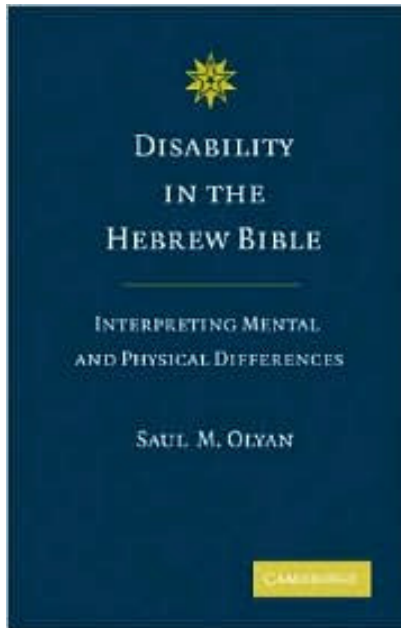


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Olyan, Saul M.

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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Disability studies is in the middle of a boom. This boom can be measured by the sheer number of book titles in biblical/religious studies with the words “disability/disabilities” in the last three years alone. These books include *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (2006), by Jeremy Schipper; *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (2007), by Rebecca Raphael; *Disability in Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (2008), by Deborah Creamer; and *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (2007), an anthology edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper.

Saul Olyan, Professor of Judaic Studies at Brown University, enters into this nascent field with a solid contribution. Olyan tells us that his goal 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 to communicate patterns of social inequality” (3). He divides the book into seven chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. Those seven chapters render the book one of the most thorough treatments of disability in the Hebrew Bible yet to appear. This book differs from the ones mentioned above by its

intensive philological and historical attention to the enigmatic Hebrew term *mûm*, which Olyan translates as “defect.”

In the introduction, Olyan wisely informs us that the definition of disability is contested, but the consensus is that it is a socially constructed concept. Accordingly, Olyan issues this definition: “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” (3). The entire book is within the context of the study of corporeality, or the way in which the body is conceptualized. Indeed, the case has been made that disability studies is part of what may be called corporeal or somatic studies, which encompass the entire human embodied experience.

Chapter 1 explores the concept of corporeal beauty and ugliness in the Hebrew Bible. Olyan makes the case for a culture-specific nature of somatic aesthetics. Chapter 2 focuses attention more specifically on congenital or acquired alterations of the body that are characterized by the Hebrew word *mûm* (plural *mûmîm*). As he notes, it is not entirely clear why blindness and lameness are classified as *mûmîm* (see Lev 21:17–23) but not so deafness and muteness. Disabling diseases and physical conditions (including what has been misclassified as “leprosy”) that are not classified as “defects” (*mûmîm*) are the focus of chapter 3. How mental disabilities differ from physical disabilities is the subject of chapter 4, while utopian prophetic visions of the body (e.g., Isa 35:4–10) are treated in chapter 5.

In chapter 6, Olyan shifts our attention to how nonhuman entities can be treated analogously to human bodies (e.g., “whole” altar stones). The final chapter (7) focuses on how Second Temple literature, particularly the Dead Sea Scrolls, perpetuate or transform biblical notions of disability. He notes, as others have before him, that Qumranic texts sometimes increase the restrictions on the disabled relative to earlier biblical texts. The conclusion places biblical notions of disability in the context of the broader Near Eastern milieu. He finds that biblical and cuneiform literature both use blindness and deafness as a sign of ignorance. As in cuneiform literatures, disabilities are often attributed to divine punishment.

One of the salient concluding questions is why biblical authors consistently stigmatize persons with disabilities. Olyan proposes that one reason is the association of “defects” (*mûmîm*) with ugliness and abomination, something also attributed to defective animals. Another is anti-idol polemics that view heathen nonliving idols as lacking the qualities that render human beings what they are (e.g., speaking, hearing, seeing). Olyan also suggests that the feminization of males with disabilities is not as pronounced in the

biblical materials as it is in modern Euro-American cultures. These findings prompt us to engage in more nuanced comparisons between Western and non-Western views of disabilities.

Most of Olyan's conclusions are based on very sound philological and historical analyses. However, the most significant problem is how Olyan relates "defect" to "disability." He does tell us clearly that he will use "defect" only to translate "*mûm*" (130 n. 1). He also tells us that "[t]he criteria that determine whether biblical sources classify conditions or qualities as 'defects' (*mûmîm*) remain obscure" (29). But he also asserts that there are "physical disabilities not classified as 'defects'" (47). The problem is that "defect" and "disability" are inextricably related everywhere else in disability studies. He cites (131 n. 5) the discussions in Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury (*Handbook of Disability Studies* [London: Sage, 2001]) but does not explain clearly how his word "defect" is related to how other disability scholars are using it. Usually, a "defect" or impairment is the particular physical or mental feature (e.g., blindness) that renders one disabled (i.e., classified as part of a broader socially devalued condition). Thus, there is no disability without a corresponding defect.

It is true that emerging fields often have to reconfigure vocabulary, but even with Olyan's clarifications, his use of "defect" becomes somewhat idiosyncratic and confusing. For example, his reference to "physical disabilities not classified as 'defects'" may otherwise refer to defects (e.g., deafness) that are not classified as *mûmîm* by some biblical authors, even if they can be disabling in other ways. But this only points to the highly contextual nature of all disabilities. Any feature X can be disabling in context A but not in context B. Thus, it is probably better to just leave the term *mûm* untranslated, especially as Olyan admits that the criteria for use of that term "remain obscure."

Nonetheless, Olyan's book is a very welcome addition to our growing corpus of studies of disability. The main advantages of the book is a thorough philological engagement with the data and his knowledge of Near Eastern literature. The problem of the precise criteria for classifying a *mûm* remains unsolved, but his efforts only prompt us to look farther afield for answers. For example, it may be useful to compare this Hebrew *mûm* to the Greek *mômos*, which has connotations of guilt and shame. Overall, Olyan's book becomes necessary reading for all those interested in disability studies in the Bible and in the Near East.