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Interpreting Disability in the Old Testament – A Hermeneutical Analysis of Inclusion and Moral Interpretation

Abstract.

This study examines the representation of disability in the Old Testament and its influence on later theological and cultural interpretations. Employing a qualitative, hermeneutical, and context-sensitive approach, it analyses narrative, legal, cultic, prophetic, and wisdom texts that refer to physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments. Particular attention is given to the literary diversity of the biblical corpus and to the ancient Near Eastern context, in which no unified concept of “disability” existed. The study systematically identifies and classifies relevant passages, highlighting the multiple layers of meaning through which bodily difference is articulated. The findings demonstrate that the Old Testament presents disability in diverse and often overlapping ways, including descriptive accounts of human vulnerability and aging, identity-forming experiences associated with divine encounter, ethical imperatives emphasizing communal responsibility, and metaphorical expressions of spiritual insensitivity or disobedience. Legal and narrative traditions frequently foreground protection, inclusion, and care, positioning persons with impairments within broader categories of social vulnerability rather than as objects of moral condemnation. At the same time, certain cultic regulations introduce restrictions

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tied to ritual roles, reflecting symbolic notions of holiness rather than comprehensive social exclusion. Although some covenantal curse texts and disciplinary narratives portray impairment as a form of divine punishment, these instances are contextually bounded and serve specific rhetorical and theological purposes. They do not constitute a consistent or dominant biblical doctrine of disability. Overall, the study argues that the moral model linking disability with sin and punishment emerges primarily from later interpretive traditions, rather than from the internal logic of the Old Testament texts themselves, which instead reflect a plurality of perspectives shaped by genre, context, and theological intent.

Keywords: disability, Bible, Old Testament, social and cultural perception, moral model

Introduction

The significance of the biblical texts extends far beyond their religious and theological functions; they have exerted a profound and lasting influence on the moral, legal, and cultural norms of Western societies. A crucial dimension of this impact concerns the development of social and cultural conceptions of persons with disabilities. Within the Old Testament, disability is presented through multiple layers of meaning: metaphorical representations of physical or spiritual deficiency coexist with narratives addressing social exclusion, communal belonging, and the ethical responsibilities of the community. The legal prescriptions, wisdom traditions, and narrative accounts embedded in these texts collectively contributed to the formation of a complex theological, moral, and social framework for interpreting bodily and cognitive impairment. Consequently, Old Testament conceptions of disability exercised a durable influence on how subsequent historical eras understood, judged, and regulated bodily difference.

Literature Review

Interpretations of Disability

Disability, as a social phenomenon, has been present in every historical period and cultural context; however, the ways in which societies defined, assessed, and responded to various impairments were shaped by the particular social and religious circumstances

of each era.² The lived experiences and opportunities of individuals with disabilities were determined not solely by the type or severity of their impairment but also by the environmental and social conditions afforded by their immediate surroundings.³ These conditions included a person's capacity to fulfil a productive or socially acknowledged role, the perceived economic burden of their support, and culturally embedded – often religiously grounded – aesthetic, moral, and behavioural norms governing bodily expectations and notions of “normality”.⁴ Another decisive factor was the presumed trainability and treatability of persons with disabilities, which substantially influenced their perceived social value and life prospects.⁵

Collectively, these parameters shaped the interpretive and evaluative framework through which disability was classified and understood. As a result, persons with disabilities were frequently relegated to the margins of their communities, a reality that

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- ² ANDOR, Csaba (2009): *Merre tovább, melyik úton? A fogyatékosügy a szociál- és a foglalkoztatáspolitikában*. Budapest, ELTE BGGYK. 8; JUDIK, Dorottya (2013): Siketek összeírása az 1840-es években – avagy a fogyatékosok a történelemben. In: Balogh, Zoltán – Fodor Z., Miklós (eds.): *Neograd 2013*. Salgótarján, Dornay Béla Múzeum. 109; KÁLMÁN, Zsófia – KÖNCZEI, György (2002): *A Taigetosztól az esélyegyenlőségig*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó. 29, 63; SZEPESSYNE J., Dorottya (2022): *Oktatás és társadalmi mobilitás a siketek körében a dualizmus kori Magyarországon*. Doctoral dissertation. Komárom, Selye János Egyetem. 29.; FLOGNY, Károly Lajos (2022): A fogyatékos személyek iránti attitűd Jób korában és életében, valamint manapság Magyarországon, különös tekintettel a tradicionális protestáns kisegyházakban. In: *Teológiai Fórum*. 2022/16/1. 103–135.
- ³ BERZSENYI, Emese (2024): Bűnös vagy ártatlan? – Az európai középkor fogyatékoságtörténete. In: Juhász, Erika – Gyányi, István (eds.): *Az oktatás időszerei narratívumai: Absztraktkötet. (Hungarian Conference on Educational Research)*. Eger, Magyar Nevelés- és Oktatókutatók Egyesülete. 99–100, 1.; FLOGNY, Károly (2021): Egy vizsgálat a magyarországi protestáns szabadegyházak körében a fogyatékkal élő emberekhez való viszonyulásról. In: *Teológiai Fórum*. 2021/15/2. 77–94.
- ⁴ BERZSENYI, Emese (2020): Világvallások fogyatékoságképe – az ábrahामी monoteista vallások rendszere. In: Endrődy, Orsolya – Svraka, Bernadett – Lassú F., Zsuzsa (eds.): *Sokszínű pedagógia*. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó. 300.; FLOGNY, Károly Lajos (2024) : A fogyatékkal élő ember egy posztmodern társadalomban és annak etikai vonatkozásai. In: *Teológiai Fórum*. 2024/18/2. 77–97.
- ⁵ GORDOSNÉ SZABÓ, Anna (1975): *Gyógypedagógia-történet I. Egyetemes gyógypedagógiatörténet a XX. századig*. Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó. 3–25.

is also well attested in Old Testament writings.⁶ Such marginalization reinforced broader mechanisms of exclusion and segregation. The social construction of disability became intimately tied to notions of “otherness”, “weakness”, and “difference”, and in many cases functioned as an instrument for sustaining and legitimizing prevailing social hierarchies.⁷

The Moral Model in the Interpretation of Disability

One of the earliest conceptual approaches to disability is the moral–ethical model, which gained significant influence during the consolidation of Christian intellectual life in the medieval period. According to this paradigm, disability is not construed merely as a physical or biological condition but rather as the consequence of an individual’s – or, in some cases, their ancestors’ – moral failings or transgressions.⁸ The central premise of this model holds that physical or cognitive impairments represent tangible manifestations of divine justice, such that disability is interpreted as a deserved punishment for wrongdoing.⁹

The moral model exerted considerable social impact: it contributed to the stigmatization, exclusion, and marginalization of persons with disabilities, thereby shaping long-term attitudes towards them.¹⁰ Although Christian tradition emphasized acts of mercy and charity towards vulnerable individuals, such practices frequently reinforced

⁶ BERZSENYI, Emese (2017): *A fogyatékos személyek nevelésének története interkulturális megközelítésben az ábrahámiai vallások szent könyveiben*. Doctoral dissertation. Budapest, ELTE. 16.

⁷ BÖSL, Elsbeth (2010): Was ist Disability History? In: Bösl, Elsbeth – Klein, Anne – Waldschmidt, Anne (eds.): *Disability History: Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte*. Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag. 29–43, 7.

⁸ BERZSENYI 2017, 16; KATONA, Vanda – SÁNDOR, Anikó – ANTAL, Zsuzsanna – HERNÁDI, Ilona – HOFFMAN, István – HORVÁTH, Péter – JAKAB, Nóra – KOLONICS, Krisztián – KÖNCZEI, György – KUNT, Zsuzsanna – SZÜCS, Marianna (2019): Kvalitatív kutatásunk elmélete és gyakorlata. In: Könczei, György – Hernádi, Ilona – Sándor, Anikó (eds.): *Esély? Egyenlőség? Taigetosz? Egy fogyatékoságtudományi kutatás tapasztalatai*. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó. 26–38.

⁹ KATONA 2019, 54; SZÉNÁSI, Lilla (2022): Az önismeret helye a szociális gondoskodásban. In: *Teológiai Fórum*, Calvin J. Teológiai Akadémia, Komarno, 2. 106–114.

¹⁰ KAPLAN, Deborah (2000): *The Definition of Disability*. In: *Journal of Health Care Law and Policy*. 3, 2. 352–364.

pity-based hierarchical relationships rather than fostering a substantive re-evaluation of disability within the community.¹¹

Szászi observes that the biblical corpus does not contain explicit statements equating disability with personal guilt.¹² Nevertheless, in numerous ancient cultures, curse formulas regularly associate sin with bodily affliction, reflecting a pervasive symbolic connection between moral transgression and physical suffering.¹³

This broader interpretive pattern is consistent with the analyses of several international scholars. Shakespeare demonstrates that the moral model was widely disseminated across Eurasian traditions, where religious systems frequently interpreted bodily difference through a logic of retributive justice.¹⁴ Eiesland argues that Christian theology often linked moral purity with bodily integrity, positioning the impaired body within metaphors of “lack”, “brokenness”, or “punishment”.¹⁵ Yong contends that the moral model constitutes one of the most deeply rooted cross-cultural interpretive strategies related to disability – yet one that derives not from the biblical texts themselves but from their historical theological reception.¹⁶ Garland-Thomson further characterizes the moral model as a foundational form of stigma construction, through which disability becomes a repository for communal fears, normative expectations, and strategies of social control.¹⁷ Taken together, contemporary scholarship confirms that although the biblical texts do not articulate a unified moral model of disability, later

¹¹ KÖNCZEL, György – HERNÁDI, Ilona (2011): A fogyatékoságtudomány főfogalma és annak változásai. Hipotetikus kísérlet rekonstrukcióra. In: Nagy, Z. Éva (ed.): *Az akadályozott és egészségkárosodott emberek élethelyzete Magyarországon: Kutatási eredmények a TÁMOP 5.4.1 projekt kutatási pillérében*. Budapest, Nemzeti Család- és Szociálpolitikai Intézet. 10–11.

¹² SZÁSZI, Andrea (2019): Bibliai szempontok a fogyatékoság értelmezéséhez. In: *Magyar Református Nevelés*. 4. 6–21.

¹³ KELLENBERGER, Edgar (2011): *Der Schutz der Einfältigen. Menschen mit einer geistigen Behinderung in der Bibel und in weiteren Quellen*. Zürich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich. 456–457.

¹⁴ SHAKESPEARE, Tom (2006): *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. London – New York, Routledge. 31–32.

¹⁵ EIESLAND, Nancy L. (1994): *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville, Abingdon Press. 71–73.

¹⁶ YONG, Amos (2007): *Theology and Down Syndrome*. Waco, Baylor University Press. 36–38.

¹⁷ GARLAND-THOMSON, Rosemarie (1997): *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York, Columbia University Press. 6.

interpretive traditions frequently imposed such a framework upon them. As a result, disability came to be associated with shame, deviance, and punitive suffering, functioning as a mechanism for maintaining and reinforcing established social hierarchies.

Disability in the Bible

In the cultural contexts in which the biblical texts originated, the modern conceptual category of “disability” did not exist. Nonetheless, societal norms regarding bodily integrity and physical conformity were clearly operative, guiding perceptions of which bodily traits were deemed normal, acceptable, or conversely, deficient or improper.¹⁸

In the Old Testament, disability most commonly appears in the form of illness, frequently imbued with spiritual or theological significance.¹⁹ Such representations may function as literal descriptions of impairment, yet they may also carry symbolic, metaphorical, or instructional meanings that vary according to historical and literary context. As Bengtsson argues, any interpretation of disability must be situated within its sociocultural environment; although religious texts serve as important interpretive sources, biblical conceptions of disability remain profoundly context-dependent.²⁰

The biblical corpus exhibits a particular sensitivity towards three categories of socially vulnerable individuals. First, it acknowledges the plight of the socially marginalized, including foreigners, orphans, widows, slaves, and the poor. Second, it demonstrates concern for persons with physical impairments, such as the lame, deaf, blind, or mute, as well as for those excluded from communal life due to conditions such as leprosy. Third, individuals with intellectual disabilities or those experiencing psychological or spiritual distress also appear within the textual tradition.

Crucially, isolation was mandated primarily in cases of contagious illnesses, most notably leprosy, while other forms of disability did not necessitate social segregation.²¹

¹⁸ BENGTSSON, Staffan (2014): On the Borderline – Representations of Disability in the Old Testament. In: *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*. 16, 3. 280–292.

¹⁹ SZÁSZI 2019, 6–20.

²⁰ BENGTSSON 2014, 282–283.

²¹ KŐSZEGHY, Miklós – PARRAGH, Szabolcs (2016): „...nem voltak fogyatékosok a történelemben...”: A fogyatékoság jelensége a történettudományban. In: Zászkaliczky Péter – Verdes Tamás (eds.): *Tágabb értelemben vett gyógypedagógia*. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó – ELTE Bárczi Gusztáv Gyógypedagógiai Kar. 515–536.

The biblical sources further indicate that caregiving responsibilities fell predominantly upon the family, and the texts consistently refrain from assigning personal blame to the affected individual. Moreover, several passages reflect an attitude of compassion towards parents of children with impairments, signalling a more nuanced and humane perspective on disability and its social implications.²²

Research Questions and Objectives

One of the principal aims of this study is to review, analyse, and synthesise both Hungarian and international scholarship concerning the representation and interpretation of disability in the Bible. Additionally, the study seeks to investigate the ways in which biblical texts contributed to the development of cultural frameworks for understanding disability and shaped societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities throughout the evolution of the Christian tradition.

Research Questions

1. How can the occurrences of disability in the Old Testament be systematically identified and classified according to their textual form and meaning?
2. How do Old Testament texts construct the social status and communal roles of persons with disabilities, particularly in relation to inclusion and exclusion?
3. To what extent do Old Testament representations of disability support or challenge the moral model that associates disability with sin and divine punishment?

Methods

This study employs a qualitative, text-based approach combining systematic textual analysis with hermeneutical interpretation. The Old Testament (NRSV-CE) serves as the primary corpus. Passages referring to bodily, sensory, and cognitive difference (both explicit and metaphorical) were identified and compiled into *Table 1*, which provides a systematic mapping of disability-related references. The material was subsequently classified

²² KELLENBERGER 2011, 29.

according to textual function and disability type, forming the basis for analysing social implications and evaluating the moral model of disability.

Results

The interpretation of disability in the Old Testament requires sensitivity to the literary and theological diversity of the biblical canon, as well as to the cultural context of the ancient Near East, in which no modern concept of “disability” existed.²³ Within this framework, bodily difference emerges across a range of genres, including narrative, legal, prophetic, and theological texts, where it fulfils diverse and often overlapping functions.

Table 1, arranged according to the canonical order of the Old Testament books, presents selected passages in which disability or disability-related imagery occurs. In doing so, it provides a systematic mapping of these occurrences and establishes the empirical basis for addressing the first research question. Rather than offering a simple catalogue of physical or mental conditions, the table highlights the diversity of their representation across textual genres and interpretive contexts. It distinguishes between narrative, legal, ethical, metaphorical, theological, and eschatological usages, thereby underscoring that such references frequently carry symbolic, rhetorical, or theological meanings in addition to (or instead of) literal ones.

Table 1. *Types of disability-related references in Old Testament texts*

Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
Gen 19:11	And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.	Narrative	Visual	Temporary blindness
Gen 27:1	When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see , he called his elder son Esau and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.”	Narrative	Visual	Age-related
Gen 32:32	Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle .	Narrative	Mobility	Injury

²³ AVALOS, Hector (1995): *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel*. Atlanta, Scholars Press. 27–35; SCHIPPER, Jeremy (2006): *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story*. London, T&T Clark. 1–15.

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Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
Gen 48:10	Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, and he could not see well . So Joseph brought them near him; and he kissed them and embraced them.	Narrative	Visual	Age-related
Exod 4:10	But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. ”	Narrative	Speech	Self-description
Exod 4:11	Then the LORD said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf , seeing or blind ? Is it not I, the LORD?”	Theological	Speech, Auditory, Visual	Divine origin
Exod 15:26	He said, “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you.”	Theological	Disease	Punishment
Exod 23:8	You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials , and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.	Metaphorical	Visual	Figurative
Lev 13:1-3	The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot , and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body , he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body , and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease ; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean.	Legal/cultic	Disease	Ritual purity
Lev 13:45-46	The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.	Legal	Disease	Exclusion
Lev 19:14	You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind ; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.	Ethical	Auditory, Visual	Protection
Lev 21:17-23	Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame , or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand , or a hunchback , or a dwarf , or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles . No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come	Cultic	Physical	Priestly exclusion

Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
	near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish , he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord; I sanctify them.			
Lev 26:14-16	But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant, I in turn will do this to you: I will bring terror on you; consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away .	Theological	Disease Visual	Punishment
Num 12:9-15	And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed. When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous , as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous . Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed..."	Narrative	Disease	Punishment
Deut 16:19	You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.	Metaphorical	Visual	Figurative
Deut 27:18	Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road. All the people shall say, "Amen!"	Ethical/legal	Visual	Protection
Deut 28:21-22	The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess. The Lord will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation , with fiery heat and drought , and with blight and mildew ; they shall pursue you until you perish.	Theological	Disease	Punishment
Deut 28:27	The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy , and itch , of which you cannot be healed .	Theological	Disease	Punishment
Deut 28:28-29	The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness , and confusion of mind ; you shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help.	Theological	Cognitive, Visual	Punishment
Deut 29:4	But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand , or eyes to see , or ears to hear .	Theological/ Metaphorical	Cognitive, Visual, Auditory	Figurative
1Sam 3:2	At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see , was lying down in his room;	Narrative	Visual	Age-related

Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
1Sam 16:14–16	Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, "See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you..."	Narrative/ theological	Cognitive	Punishment
1Sam 21:13–15	So he changed his behavior before them; he pretended to be mad when in their presence. He scratched marks on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle run down his beard. Achish said to his servants, "Look, you see the man is mad ; why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?"	Narrative	Cognitive	Feigned madness
2Sam 3:29	May the guilt fall on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house; and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge , or who is leprous , or who holds a spindle, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks food!"	Narrative / curse formula	Disease	Punitive wish
2Sam 4:4	Saul's son Jonathan had a son who was crippled in his feet . He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled; and, in her haste to flee, it happened that he fell and became lame . His name was Mephibosheth.	Narrative	Mobility	Accident
2Sam 5:8	David had said on that day, "Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates." Therefore it is said, "The blind and the lame shall not come into the house."	Metaphorical	Physical, Visual	Figurative
2Sam 9:3, 13	The king said, "Is there anyone remaining of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?" Ziba said to the king, "There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet ." Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he always ate at the king's table. Now he was lame in both his feet .	Narrative	Mobility	Inclusion and royal protection
1Kgs 1:1	King David was old and advanced in years ; and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm .	Narrative	Disease	Age-related
1Kgs 13:4	When the king heard the words that the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, "Seize him!" But the hand that he stretched out against him dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself .	Narrative	Physical	Sudden paralysis, Punishment
1Kgs 15:23	In the time of his old age he was diseased in his feet .	Narrative	Mobility	Age-related
1Kgs 14:4–5	Jeroboam's wife did so; she set out and went to Shiloh, and came to the house of Ahijah. Now Ahijah could not see , for his eyes were dim because of his age . But the Lord said to Ahijah, "The wife of Jeroboam is coming to inquire of you concerning her son; for he is sick. Thus and thus you shall say to her.	Narrative	Visual	Age-related

Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
1Kgs 18:21	Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?"	Metaphorical	Physical	Figurative
2Kgs 5:1–2	Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy .	Narrative	Disease	Leprosy
2Kgs 6:18	When the Arameans came down against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord, and said, "Strike this people, please, with blindness ." So he struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked.	Narrative/theological	Visual	Temporary blindness, Punishment
2Kgs 6:20	As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see ." The Lord opened their eyes , and they saw that they were inside Samaria.	Narrative/theological	Visual	Restoration, Temporary blindness
2Kgs 7:3	Now there were four leprous men outside the city gate, who said to one another, "Why should we sit here until we die?"	Narrative	Disease	Social exclusion
2Kgs 20:7	Isaiah said, "Bring a lump of figs." They brought it and applied it to the boil , and he recovered.	Narrative	Disease	Healing
2Chr 16:12	In the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Asa was diseased in his feet , and his disease became severe; yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians.	Narrative	Disease/Physical	Failure to seek the Lord
2Chr 26:16–23	...Now he had a censer in his hand to make offering, and when he became angry with the priests a leprous disease broke out on his forehead, in the presence of the priests in the house of the Lord, by the altar of incense. When the chief priest Azariah, and all the priests, looked at him, he was leprous in his forehead. They hurried him out, and he himself hurried to get out, because the Lord had struck him. King Uzziah was leprous to the day of his death, and being leprous lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the Lord. His son Jotham was in charge of the palace of the king, governing the people of the land. Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz wrote. Uzziah slept with his ancestors; they buried him near his ancestors in the burial field that belonged to the kings, for they said, "He is leprous ." His son Jotham succeeded him.	Narrative/theological	Disease	Punishment
Job 2:7	So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.	Narrative/theological	Disease	Testing
Job 29:15	I was eyes to the blind , and feet to the lame .	Metaphorical	Visual, Mobility	Figurative
Job 33:19–21	They are chastened also by pain upon their beds, and continual strife in their bones , so that their lives loathe bread, and their appetites the choicest food. Their flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen , and their bones , once invisible, now stick out .	Theological	Disease	Punishment

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Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
Ps 38:3–8	There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me. My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness; I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning. For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.	Theological	Disease	Punishment
Ps 38:14–17	I am like the deaf , who do not hear , like the mute , who cannot speak . Truly, I am like one who does not hear , and in whose mouth is no retort . But it is for you, O LORD, that I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer. For I pray, “Only do not let them rejoice over me, those who boast against me when my foot slips.”	Metaphorical	Auditory, Speech	Figurative
Ps 58:5	They are like the deaf adder, that stops its ear.	Metaphorical	Auditory	Figurative
Ps 116:6	The LORD protects the simple ; when I was brought low , he saved me.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative (moral/spiritual category)
Ps 146:8	The LORD opens the eyes of the blind . The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.	Theological/ Metaphorical	Visual, Physical	Restoration
Prov 10:1	A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother’s grief.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 14:15	The simple believe everything, but the clever consider their steps.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 14:18	The simple are adorned with folly, but the clever are crowned with knowledge.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 15:20	A wise child makes a glad father, but the foolish despise their mothers.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 17:21	The one who begets a fool gets trouble; the parent of a fool has no joy.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 17:25	Foolish children are a grief to their father, and bitterness to her who bore them.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 22:3	The clever see danger and hide; but the simple go on, and suffer for it.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 26:7	The legs of a disabled person hang limp ; so does a proverb in the mouth of a fool .	Metaphorical	Physical	Figurative
Prov 27:12	The clever see danger and hide, but the simple go on, and suffer for it.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative
Prov 31:8	Speak out for those who cannot speak , for the rights of all the destitute	Ethical	Speech	Figurative

Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
Wis 2:21	Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray, for their wickedness blinded them,	Metaphorical	Visual	Figurative
Eccl 7:25	I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness .	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative (moral-intellectual categories)
Eccl 12:1–7	... in the day when the guards of the house tremble , and the strong men are bent , and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly ; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird , and all the daughters of song are brought low ; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.	Metaphorical	Visual, Auditory, Physical, Cognitive	Figurative
Sir 20:29	Favours and gifts blind the eyes of the wise; like a muzzle on the mouth they stop reproofs.	Metaphorical	Visual, Speech	Figurative
Sir 22:3–4	It is a disgrace for a father to have a foolish son, and the birth of a daughter is a loss. A sensible daughter will obtain a husband of her own, but a shameless one is a grief to her father.	Metaphorical	Cognitive	Figurative (foolishness as moral category)
Sir 38:15	Those who sin against their Maker will be defiant toward the physician .	Theological	Disease	Punishment
Isa 6:9–10	And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend ; keep looking, but do not understand .' Make the mind of this people dull , and stop their ears , and shut their eyes , so that they may not look with their eyes , and listen with their ears , and comprehend with their minds , and turn and be healed ."	Theological / Metaphorical	Visual, Auditory, Cognitive	Figurative, Judgment
Isa 29:9	Stupefy yourselves and be stupid ; blind yourselves and be blind ! You who are drunk, but not with wine, staggering , but not with strong drink!	Metaphorical	Visual, Physical	Figurative, Judgment
Isa 29:18	On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.	Eschatological/ Metaphorical	Auditory, Visual	Figurative
Isa 32:3	Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed , and the ears of those who hear will listen.	Eschatological/ Metaphorical	Auditory, Visual	Figurative
Isa 32:4	The mind of the rash will have good judgment, and the tongue of the stammerers will speak readily and distinctly.	Eschatological	Cognitive, Speech	Restoration

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Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
Isa 35:5-6	Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy...	Eschatological/Metaphorical	Visual, Auditory, Physical, Speech	Restoration, figurative
Isa 42:18	Hear, you deaf ; and look, you blind , so that you may see!	Metaphorical	Visual, Auditory	Figurative
Isa 59:10	We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes ; we stumble at noon as if it were twilight, among the vigorous we are like the dead.	Metaphorical	Visual	Figurative
Jer 5:21	Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see , who have ears, but do not hear .	Metaphorical	Visual, Auditory, Cognitive	Figurative
Jer 31:8	See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame , those with child and those in labour, together; a great company, they shall return here.	Eschatological	Physical, Visual	Inclusion
Ezek 3:26	I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless and unable to reprove them; for they are a rebellious house.	Theological	Speech	Temporary Muteness
Ezek 12:2	Mortal, you live among a rebellious house; they have eyes to see, but do not see ; they have ears to hear, but do not hear .	Metaphorical	Visual, Auditory	Figurative
Dan 4:30-31	While the words were still in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: The kingdom has departed from you! You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the wild animals. You shall eat grass like oxen , and seven times shall pass over you, until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will."	Narrative	Cognitive	Madness
Dan 10:8-10	So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me , and my complexion grew deathly pale , and I retained no strength . Then I heard the sound of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground. But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees.	Narrative	Physical	Temporary loss of strength
Dan 10:15	While he was speaking these words to me, I turned my face toward the ground and was speechless .	Narrative	Speech	Temporary speechlessness
Mic 4:6-7	In that day, says the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted; the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore.	Eschatological	Physical	Restoration

Location	Text	Type of Reference	Category	Note
Zeph 1:17	I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind ; because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.	Metaphorical	Visual	Figurative, Punishment
Zeph 3:19	I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.	Eschatological	Physical	Restoration
Zech 11:17	Oh, my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye ! Let his arm be completely withered , his right eye utterly blinded!	Prophetic	Physical, Visual	Curse formula
Zech 12:4	On that day, says the Lord, I will strike every horse with panic, and its rider with madness . But on the house of Judah I will keep a watchful eye, when I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness .	Theological	Cognitive, Visual	Judgment

Source: author's own compilation

Notes: Narrative = historical description, Legal/cultic = legal/cultic regulation, Ethical = moral instruction, Metaphorical = figurative/rhetorical usage, Theological = divine action or punishment, Eschatological = restoration, future promise.

Taken together, these findings indicate that disability in the Old Testament cannot be reduced to a single, unified category but operates across multiple interpretive levels shaped by genre and theological context. The mapping presented in *Table 1* demonstrates that disability appears both as a concrete physical condition and as a symbolic construct, fulfilling diverse functions across narrative, legal, and prophetic texts. This complexity necessitates a more systematic analytical framework. Accordingly, in the following section, the passages identified in *Table 1* are reclassified according to distinct disability types. This shift from descriptive inventory to interpretive analysis enables a more focused examination of how disability is represented and functions across different textual contexts.

1. Visual Impairment

Among Old Testament writings, visual impairment appears with the greatest frequency, occurring in concrete (Gen 19:11; 27:1; Exod 21:17–23; 1Kgs 14:4–5; 2Kgs 6:18), abstract and metaphorical (Gen 19:11; 2Kgs 6:20; Isa 6:9–10; 29:9; 32:3; 59:10; Zeph 1:17), moral/ethical (Exod 23:8; Lev 19:14; Deut 16:19; 27:18; Wis 2:21; Sir 20:29),

as well as redemptive and healing-oriented interpretive contexts (Isa 29:18; 33:19; 35:5–6; 42:18; Jer 31:8). In its metaphorical sense, “sight” denotes the recognition of divine truth, which enables the avoidance of sin and the mastery of passions. Within this interpretive framework, blindness is understood as a manifestation of divine punishment imposed upon the individual, from which healing becomes possible through the illumination of consciousness. Consequently, blindness is not interpreted as a final or irreversible condition. The transition out of ignorance (darkness) is contrasted with the attainment of knowledge (light).²⁴ Passages related to visual impairment occur on five occasions as expressions of divine admonition (Zech 11:17), in connection with the violation of the covenant (Lev 26:14–16; Deut 28:28), as punishment for sin against the Lord (Zeph 1:17), and once in response to the request of a man of God (2Kgs 6:18).²⁵

2. Hearing Impairment

With regard to passages referring to hearing impairment, it can likewise be observed that multiple layers of meaning appear in Old Testament texts. Certain passages depict hearing loss as a concrete, physical condition, either as a manifestation of divine power or as part of moral legislation (Exod 4:1; Lev 19:14). Alongside this

²⁴ BERZSENYI 2017, 117–118.

²⁵ HAMILTON, Victor P. (1990): *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; HAMILTON, Victor P. (1995): *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 37–38, 212; BODA, Mark J. (2016): *The Book of Zechariah. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 667; CRAIGIE, Peter C. (1976): *The Book of Deuteronomy. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 247, 333, 344; OSWALT, John N. (1986): *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 188–189, 531, 624; OSWALT, John N. (1998): *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 520; WENHAM, Gordon J. (1979): *The Book of Leviticus. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 268, 330.

literal meaning, symbolic representations of spiritual or inner deafness emerge in relation to the rejection of divine revelation (Isa 6:9–10; 29:18; 32:3; 42:18). Ethically charged passages express a lack of understanding and compassion (Ps 38:14–17; 58:5), while prophetic texts referring to the healing of hearing impairment point towards God's salvific activity (Isa 35:5–6). Hearing impairment (deafness) frequently occurs in conjunction with impairment of speech (muteness).²⁶

3. Speech Impairment

Among passages addressing speech impairment, references to physical speech disorders are also present (Exod 4:10), together with explicit affirmations of God's creative power in relation to speech (Exod 4:11). Ethical regulation appears as well, aimed at the protection of human dignity (Lev 19:14). In prophetic texts, symbolic meaning is employed to anticipate the removal of communicative barriers between God and humanity (Isa 32:4; 33:19), while passages describing healing (Isa 33:19; 35:5–6) project a vision of redemption. In the Psalms, muteness appears in the form of simile, emphasizing human helplessness (Ps 38:14–17). This section also reflects a call for moral sensitivity, which may point to experiences of exclusion or social withdrawal affecting persons with disabilities.²⁷

4. Physical/Mobility Impairment

Physical impairment also occurs in large numbers within Old Testament texts. Concrete physical disabilities, bodily injuries, and limitations appear in narratives concerning paralysis (2Sam 4:4), bodily disfigurement (Isa 52:14–15), and lameness (Gen 32:32; 2Sam 9:13; Isa 35:5–6). Within these accounts, the practice of solidarity towards persons with disabilities is also evident (Job 29:15). Cultic regulations

²⁶ BERZSENYI 2017, 117–118; DECLAISSÉ-WALFORD, Nancy L. – JACOBSON, Rolf A. – TANNER, Beth LaNeel (2014): *The Book of Psalms*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 358, 495; OSWALT 1986, 188–189, 537, 580, 624; OSWALT 1998, 130; WENHAM 1979, 268.

²⁷ DECLAISSÉ-WALFORD – JACOBSON – TANNER 2014, 358; OSWALT 1986, 581, 588, 624; WENHAM 1979, 268.

addressing specific bodily impairments are found in priestly legislation (Lev 21:17–23), alongside punitive amputation prescribed as punishment for legal transgression (Lev 24:19–20), as well as prophetic promises and assurances of healing and restoration (Isa 35:5–6; Jer 31:8). Physical impairment also appears in figurative and symbolic form (2Sam 5:8, where lameness symbolizes the house of Saul; 1Kgs 18:21; Zech 11:17; Prov 26:7; Ps 38:14–17).²⁸ Paralysis appears on two occasions in the Old Testament as a consequence of resistance to God (1Kgs 13:4; Zeph 3:19; 11:17); however, the Lord delivers those who remain faithful to Him (Zeph 3:19).²⁹

5. Cognitive Impairment

The Bible does not draw a sharp distinction between intellectual disability and mental illness; consequently, references to these conditions frequently overlap.³⁰ The texts often contain allusions to intellectual impairment, most prominently in the form of moral folly arising from a lack of wisdom, especially within wisdom literature (Prov 10:1; 14:15, 18; 15:20; 17:21, 25; 22:3; 26:7; 27:12; Sir 22:3–4). These passages emphasize that the behaviour of a foolish and irresponsible child imposes a significant emotional and psychological burden on the family, particularly affecting the inner life of the parents. Certain passages portray madness as a sign of divine intervention or punishment (Deut 28:28; 1Sam 16:14–16; Dan 4:30–31), arising as a consequence of pride, disobedience, or unbelief. In contrast, examples of divine protection and care are offered with respect to the simple-minded (Ps 116:6). In metaphorical usage (Isa 32:4), the insensitivity and incomprehension of the heart also appear with symbolic meaning (Isa 6:9–10).³¹

²⁸ SCHIPPER, Jeremy (2005): Reconsidering the Imagery of Disability in 2 Samuel 5:8b. In: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 67, 3. 422–434.

²⁹ BODA 2016, 677; DECLAISSE-WALFORD – JACOBSON – TANNER 2014, 358; HAMILTON 1995, 337–338; HARTLEY, John E. (1988): *The Book of Job. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 391; OSWALT 1986, 624; OSWALT 1998, 379; WENHAM 1979, 292, 312.

³⁰ BERZSENYI 2017, 122.

³¹ CRAIGIE 1976, 344; DECLAISSE-WALFORD – JACOBSON – TANNER 2014, 860; OSWALT 1986, 188–189, 580; TSUMURA, David T. (2007): *The First Book of Samuel. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 426; WALTKE, Bruce K. (2004): *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15. The New*

6. Diseases

This section includes illnesses that cannot be classified within the preceding categories. Although illness cannot be unequivocally identified with disability, skin diseases mentioned in Old Testament texts are included here due to their isolating and exclusionary effects on communal life. Within this category, illness most frequently appears as an expression of divine punishment or judgment. Diseases such as trembling, fever, and plague emerge as consequences of covenantal violation and sin (Lev 26:15–16; Deut 28:21–22), potentially resulting in exclusion from the community (2Chr 26:16–23) or death (Lev 26:15–16; Deut 28:21–22). Illness also appears in admonitory texts (Exod 15:26; Sir 38:15), where God declares that obedience will prevent the afflictions imposed upon Egypt. Leprosy appears both in David’s curse formula (2Sam 3:29) and in factual narrative description (2Kgs 5:1–2). In the case of Job, ulcers function as signs of a divinely permitted trial (Job 2:7).

From both cultic (Lev 21:17–23) and social perspectives, Mosaic law provides detailed regulations concerning the procedure for identifying bodily impurity (Lev 13:1–3) and its relation to healing (Lev 13:45–46). On this basis, it can be concluded that the person afflicted with leprosy occupies a status of separation not only medically but also ritually and socially. In narratives of miraculous healing, divine power is manifested (2Kgs 20:7).³²

In relation to the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:9), Levin raises the question of whether Abel may have lived with a disability.³³ Since naming did not necessarily occur at birth, it was often connected subsequently to a person’s defining characteristics or activities; the meaning of the name *Abel* – interpreted as “weak”, “incapable”, “disabled”, or “vain” – invites further reflection. The use of the term “keeper” in the text raises the

International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; WALTKE, Bruce K. (2005): *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31.* *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament.* Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 60, 62, 201, 351–352, 381; STRÉDL, Terézia-SZÉNÁSI, Lilla (2023): Szociális munka mentális betegekkel In: *Diakónia, szociális intézmények és szolgálatai*, Univerzita J. Selyeho, Komárno, 2023. 106–130.

³² CRAIGIE 1976, 342; HARTLEY 1988, 82; WENHAM 1979, 197, 200, 292, 330.

³³ LEVIN, Schneir Z. (1992): The Abel Syndrome. In: *Jewish Bible Quarterly*. 20, 2. 111–114.

question of whether Abel required protection or care, and whether he may have lived with a disability.

The second research question examines how Old Testament texts construct the social status and communal roles of persons with disabilities, particularly in relation to inclusion and exclusion. The evidence indicates that these texts do not present a uniform perspective but rather reflect diverse and at times tension-filled legal, ethical, and cultic frameworks.

On the one hand, ethical prescriptions within the Mosaic Law (Lev 19:14; Deut 27:18) establish a clear obligation to protect persons with disabilities, prohibiting their mistreatment and assigning responsibility to the community as a whole.³⁴ Narrative texts reinforce this inclusive dimension: Mephibosheth's incorporation into the royal household (2Sam 9:3, 13) and Job's self-description ("I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame" Job 29:15) exemplify a model in which care for vulnerable individuals becomes a marker of justice and social responsibility.³⁵ As noted in scholarship, such norms may have contributed to the protection and social integration of persons with disabilities.³⁶

On the other hand, cultic regulations impose restrictions on participation in specific ritual roles. Leviticus 21:17–23 excludes individuals with physical impairments from priestly sacrificial functions, reflecting a symbolic association between bodily integrity and ritual holiness.³⁷ Scholarly interpretations diverge on this point. Some emphasize the exclusionary implications of these prescriptions and their role in

³⁴ BOWA, Makomborero A. (2022): The Coronavirus Pandemic and Persons with Disabilities: Towards a Liberating Reading of the Bible for Churches in Southern Africa. In: Sibanda, Fortune – Muyambo, Tenson et al. (eds.): *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*. London – New York: Routledge. 186–201; WENHAM 1979, 267–269; SCHIPPER 2006, 45–50.

³⁵ YONG, Amos (2011): *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; SCHIPPER 2006, 50–55; GARLAND-THOMSON 1997, 22–24.

³⁶ MELCHER, Sarah J. (2010): A Review of Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences by Saul M. Olyan. In: *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*. 14, 1. 96–97.

³⁷ OLYAN, Saul M. (2008): *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 29–31.

reinforcing social marginalization,³⁸ while others argue that they are limited to specific ritual contexts and do not entail broader exclusion from religious or communal life.³⁹

Temporary isolation associated with skin diseases (Lev 13:1–3; 13:45–46) and the bodily requirements for priestly service (Lev 21:17–23) belong to the symbolic order of holiness rather than to any devaluation of individual social worth.⁴⁰

Taken together, these findings suggest that disability in the Old Testament is situated within a dynamic field of inclusion and exclusion, where ethical obligations towards protection coexist with symbolic and institutional forms of restriction.

The third research question explored the extent to which Old Testament representations of disability support the assumptions of the moral model, which interprets disability as a causal consequence of sin and divine punishment. The analysis indicates that the biblical corpus does not sustain a unified or deterministic interpretation of this kind.

Certain texts, particularly covenantal curse traditions (Deut 28:21–29; Lev 26:14–16) and specific narrative episodes (e.g. Miriam’s leprosy: Num 12:9–15), do present physical or mental impairment as a form of divine punishment. However, these instances are contextually bounded and serve specific theological and rhetorical purposes, as emphasized in contemporary biblical scholarship.⁴¹

At the same time, numerous texts complicate or challenge this model. Wisdom literature, most notably the Book of Job, rejects a direct causal link between sin and suffering, while other passages present disability as part of human vulnerability, as a condition of testing, or as a state open to healing and restoration.⁴²

Taken together, these findings suggest that while the moral model is present within certain textual traditions, it cannot be generalized as a comprehensive explanation of disability in the Old Testament. Instead, biblical representations reflect a plurality of interpretive frameworks that resist reduction to a single theological paradigm.

³⁸ BENGTSSON 2014, 283–286; BOWA 2022, 188.

³⁹ SZÁSZI 2019, 15; BELSER, Julia Watts (2019): Priestly Aesthetics: Disability and Bodily Difference in Leviticus 21. In: *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*. 73, 4. 355–366.

⁴⁰ MILGROM, Jacob (1991): *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible*. Vol. 3. New York, Doubleday. 112–115.

⁴¹ AVALOS 1995, 36–50; MILGROM 1991, 191–194; YONG 2011, 342–345.

⁴² YONG 2018, 164–167.

Conclusions

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that disability in the Old Testament cannot be understood as a single, coherent category, but it must be interpreted within a complex matrix of literary forms, social norms, and theological meanings. The systematic mapping of relevant passages shows that disability appears both as a concrete human condition and as a symbolic resource across diverse textual genres.

At the social level, biblical texts construct a dynamic tension between inclusion and exclusion: while ethical and narrative traditions emphasize protection, care, and integration, cultic regulations introduce forms of restriction grounded in symbolic notions of holiness. At the interpretive level, the analysis challenges the adequacy of the moral model as a comprehensive explanatory framework. Although certain texts associate impairment with sin and divine punishment, this perspective is neither uniform nor dominant but is counterbalanced by alternative representations that understand disability in terms of vulnerability, testing, or restoration.

These findings suggest that the moral stigmatization of disability cannot be attributed directly to the biblical texts themselves but rather to selective and decontextualized interpretations in later reception history. Accordingly, the Old Testament offers not a singular theological interpretation of disability but a plurality of perspectives that reflect the complexity of human embodiment and its relation to the divine, while also contributing to contemporary ethical and hermeneutical discussions.

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