to biology *nor* society. Rather, it must be understood as a phenomenon on various levels, where different mechanisms are at work and generate different outcomes depending on its contextual factors (Danermark [2001](#)).

Moreover, disability relates to issues of inclusion and exclusion. Although the concept of social exclusion has been criticized as vague, it touches upon relevant areas such as marginalization, normality, deviance and stigma. Social exclusion is about the creation of social categorization and the consequences of these processes, as well as its relationship to power and the definitions of *us* and *them* (Bengtsson [2005](#); Madsen [2006](#)). Social identity is built upon notions of what group a certain individual belongs to and interacts with inclusion and exclusion processes since it sanctions what group is allowed to participate in what arenas. Society sometimes tries to protect itself from a perceived threat by constructing systems of social control. These systems can work in two ways: to keep someone from entering a group or to exclude someone who is already on the inside (Madsen [2006](#)).

The categorization of people is arbitrary and affected by shifting cultural practises. In this process, the individual can move from separation to transition to incorporation

through rites of passage (Murphy 1987). Individuals belonging to this category are hard to define by members of society since 'liminal spaces are between cultural states, making them an in-between place, a non-place. In this space, initiates are between social roles, cultural expectations, and status […] To be in liminality is to be in limbo, on the threshold of between here and there' (Kelly 2008, 336). In other words, the concept highlights an indistinct status and identity, which creates societal unrest and uncertainty (Lindqvist 2004). According to Fraser (2003), social inclusion and exclusion processes must also address social recognition and justice in relation to status, stressing the importance of bringing into the picture institutional barriers embedded in a certain context.

This study's overall analytical framework is the anthropologically-inspired perspective by Whyte and Ingstad (1995), which outlines disability within a cultural context. Fundamental questions guiding this approach address how disability is interpreted and understood in connection to cultural systems and symbols. This perspective also strives to implement a comparatively open analysis that accentuates values, norms and various social positions; these factors are then collectively related to individuals and groups and analyses target contextual perception and description.

The analytic procedures for this study can be described as follows: (1) every book of the Old Testament was examined closely in its entirety, with an objective to identify statements/narratives that, in some way, touch upon bodily features/functions and their relation to normality and deviance. This examination began by looking at how the narratives recognize and define a particular problem, how agents/narratives describe reality and the values inherent to those descriptions, and finally what kind of actions and arrangements are recommended in a certain context (Förhammar 2000). (2) These statements/narratives were then coded into common units, *i.e.* categories dealing with a particular issue. (3) Subsequently, these units were jointly conceptualized and interpreted into overall themes with 'higher levels of abstraction' (Padgett 2008, 151). Finally, each theme has been analysed to illuminate issues relating to concepts of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, the theme of *the perfect body* is constructed through the collaboration of different units, all of which commonly deal with bodily requirements relating to issues of priesthood, sacrifices, strength and beauty. The search for various themes has been constantly guided by the initial research questions in order to validate the outcome of the coding process. The resultant analysis and interpretation have also been drawn from an oscillation between the parts and the whole of the *biblical* text (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994). Interpretation can be described as a process where theory and empirical data intertwine in an ongoing analysis and conceptual discussion. At the same time, there is always a risk of chronological imperialism when studying historical records and texts since interpretation is being conducted in a context separated from the one that originally produced the text (Nilsson 1990; Ricoeur 1993). The interpreter must, therefore, put his own *judgement* into play, integrating various horizons (Gadamer 1997). At the same time, disability is a contemporary term that fits badly in historical settings. Despite the risk of being anachronistic, disability will be used in this article to define restrictions and categorisations due to impairment *and/or* to social barriers and processes of marginalization.

Findings

The perfect body

One *biblical* arena where disability came to be visualized was in the religious ceremonies. Throughout the Old Testament various rituals and collective procedures are enforced, illuminating the important *role* of these cultural institutions. Not only

were these ceremonies a celebration to God, but they also highlighted a specific societal structure where roles were established, developed and confirmed. The rituals as such were strictly regulated emphasizing a hierarchy within the religious community. For instance, not just anyone was accepted as a high-ranking priest in charge of the temple service. First, in order to take a leading *role* in the performance of rituals and ceremonies, a member of the community had to pass the test of bodily normality. Therefore, it was unthinkable that a person with a disability could ever serve as a high priest and take a leading *role* in the highest rituals of the cult; thus disability became a clear marker for an institutional exclusion barrier, if the reasoning of Fraser (2003) is followed. This kind of exclusion procedure was clearly established through a direct order from God:

> And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron, saying: 'No man of your descendants in *succeeding* generations, who has *any* defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God. 'For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred *face* or any *limb* too long 'a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, 'or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or *a man* who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch. 'No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offerings made by fire to the LORD. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. 'He may eat the bread of his God, *both* the most holy and the holy; 'only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I the LORD sanctify them.' (Lev. 21:16–23)[1]

The passage illustrates not only the idea that a person with disability was considered to be impure, but the very idea that God found most pleasure in a perfect and normal body. This idea becomes even clearer when looking at the requirements surrounding the institution of the religious sacrifice, a central part of the religious cult presented in the Old Testament – a ritual in which man was believed to make contact with the divine power (Abrams 2007). Therefore, one of the most important roles upheld by the ceremonial leaders was to conduct these rituals in a correct manner. In the same way that the religious positions were determined by bodily constitution, so, too, did the rules regulating the sacrifice similarly express God's quest for normality and perfection. In this sense, an impaired creature became more or less an act of disrespect towards God's greatness:

> 'Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, for it shall not be acceptable on your behalf. 'And whoever offers a sacrifice of a peace offering to the LORD, to fulfil *his* wow, or a freewill offering from the cattle or the sheep, it must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it. (Lev. 22:20–21)

Even in this sense impairment seems to relate to perceptions about the unclean and the less holy. If choosing a less-perfect body the owner of the livestock was running the risk of being less favoured by God – and the *biblical* narratives tells us how God warned those who neglected the rule by sacrificing an animal that was blind or lame:

> And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice,
> Is it not evil?
> And when you offer the lame and sick,
> Is it not evil? (Mal. 1:8)

How is this to be understood? Apparently impairment was believed to be a phenomenon representing some kind of collective shame that to some extent was to be hidden from the

eyes of God. Since nature was created by a flawless divine power and humans as an image of that power, a person with a bodily deficit to some extent challenged the idea of perfection. The very existence of deviance in some respect became a contradiction to the religious message and, therefore, an act of disrespect.

God had also selected the Israelis to be the chosen people. In addition, the Old Testament, as shown by Olyan (2008), celebrates the able-bodied emphasising strength and beauty. In promoting a united people under one God, the myths of the strong and perfect warriors became important. The legend of Samson or the description of King David's mighty men could work as sources of inspiration and force (Judg. 15:16; 2 Sam. 23:8–39). Indeed, the narratives also emphasize in many ways beauty as a high-ranking element (Gen. 39:6), and they can even describe disability as the very opposite of beauty. For instance, King Nebuchadnezzar decided that only certain people of Israel – 'Young men in whom *there was* no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand' (Dan. 1:4) – were to be given certain favours and positions, illustrating how the *biblical* stories highlight special bodily and cognitive features as a condition for benefits and higher status. All of this seems to touch upon the notion of an ideal state and a perfect societal order. In that sense, disability was possibly seen as a threat. Since God favoured normality and since man's destiny was to seek a closer relationship with him, a person with a disability was easily turned into a stigmatized and unclean deviant contaminating the holy, drawing a line between the worthy and less worthy.

However, that does not capture the whole picture. There also seems to be a kind of hierarchy within these categories. For instance, the restrictions concerning religious rituals deal mainly with visual forms of disability, leaving, for instance, people who were deaf off the list. More important, these procedures concerning rituals and clerical affiliation reveal how people with disabilities were still considered to be a part of the religious congregation, giving them the right to important roles and to participation in the priestly ceremonies on a partial basis – a fact that most clearly illustrates the ambivalent nature of disability in the Old Testament. Clearly, to be a descendent of Aaron became a mechanism that offset discrimination and guaranteed a person a certain amount of recognition. Therefore, it is misleading to claim that persons with disabilities were automatically excluded or banned from important domains and roles. Rather ritual procedures seemed to have balanced between exclusion *and* inclusion, arrangements that placed a person with a disability in a more liminal or diffuse state. For instance, who was to decide exactly when a certain 'defect' existed that would sanction exclusion measures?

To exercise solidarity

Another *biblical* dimension or arena, related to disability, dealt with poverty. In many ways, the Bible upholds a significant correlation between disability and poverty. When it comes to the poor in general, the Old Testament makes several remarks concerning how a member of the Jewish community should act in order to assist the needy in a spirit of unselfish brotherhood and solidarity (Lev. 25:35; Exod. 22:25; Deut. 23:19–20). The narrative also contains ideas about how this sense of solidarity was very much related to the notion of ideal leadership, one that would 'spare the poor and needy, And will save the souls of the needy' (Ps. 72:13) – suggesting that even those seen as deviants to some degree were considered to be part of a broader collective in-group subject to community support. In his final plea, Job, the high-minded man being tested by God, tried to prove his value by stating that he had always assisted the blind and the lame (Job 29:15),

making disability into a domain for others to prove themselves worthy of God's recognition.

The relationship between poverty and disability is further delineated in the institution of begging. Exercising mercy was a way of showing not only rightfulness before God but to prove that one was a true believer. On another level, poverty was conceived in terms of a threat, indicating that something was wrong in the state of Israel. Since God had given the land to the Israelis with the ambition to make it prosper, the very existence of disabled and poor people in Israel could seem to contradict such a project, which elucidates how disability was placed on a movable scale of inclusion and exclusion. Thus disability functioned in a way in which members of the society could express mercy and, in doing so, strengthen the collective identity of the Jewish community. All of this accentuates how economic factors to a large extent constituted the border between normality and deviance in the *biblical* context. It also emphasizes the difference among categories.

The teaching of morals

Disability was also something that triggered the leaders to create collective arrangements in order to strengthen a certain moral *behaviour*. The objective of this measure was to protect a person with a disability. For instance, Deuteronomy deals with Moses and how he established a ceremonial system of curses that accentuated the boundary of non-acceptable behaviour. The system consisted of rules that regulated how members within the community were supposed to act towards *the other*, stating, for instance, that: 'Cursed *is* the one who makes the blind to wander off the road' (Deut. 27:18). According to Leviticus, it was strictly prohibited to *orally* attack a person with a certain disability: 'You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God…' (Lev. 19:14). These words seem to illustrate an idea that blindness and deafness represented great suffering and that someone who took advantage of that condition was to be damned by the rest of the community. Therefore, the institution of joint curses underlines notions of explicit moral standards in relation to disability and the promotion of certain collective attitudes and norms. Still, it is striking that no other types of disabilities are mentioned in these curses, suggesting that blindness and deafness were considered to be severe conditions. Another possible interpretation is that the curse was needed to prohibit common acts of mockery towards the blind and the deaf. Putting persons with disabilities in the same category as widows and orphans signals the idea that disability was a phenomenon related to weakness and dependence, calling for specific moral standards. It also indicates that the status of the disabled individual must be understood within a broader system where different roles coincided. For instance, it is hard to find episodes representing mental illness as a target for moral exercise or solidarity. Mental issues or deviant *behaviour* in general seem to have caused more confusion. The story where David tries to fool King Achish by playing mad indicates that mental conditions were perceived as a much more elusive phenomenon than blindness or some other physical disability. The story also reveals how someone demonstrating that kind of deviant *behaviour* was considered more or less useless (1 Sam. 21:13–15). All of this suggests that blindness, for instance, was mainly conceived in terms of an economic problem and as a target for moral exercise, while issues concerned with mental illness to a higher degree seem to relate to disturbance and uncertainty, which weakens the idea that disability received a uniform interpretation in the *biblical* context.

Disability as a stigma

Another arena, or domain, that put disability in the *centre* in a more negative sense was the legal system. Hebrew law was much devoted to defining normal *behaviour*, prescribing, for instance, harsh punishment for homosexuality (Lev. 20:13). Regulations of this kind promoted situations where moral deviance became a matter for societal surveillance and control, and corporal punishment could lead to permanent injuries that implied disabilities. Thus, impairment and disability were used as important instruments in fulfilling the punishment philosophy of *biblical* times (Exod. 21:23–25). Leviticus stipulates clearly that 'If a man causes disfigurement of his *neighbour*, as he has done, so shall it be done to him' (Lev. 24:19). The philosophy of the penalty system also touches upon how disability might have been perceived. The perpetrator should be forced to meet the same type of negative experience and suffering as the victim, putting disability in relation to other systems of cultural symbolism. In other words, disability caused by mutilation could signal a person who had crossed the line and violated the rules of the community. We can assume that this, to some extent, promoted a more negative attitude concerning disability as a phenomenon, suggesting that the *biblical* boundaries between exclusion and inclusion are not sharp but rather diffuse and are dependent on what other variables and perspectives we bring into the analyses. The origin of the impairment was crucial. For instance, even though he was blinded by the Philistines, Samson is described as a giant hero defeating the enemy of Israel (Judg. 16:21–30). Thus, if the impairment resulted from a glorious war, as opposed to having a criminal origin, disability could indicate that you were highly valued as God's true servant. Indeed, in order to understand disability and the Bible, one must also regard how a certain disability came to be.

Status and identity

Previous research speaks of the Bible and disability in terms of ostracism (Stiker 2006; Mackelprang and Salsgiver 1996). But the Old Testament hardly presents a universal *programme* for isolation and exclusion. On the contrary, the institution of curses or the partial participation in the priestly ceremonies shows a willingness to facilitate the functioning of these individuals in society. One clear exception is the instructions regarding what actions society was supposed to take when it came to lepers; this reveals the power structures and who had the authority to exclude. If the priest categorized a person as unclean, the person was to be isolated and forced to cry out 'Unclean! Unclean!' and to 'dwell alone' outside the camp (Lev. 13:44–46).

Still, one can find *biblical* episodes that illustrate how persons with disabilities were not always welcomed and where ostracism in fact was proposed. In the second Book of Samuel, there is a passage that has caught the interest of scholars. The narrative deals with how David becomes king over Israel and Judah and contains a remarkable story of how David set out to fight the Jebusites and ends with a saying that expelled the blind and the lame from entering what may be interpreted as the temple:

> And the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who spoke to David, saying, 'You shall not come in here; but the blind and the lame will repel you,' thinking, 'David cannot come in here'. Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion […] Now David said on that day, 'Whoever climbs up by way of the water shaft and defeats the Jebusites (the lame and the blind, *who are* hated by David's soul), *he shall be chief and captain*.' Therefore they say, 'The blind and the lame shall not come into the house'. (2 Sam. 5:6–8)

Olyan (2008) interprets this episode primarily as an ideological rejection that bans the blind and the lame from the temple sphere because of the 'threat of pollution or that of profanation' (Olyan 2008, 32). Schipper (2005) puts the story in relation to a broader rhetorical technique and ideology in which disability is used as representations in an ongoing power struggle between competing dynasties.

It seem reasonable to assume that this passage is about David being taunted in the sense that even the blind and the lame were able to defeat him, and that the other side, in turn, uses this paraphrase as a rhetorical weapon of their own. Still, the passage associates disability with stigma and deviance, illustrating the idea that certain groups were surrounded by beliefs that promoted special treatment and discrimination. The implications were that a person with a disability was weak and less worthy. Yet, this order did not represent a universal system surrounding disability. In other stories, King David chooses a different path. After the power struggle and the death of Saul and his son Jonathan, David wanted to reward Jonathan's loyalty by showing mercy to his children. The only one left was a disabled son, Mephibosheth, who was 'lame in *his* feet' (2 Sam. 9:3). Despite this fact, David decided to reward him by donating land and inviting him to live in Jerusalem and to 'eat bread' at the king's 'table continually' (2 Sam. 9:7). Even though he was lame, David had no trouble announcing that Mephibosheth was to be treated and looked upon as 'one of the king's sons' (2 Sam. 9:11).

These episodes underline factors that need to be considered in regard to values and norms. It illustrates once again that persons with disabilities were not talked about or treated in a uniform manner. On the contrary, it shows how disability cannot be separated from a wider cultural system in which other mechanisms, such as honour, influenced the issue of inclusion. If a person had a higher position, generally this could also render that same person a higher grade of recognition. If a disability worked as a mechanism of exclusion, countermechanisms could prevent or soften elements of ostracism.

The idea that the blind and the lame should be rejected may also be contested in other *biblical* episodes underlying the mechanisms of collective identity. Even though strangers in general should be treated with respect, several passages demand that some strangers should be expelled from Israel and that the Israeli people should not mix with other people (1 Kings 11:2). But this was not the case when it came to disability. On the contrary, in one story the prophet Jeremiah said that the people of Israel as a whole should reunite in the Holy Land. Worth noticing is the fact that Jeremiah in his statement explicitly included also 'the blind and the lame' (Jer. 31:8). In doing so, Jeremiah underlined the importance and range of the Jewish identity. Still, the statement could also be seen as another reminder that persons with disabilities were looked upon as less worthy. By inviting even the disabled persons back to the state, God's love for his chosen people could be proven even stronger.

Even if there was a negative attitude towards disability in general, it was not universal. Ahijah, the prophet, shows that a person with disabilities could be given important roles in the society and uphold a considerable amount of status and respect. Even though he was blind, due to old age, people turned to him for assistance and help (1 Kings 14:4–18). Another example illustrating this phenomenon is Moses who was reluctant to accept the exodus mission because he was 'slow of speech and slow of tongue' and, therefore, considered himself less suitable to lead the Israeli people (Exod. 4:10). Still he was given one of the most important assignments in the whole Old Testament. All of this suggests that, in these cases, blindness and speech impediments were not automatically connected with passivity, helplessness and weakness. The impression is once again the ambivalent

view of the Bible in which the border between inclusion and exclusion in relation to disability was not fixed but rather fluid.

Disability for consolidation and as a warning

Another domain where disability was being used was as rhetorical figures in relation to ideology in which it was given a dual logic. It was used both as an internal metaphor questioning the righteousness and obedience of the Israeli people and as a weapon set out to weaken an external enemy.

Several passages in the *biblical* narratives use disability terminology in order to emphasize that something was wrong in the state of Israel. For instance, the words coming out of a fool's mouth are compared to the powerless legs of the lame (Prov. 26:7). For the prophets, disability was used as a wake-up call in order to mobilize strength and resources promoting a unified people. Unification was supposed to be guided by God's voice revealed by holy spokesmen. In addition, the strength of Israel went hand in hand with the ability to receive God's messages; parallels were repeatedly drawn between the making of Israel and man's perception of the world. The Prophet Isaiah, for instance, used disability-inspired rhetoric when trying to warn Israelis to ignore God's plan:

> 'Hear, you deaf; And look, you blind, that you may see. Who *is* blind but My servant, Or deaf as My messenger *whom* I send? Who *is* blind as *he who is* perfect, And blind as the LORD'S servant? (Isaiah 42:18–19)

Isaiah and others used that kind of rhetoric in order to underline God's wisdom. Disability was, therefore, used to describe a people unwilling to take instructions from God, separating them from the divine power, comparing, for instance, the Israelis with blind people stumbling in the street (Isa. 59:10). In that sense, disability was used as a kind of warning, stressing the need for obedience, saying that 'the LORD will strike you with madness and blindness' (Deut. 28:28). In this also lies a belief that God always had the power to intervene and create disability according to his own will: 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? *Have* not I the Lord?' (Exod. 4:11).

But if someone showed obedience and belief, God would work as a healer liberating the people from illness and suffering (Exod. 15:26; Deut. 26:15). Prophets like Isaiah also used disability in this more positive sense. It seemed equally important to explain how the Israelis were to be rewarded if only they followed the path of God. The prevalence of disability would diminish if the Israelis would come to terms with its true meaning and faith. In doing so, Isaiah argued, the people would witness the coming of an ideal paradise in which there would be no such thing as disability. Once the people turned to God, they were to be rewarded through miracles and 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing' (Isa. 35:5–6).

Disability was also used to depict external enemies. When the King of Syria was at war with Israel, Elisha, the prophet, asked God to intervene by blinding the enemy (2 Kings 6:18). Inversely disability rhetoric was also used to expose the cruelty of the enemy (Jer. 39:7). What is interesting in these examples is that every rhetorical technique was a choice involving the expected response from the public, indicating that disability could trigger negative attitudes and emotions, making it a powerful instrument in the

world of politics. It also illustrates once again that disability was given different meanings depending on the context.

Discussion

Disability appears throughout the whole Old Testament, suggesting that this was not only considered to be a reality of life but that the people of *biblical* times could not escape the process in which they were left to understand and interpret disability from within their own cultural horizons, integrating it in the dominant religious system. In addition, images of disability are presented in a fragmentary way, and the meaning of disability clearly shifts with the context in which it appears, making it hard to speak of *one* dominating idea, discourse or practice. Thus, there are reasons to downplay theorists like Foucault (2010) or Stiker (2006) and their idea of a given normality discourse governing the way disability was being perceived and talked about. In addition, even though the Bible in many ways celebrates the perfect body and reveals negative attitudes towards disability, there are few signs of institutional discrimination of people with disabilities. Furthermore, the Bible talks about disability in a most fragmented way, and the narratives contradict themselves in many ways, suggesting that we must speak of *the Bible's views* on disability, rather than *view* of disability was in many ways part of other processes within Hebrew society and the ongoing definition of *us* and *them* that were shaping a collective identity of the Jewish community. Thus, from the perspective of critical realism and the understanding of disability, it is clear that exclusion and inclusion mechanisms were interwoven in the Old Testament. The narratives primarily categorize people as either Jews or non-Jews, constituting a wide collective identity that also included people with disabilities. Even if there were exclusion processes derived from disability, they were countered with mechanisms of inclusion. On the one hand, deviance was met with fear and arrangements of control; on the other hand, it was met with empathy and acts of mercy. Another point deals with status. If you were already on the inside, disability did not automatically made you an outcast, illustrating how disability was integrated in parallel processes of social categorization, where the dividing line between us and them was not solely shaped on the basis of bodily functioning. According to Murphy (1987), people with a disability tend to be caught in a state of liminality which creates uncertainty within society. Many of the *biblical* narratives seem to illustrate this phenomenon, not presenting a uniform image of disability as such. The fact that the *biblical* narratives describe how morality in some sense had to be taught, indicates perhaps a gap between the leaders and the rest of the community, illustrating once again how there might have been different perceptions and ideas concerning these phenomena.

On top of this, disability and the Bible must also be understood in terms of ideology. Looking at the rhetoric of the Old Testament, disability played a vital part in the construction of the Jewish community. These different meanings indicate that disability has an important function throughout the Bible as a domain for moral exercise, solidarity, warnings, religious duty, repentance – and national identity.

All of this underscores the imperative to understand disability within a cultural context, drawing meaning that is embedded within the context itself. Such a cultural analysis of disability illuminates the complexity of a phenomenon in which different factors interact, complexity that is not always visible in previous studies concerning disability and the Bible. To conclude, there are several mechanisms at work in the Old Testament: some pushed the individual out of the community and others pulled that same

individual back in, leaving a person with a disability in a state of liminality, on the borderline between inclusion and exclusion.

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Note

1. Biblical references are consistently taken from The Holy Bible (1982).

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