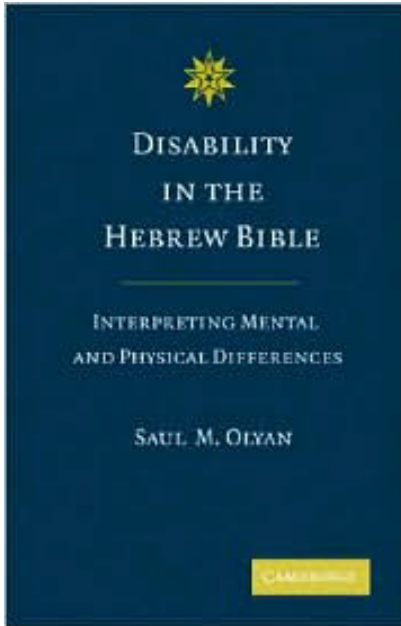


RBL 04/2009



Olyan, Saul M.

Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 188. Hardcover. \$80.00. ISBN 0521888077.

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The disabled, underappreciated in society at large, receive less scrutiny in biblical studies than other fields. This point, made by Saul M. Olyan at the beginning of his introduction (1), no longer holds true after Olyan's study. His monograph, consisting of seven chapters with an introduction and conclusion, moves well beyond a simple classification and recitation of biblical passages and into the arena of interpretation, as his subtitle *Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* suggests. Olyan notes in his acknowledgments that chapters 2, 6, and 7 rework prior articles, but this still means that the bulk remains new work. Each chapter, as well as his introduction, contains subheadings to guide the reader in the discussion, and each chapter ends with its own conclusion to summarize the presented data.

In his introduction (1–14) Olyan defines the term “disability” and outlines his specific area of focus. He concedes that *disability* possesses a wide range of meanings to different scholars but prefers a broader definition of disability as “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” (3). The “social meaning” governs Olyan's approach, since he views disability “to be preeminently a social production” (3). Consequently, Olyan outlines how the biblical

texts stigmatize or marginalize the disabled through a variety of strategies, such as characterizing them as weak, vulnerable, inferior, or associated with other disabled individuals. He sets out to determine both the native (original West Asian context) and nonnative (contemporary Western context) classification (12), but the balance plainly falls on the side of the biblical setting.

Although perhaps not an obvious opening, Olyan's first chapter on "Constructions of Beauty and Ugliness" (15–25) prepares his groundwork for disability research by examining the binary opposition of beauty and ugliness. He finds that "ideas of beauty and ugliness are not infrequently related to 'defects' and other biblical disabilities" (15). Considerable overlap exists between ancient and modern definitions of defects, but Olyan states deafness, muteness, and mental disability never fall under the category of defects in biblical texts (19). Nor can a straight line be drawn, since "'Defects' are constructed as ugly; although not all who are ugly possess 'defect'" (22). Technical Hebraic vocabulary indirectly links words for beauty and ugliness with moral virtue and vice, respectively (25).

Olyan explores in chapter 2 (26–46) "Physical Disabilities Classified as 'Defects,'" the term "defect" as a subset of disability. He presents the general rule that defects are "visible to the eye, long lasting or permanent in nature, and characterized by physical dysfunction, and more than a few share asymmetry as a quality" (30). While he adduces other biblical passages, priestly or legal texts barring defective individuals, such as 2 Sam 5:8 or Lev 21, 24, largely determine his list of defects. Circumcision represents an exception that puts a bodily mutilation in a positive framework, so much so that the noncircumcised becomes the defective individual. Overall, the biblical text devalues and stigmatizes the physically defective.

In chapter 3 (47–77), "Physical Disabilities Not Classified as 'Defects,'" Olyan considers when physical disabilities by themselves do not fall under the category of a defect in the biblical material. He argues that disabilities such as muteness or deafness, skin disease or genital flows, and menstruation or childbirth (48–60) share common characteristics with defects but remain set apart due to their different set of social ramifications (60). For example, the deaf and the mute maintain greater access to the cultic areas (48). Nonetheless, Olyan demonstrates how biblical texts associate these disabled but not defective classes with defective persons like the blind and the lame.

After the analysis of physical disabilities in chapters 2–3, chapter 4 examines the biblical portrait of "Mental Disability" (62–77). Olyan points out the inherent difficulty in diagnosing mental disability. Blindness readily identifies the fundamental nature of the disability, namely, an inability to see (63–64). However, with mental disturbances the

reader must infer in a more complex fashion whether the mental illness revolves around mental retardation, autism, clinical depression, or madness, to just name a few. After a brief section where he differentiates between “foolishness” and “madness,” (64–66), Olyan concentrates on the latter, principally through the narrative descriptions of the madness of both David and Saul (66–71). He concludes by remarking on the pairing of madness with signs of physical disabilities in biblical and cuneiform texts, a trait that brings with it a pattern of stigmatization and marginalization (71–77).

Chapter 5, “Disability in the Prophetic Utopian Vision,” projects disability into a future time. Olyan introduces Isa 21:1–4 and 11:1–9 as a framework to discuss disability through the transformative nature of the utopian ideal (79–81). He traces how the utopian future dramatically changes circumstances for disabled persons (81–85) and even where disability disappears altogether (85). Contrastively, Olyan profiles disability as a metaphor for God’s rejection of his people (89–91).

Olyan turns from disabilities in persons to inanimate objects such as stone in chapter 6: “Nonsomatic Parallels to Bodily Wholeness and ‘Defect.’” He follows up on Mary Douglas’s thesis that wholeness and completeness correspond to paradigms of cultic holiness by examining a previously unexplored analogy of defects to the disqualifications of stones of the altar and temple (94–97). Ironically, ashlar stones in other building contexts would be highly desirable, but Olyan finds that biblical law labels finished stone defective. Hence, its rejection resembles the stigmatization faced by defective sacrifices or ultimately disabled individuals.

The final chapter, “Exegetical Perpetuations, Elaborations, and Transformations: The Case of Qumran,” moves beyond the biblical corpus and into the later time of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Olyan examines both defective and nondefective classifications, finding biblical tendencies as well as some innovations. He concludes that the Dead Sea Scrolls typically view both defective and nondefective disabilities as more polluting. Consequently, these texts advocate a further removal of these individuals from the realm of the holy, including the community itself, which contains holy angels. This, of course, lends a greater degree of stigmatization and marginalization to the disabled than previously seen in the biblical texts.

In addition to the seven chapters, Olyan adds some important supplementary materials. His conclusion (119–29) not only sums up his findings but also addresses areas for future investigation, such as hierarchal ranking of disabilities according to a combination of the “number of devaluing strategies deployed for each disability, the severity of the stigma attached to the particular strategies employed, and the ramifications of those strategies with respect to social marginalization” (123). This formula causes him to tentatively rank

deafness and mental disability as less stigmatized than either blindness or skin disease (123–24). His annotated notes (130–63) contain more than the usual critical interaction with both primary and secondary sources. Olyan’s thorough bibliography (164–70) and both subject and citation indices attest to an especially high level of scholarship.

Olyan sets before himself an ambitious agenda as he seeks to classify and assess the character of disability in Hebraic sources. He displays an incredible range of erudition as he mixes in the new emerging disability discipline in the ancient and contemporary target cultures, biblical exegesis, comparative examples from the ancient Near East, lexical studies, and even gender issues. Scholars operating in each of these areas will no doubt appreciate his inclusion of their fields of study in his work.

Ironically, though, Olyan’s broad knowledge base becomes the Achilles’ heel of this study. Despite his economical writing style, 129 pages simply does not leave enough room to cover all of these areas in any depth. The variety of topics fragments a work already splintered by each chapter’s essay-like nature and without a clearly identified thesis. From a stylistic standpoint, each chapter launches forward in a different trajectory. For example, in chapter 4 Olyan concentrates more heavily on Hebraic vocabulary in describing mental disability, while chapter 5 exegetes the utopian vision in prophetic passages generally before Olyan applies it more concretely to images of disability. Each chapter opens new vistas, to be sure, but the reader leaves without capturing a full picture of Olyan’s perspective on disability in the Hebrew Bible.

Although the abstract promises that Olyan will present the “first thoroughgoing treatment” of physical and mental disabilities in the Hebrew Bible, in reality Olyan slants his work toward those biblical texts that stigmatize disability. While Olyan acknowledges that several other biblical texts, such as the strong commandment to protect the deaf and blind in Lev 19:14, counter the stigmatization pattern toward the disabled, he only gives the everlasting memorial given the eunuch in Isa 56:3–7 a few sentences of exposition (11–12, 84–85). On other occasions, such as his exegesis of 2 Sam 5b and Jer 31:7–9, he heightens the stigmatization of the disabled more than the biblical context warrants. Nevertheless, these criticisms aside, Olyan’s work will surely give an impetus for a greater appreciation of the nature of disability in the Hebrew Bible.