

Disability and Social Justice in Ancient Israelite Culture

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The ideal of compassion toward those with disabilities runs like a binding thread through the texts of the Old Testament, including the law of Moses, the sacred poetry of the Psalms, the wisdom literature of Job and Proverbs, and the recorded visions of Israel's prophets. These texts belong to a different cultural world from modern Western society; thus the conceptualization of disabilities that they embody may appear unfamiliar. Yet they also reveal a response to disabilities that resonates with modern Judeo-Christian values, including those of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some passages, however, may initially appear to stand in counterpoint to the compassionate ideal. Among these texts are the Lord's commandment regarding the priestly service at the altar, which restricts this activity to those without certain "defects" (Leviticus 21:17–23); and the account of David's conquest of Jerusalem, which mentions "the lame and the blind" in a way that is usually interpreted

as negative (2 Samuel 5:8). However, in each case, a careful contextual analysis supports an interpretation in line with the compassionate ideal.

In what follows, I will discuss some aspects of the ancient Israelite cultural context that are important for an accurate understanding of the compassionate ideal enjoined in the Old Testament. Then I will briefly review some of the biblical texts that provide evidence of this ideal. Finally, I will discuss the two potentially problematic biblical passages mentioned above: Leviticus 21:17–23 and 2 Samuel 5:8. I will show that these two passages, contrary to what might appear from a casual reading, actually fit with the overall biblical ideal of social justice for those who have disabilities. I will conclude with some remarks suggesting how an accurate understanding of the Old Testament’s consistent response to disabilities may contribute to our knowledge of ancient Israelite society.

Cultural and Social Context

People with disabilities made up a large component of ancient Israelite society, and the concept of disability was salient in the culture. The frequency of invasion, together with the lack of modern medical care, would mean that disabilities were common. Some biblical texts describe practices of ritual mutilation of enemies, including the gouging out of the right eye (1 Samuel 11:2) and the gouging out of both eyes (Judges 16:21; 2 Kings 25:7); the shaving of half of the beard (2 Samuel 10:4) is analogous, though not as permanent.¹ Punitive mutilation—including the cutting off of the hand (Deuteronomy 25:12), the removal of eyes or teeth (Leviticus 24:19–20), and the cutting out of the tongue (Proverbs 10:31)—was also practiced.²

The Hebrew language itself embodies a cultural view of disability as a set-apart category significant enough to warrant its own linguistic markers. The **qittil* noun pattern in Biblical Hebrew—that is, the class of nouns originally having two short *i*-vowels and a doubled middle root letter—is often described as a linguistic pattern

for “bodily defects.”³ In reality, the pattern applies to many nouns that are not strictly associated with disabilities, such as *gēʿē*, “proud”; *gibbēah* and *qērēah*, both meaning “bald”; *ʿiqqēš*, “twisted, perverted (only in a moral sense)”; *piqqēah*, “clear-sighted”; and *šihē*, “parched with thirst” (see table 1). The linguistic pattern could thus be more accurately described as a pattern for conditions that diverge from a stereotypical norm. Nevertheless, the prominence of disabilities in this category underscores the frequency and salience of disability in ancient Israelite society. The fact that thirst belongs to this category is especially illuminating since it suggests that such divergences were conceived of as temporary states rather than as eternal or defining characteristics of the self. In later Hebrew, more nouns are added to this category, and there is a trend toward narrowing the category to disabilities in a strict sense, a trend also seen in Arabic.⁴

*Table 1. Examples of Biblical Hebrew *qittil pattern in nouns denoting divergent conditions*

Word	Translation	Biblical references
<i>ʿittēr</i>	undexterous (in the right hand; i.e. left-handed)	Judges 3:15; 20:16
<i>ʿillēm</i>	mute	Exodus 4:11; Psalm 38:14; Proverbs 31:8; Isaiah 35:6; 56:10; Habakkuk 2:18
<i>gēʿē</i>	proud	Job 40:11–12; Psalms 94:2; 123:4; 140:6; Proverbs 15:25; 16:19; Isaiah 2:12; Jeremiah 48:29;
<i>gibbēah</i>	bald	Leviticus 13:41
<i>gibbēn</i>	hunchbacked	Leviticus 21:20

<i>ḥērēš</i>	deaf	Exodus 4:11; Leviticus 19:14; Psalms 38:14; 58:5; Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:18–19; 43:8
<i>kēhē</i>	dim (of eyesight)	Leviticus 13:6, 21, 26, 28, 39, 56; 1 Samuel 3:2; Isaiah 42:3; 61:3
<i>ʿiwwēr</i>	blind	Exodus 4:11; Leviticus 19:14; 21:18; Deuteronomy 15:21; 27:18; 28:29; 2 Samuel 5:6, 8; Job 29:15; Psalm 146:8; Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7, 16, 18–19; 43:8; 56:10; 59:10; Jeremiah 31:8; Lamentations 4:14; Zephaniah 1:17; Malachi 1:8
<i>ʿiqqēš</i>	twisted, perverted	Deuteronomy 32:5; 2 Samuel 22:27; Psalms 18:27; 101:4; Proverbs 2:15; 8:8; 11:20; 17:20; 19:1; 22:5; 28:6
<i>pissēaḥ</i>	lame	Leviticus 21:18; Deuteronomy 15:21; 2 Samuel 5:6, 8; 9:13; 19:27; Job 29:15; Proverbs 26:7; Isaiah 33:23; 35:6; Jeremiah 31:8; Lamentations 4:14; Malachi 1:8, 13
<i>piqqēaḥ</i>	clear-sighted	Exodus 4:11; 23:8
<i>šihē</i>	parched with thirst	Isaiah 5:13
<i>qērēaḥ</i>	bald	Leviticus 13:40; 2 Kings 2:23

Despite the prevalence of physical disabilities in ancient Israel, archaeological evidence suggests that technological or architectural adaptations for those with disabilities were few. Modern aids that we may take for granted, such as motorized mobility devices, automatic doors, corrective lenses, and hearing aids were, of course, absent from

ancient Israelite life. Even aids that do not require modern technology—such as wheelchairs, wheeled carts, handrails, and permanent ramps—have not been attested as aids used for people with disabilities in ancient Israel or its environs. The Bible mentions the use of a staff or crutch as an aid for mobility (2 Samuel 3:29 and Zechariah 8:4), but there is as yet no evidence for prosthetic limbs in ancient Israel, although the concept is attested in Egypt.⁵ Indeed, accessibility must have been a significant challenge for people with disabilities living in urban environments, given the uneven stairways and flagstones typical of excavated sites. This set of observations is important in contextualizing the biblical injunctions to care for those who were disabled because it implies that such care was not taken up as an institutional responsibility, at least not in the architectural sphere, while technological adaptations were insufficient to minimize the need for such care. Therefore, if individual members of the community (including family members and others) neglected to extend aid, those with disabilities would have been subject to terrible hardship.⁶

Evidence of the Compassionate Ideal

The ideal of compassion toward those with disabilities runs consistently through diverse books and genres in the Old Testament, which suggests that this ideal was an important part of ancient Israelite culture. Representative passages include the following:⁷

You shall not revile the deaf, nor put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:14)

Cursed be the one who misleads a blind person on the road. (Deuteronomy 27:18)

The king said, “Is there no one remaining of the house of Saul, to whom I may show God’s kindness?” Ziba said unto the king, “There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet.” The king said to him, “Where is he?” Ziba said

to the king, "He is in the house of Machir son of Ammiel, in Lo-debar." Then king David sent and brought him from the house of Machir son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar. So Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul entered the presence of David and fell on his face, prostrating himself. David said, "Mephibosheth!" He answered, "Here I am, as your servant." David said to him, "Do not be afraid, for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you shall eat bread at my table always." (2 Samuel 9:3–7)

I put on righteousness, and it clothed me. My justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. (Job 29:14–15)

He who does justice to the oppressed, who gives bread to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free. The Lord opens (the eyes of) the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. (Psalm 146:7–8)

Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all the destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8–9)

These passages represent a great diversity of contexts. Leviticus 19 sets forth laws for ritual and moral holiness. Deuteronomy 27:18 gives one of a series of curses the Levites are to utter as the people pass over the Jordan River to possess the promised land (Deuteronomy 27:14–26). Second Samuel 9 narrates a righteous deed David performed for the son of his deceased best friend. In Job 29, Job is recounting his righteous acts of social justice in poetic form. Psalm 146 praises the Lord for his righteous deeds. And Proverbs 31 consists of "the sayings of king Lemuel," taught to him by his mother, recommending advocacy for those who cannot speak for themselves as a general principle. Thus the compassionate ideal is not just a literary motif associated with a particular genre. Instead, it is situated in the religious culture that lies behind all these texts.

In these passages, there is an implied connection between the Lord's compassion and that expected of his people. The laws, including Leviticus 19:14, begin with the injunction, "You shall be holy: for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Psalm 146:7–8 describes the Lord as the model of goodwill toward the disadvantaged, including those with disabilities (here specifically toward people who are blind). Many prophetic texts describe a culmination of the Lord's mercy in healing disabilities during a paradisiacal future time. Perhaps the clearest of these prophetic texts is in the book of Isaiah:

Strengthen the weak hands, steady the feeble knees. Say to the fainthearted, "Be strong! Do not fear! Your God will come with vengeance, God (will come) with a recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will sing. For water will gush forth in the desert, and torrents in the desolate land. (Isaiah 35:3–6)

Texts in a similar vein include Isaiah 29:17–19; Jeremiah 31:7–9; Micah 4:6–7; Zephaniah 3:18–20.⁸

Leviticus 21:17–23: Restricted Work

In Leviticus 21, the Lord restricts some classes of priests with "defects" from approaching the altar to perform the priestly service:

Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your descendants, for all generations, if he has a defect, shall approach to offer the food of his God. For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind, lame, pierced, or deformed; a man having a broken foot or a broken hand; hunchbacked, a dwarf, one having an eye defect, having a rash, having running sores, or having crushed testicles. No man who has a defect from the

descendants of Aaron the priest shall draw near to offer the Lord's sacrifices made by fire. As he has a defect, he shall not draw near to offer the food of his God. Of the food of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy, he may eat. But he shall not enter to the veil, nor approach the altar, for he has a defect, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord who sanctifies them. (Leviticus 21:17–23)

Some interpreters understand this passage as a stigmatization of people with disabilities. According to Olyan, “the priest or potential high priest of Leviticus 21 who has a ‘defect’ is stigmatized in the sense that his potential to profane the sanctuary’s holiness is greater than that of his fellows who lack ‘defects,’ and an ever-present threat; he is both stigmatized and marginalized in that he is cut off from the most highly esteemed ritual activity normally open to him.”⁹ Olyan treats this passage as one of a range of biblical texts exhibiting a “marginalizing and stigmatizing discourse” with regard to disabled people. At one extreme is the saying in 2 Samuel 5:8b, which appears to exclude people that are blind or lame from the temple altogether (see further below), while at the more positive extreme is the promise of temple participation to eunuchs in Isaiah 56:3–5 (which Olyan interprets as a critical response to the exclusion of people with genital injuries in Deuteronomy 23:1).¹⁰ Leviticus 21:17–23, according to Olyan, lies between these two extremes, since it permits priests with “defects” to eat the food from sacrifices on sacred space,¹¹ yet it excludes them from the honor of priestly service.

However, the interpretation of Leviticus 21:17–23 as a stigmatizing text seems at odds with the concept of the Lord as a champion of those with disabilities (as found, for example, in Psalm 146:7–9). The text is not merely a statement of policy, but scripture communicating the word of the Lord; the passage concludes with the declaration, “for I am the Lord who sanctifies them.”¹² Of course, it is possible for biblical texts to present different theological viewpoints. Yet even elsewhere within the priestly laws of Leviticus, a compassionate

attitude toward those with disabilities is attributed to God. Indeed, the injunction not to revile the deaf or place a stumblingblock in front of the blind (Leviticus 19:14) concludes with a declaration similar to that in Leviticus 21:23: "I am the Lord."

An important issue in Leviticus 21:17–23 is that of deciding what the law was intended to guard against. Olyan's interpretation assumes that a priest would want to participate in the offering of sacrifice because this was "the most highly esteemed ritual activity normally open to him." Even with the law in place, a priest with disabilities might "flout the restrictions imposed on his service" and perform the service at the altar anyway, presumably because of the esteem associated with this role. Should he do so, "his actions would result in profanation of the sanctuary."¹³ Thus, according to Olyan, the law restricted priests with disabilities from endangering the sanctuary, which their desire to perform the altar service might otherwise lead them to do.

I would suggest an alternative interpretation of the regulation in Leviticus 21:17–23. In this interpretation, what the law guarded against was the coercion of priests with disabilities to perform the service at the altar in order to earn the sacrificial food or even while being denied the food. The purpose of the commandment in Leviticus 21:17–23 could have been to guarantee that priests with disabilities were exempt from the altar service and were entitled to sustenance from the sacrifices. This interpretation assumes that it was the privilege of eating the sacrificial food and not the service at the altar that was the more highly esteemed prerogative of priests. This interpretation would be in keeping with the compassionate portrayal of the Lord here in the priestly laws and in other biblical passages.

Neither of the interpretations of this passage can be proven with certainty. However, I will endeavor to show that this latter interpretation is as much a possibility as the other. Five considerations help to establish that this is the case. First, one may question the assumption that the altar service was the most highly esteemed priestly activity. It is doubtful that this service was more highly esteemed than

participation in the ritual meal in which the priests would share the Lord's food, an activity that is explicitly permitted for priests with disabilities in Leviticus 21:22.¹⁴ The terms used to describe the food in this verse, "most holy" and "holy," underscore the sacred significance of the meal. Other passages indicate that eating this food would occur beside the altar "in the holy place" (Leviticus 6:16, 26; 7:6; 10:12–13; 24:9) or, in the case of priestly initiation, at the door of the tabernacle (Exodus 29:32; Leviticus 8:31). The priests with disabilities mentioned in Leviticus 21 would therefore be in the same sacred spaces as the priests serving at the altar.

The narrative of Hannah, Samuel, and Eli in 1 Samuel 1–2 shows repeatedly that the sacrificial food was associated with prestige. According to this narrative, Elkanah honored his wife Hannah by giving her a double portion of the sacrificial meat (1 Samuel 1:5), and the greed of Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas in taking the meat from others led to a divine accusation that Eli and his sons were fattening themselves with the chief parts of the offerings (1 Samuel 2:29). Eli was also told that his descendants would beg Samuel to appoint them to a priestly office so that they might "eat a piece of bread" (1 Samuel 2:36), implying that at least some people viewed priestly service as the work required for the privilege of eating the sacrificial food. Indeed, the service at the altar was hard and messy work, as I will explain below, not the kind of work that would normally be desirable.

Second, not all types of disabilities disqualified a priest from the service at the altar, which casts doubt on the idea that stigmatization is a primary purpose here. For instance, while those who are blind are excluded, the deaf and mute are not. A great deal of discussion has centered on the interpretation of the terms for the types of "defects" (*mûm*) in this and other related passages and on the rationale governing what does and does not count as a "defect." A number of these terms are rare and have been subject to different translations. The category of "defect" has also been characterized in a number of ways, as having to do with visible damage, asymmetry, ugliness, or impurity.¹⁵

Despite the uncertain meaning of some of the items, most of them would likely present practical problems with performing the priestly service. From the description of sacrificial procedures in Leviticus 1–7, it is evident that the service at the altar was labor-intensive, involving the slaughtering of animals, cutting and preparation of the parts, complicated food preparations, tending the fire of the altar, frequent movement between the altar and the laver to wash hands and feet, and other movement around the temple court. Some of the “defects,” including blindness, lameness, deformation, and having a broken foot or hand, would render the service physically difficult or even impossible.¹⁶ Others, such as being pierced or having crushed testicles, may be associated with ritual mutilation such as would occur with captives, which would incur social stigma independent of the exclusion from temple service.¹⁷ Under these circumstances, being required to perform the highly visible role of attendance at the altar would put the person with the disability in a difficult position physically or socially. Thus one can read the directive in Leviticus 21:17–23 as a provision for those whose condition would make temple service especially problematic. In the case of those mutilated as captives, the directive would be comparable to David temporarily relieving from service the men whose beards were partially shaved and whose garments were cut halfway by the king of the Ammonites (2 Samuel 10:4–5).

Third, Olyan compares Leviticus 21:17–23 with Leviticus 22:18–25, which gives a list of defects that render an animal unfit for a sacrificial offering.¹⁸ The word for *defect* (*mûm*) in both texts is the same, and some of the specific forms of defects are also the same. This comparison initially seems to support the idea that Leviticus 21:17–23 is based on stigma associated with bodily defects, but the comparison ultimately fails to support this idea. According to Leviticus 22:23, one can give a bull or a sheep that is deformed or stunted as a freewill offering but not in fulfillment of a vow. The word for *deformed* here is also found in the list of “defects” excluding priests from altar service in Leviticus 21:18. Since freewill offerings were offered by fire on the

altar like other offerings (Leviticus 22:18; Numbers 15:3), this exception challenges the notion that stigma is the core issue. Did deformity somehow incur less stigma than other defects, and if so, why would a similar exception not apply in the case of a priest with a deformity or in the case of the fulfillment of a vow? A more suitable explanation is that the regulation is meant to “ensure that families did not donate animals (for sacrifice) . . . that they could not use for themselves”¹⁹ and that the exception (perhaps an arbitrary one) is granted in order to make the regulation more feasible or to lessen its impact.

Fourth, an interpretive crux in this passage is the purpose clause in verse 23, “that he may not profane my sanctuaries” (*wə-lōʔ yəhallēl ʔet-miqdāšay*). According to Olyan, this clause shows the perceived threat posed by priests with disabilities, whose “actions would result in profanation of the sanctuary, meaning the loss of its holiness, the divine quality par excellence and essential to the sanctuary’s continued operation.”²⁰ However, the clause can be interpreted differently. One uncertain aspect of this clause is its grammatical relationship to the preceding clauses. It could legitimately be translated “and he shall not profane my sanctuaries”—in other words, in addition to not performing the altar service, these priests are not to engage in any of the activities that would profane the sanctuary, as described elsewhere in the priestly code. Thus, in this interpretation, the exemption from the altar service is not to be construed as a release from other priestly obligations.

Another uncertain aspect is the meaning of the phrase *profane my sanctuaries*. It is important to note that the issue here is not one of impurity. The priestly laws in Leviticus distinguish carefully between the opposition of holy and profane on the one hand and the opposition of clean and unclean on the other.²¹ Uncleanness or pollution was transmitted through contact. Leviticus 7:21 indicates that in cases of personal uncleanness, eating of the sacrificial food was forbidden on penalty of death; such a situation does not seem to be at issue in Leviticus 21:17–23, which permits the consumption of the holy food and mentions no penalty. Further, contact itself does not seem to be at

issue. If it were, permitting the priests to eat the sacrificial food in the holy places would jeopardize the sanctuary.²² What is at issue is specifically the work of the service at the altar (Leviticus 21:17, 18, 21, 23).

An instructive comparison may be made between the purpose clause in verse 23 and the warning against profaning the Sabbath by performing work on that day, as expressed, for example, in Exodus 31:

You shall keep my Sabbaths, for it is a sign between me and you, for all generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. The one who profanes it must be put to death, for any one who performs work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. (Exodus 31:13–14)

Here the phrase “the one who profanes it” translates the Hebrew word *məḥaləlêbā*, a participle of the same verb used in Leviticus 21:23 (where the verb appears in the imperfect: *yəḥallēl*).²³ Just as performing work on the Sabbath would profane it, performing the priestly service while in a state of disability would profane the sanctuary. Also note here that the prohibition is accompanied by the declaration “I am the Lord who sanctifies you,” similar to “I am the Lord who sanctifies them” in Leviticus 21:23.²⁴

The root meaning of the verb *ḥillēl*, “to profane,” is “to untie, loosen.”²⁵ To profane something holy is to loosen something that God has bound. This root meaning is appropriate both in Exodus 31:14 and in Leviticus 21:23. The verb *to profane* in the case of Leviticus 21:23 may have to do not with rendering the sanctuary itself unholy (just as one cannot render the Sabbath unholy by transgressing it) but rather with the loosening of a divinely ordained social order. The social order in both cases is one in which people are mercifully exempted from labor—during sacred time (the Sabbath) in the case of Exodus 31 and on sacred space (the sanctuary) in the case of Leviticus 21.²⁶ Since God’s sanctuary is a house of order (Doctrine and Covenants 88:119), he can justifiably refer to the order he has established as identical to “[his] sanctuaries.”

Fifth and finally, although the fact that the law in Leviticus 21:17–23 is framed as a commandment may support the idea that the text has a stigmatizing purpose, this fact could also make sense if the text is interpreted as an exemption from labor. We see elsewhere that God mandates mercy, as in the law of the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13–14), the commandments regarding the collection of manna during the wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 16:15–30), and the injunction to help an enemy (Exodus 23:4–5). Once again, a comparison with the law of the Sabbath is particularly instructive. Like the law in Leviticus 21:17–23, the law of the Sabbath grants exemption from labor.²⁷ Yet the law of the Sabbath is framed as a commandment with the severest possible penalty, death (Exodus 31:14). We may not fully understand the reasons for this strict formulation. However, from the standpoint of social dynamics, it is worth noting that exemptions from labor are fragile. If one person chooses to labor, it becomes harder for others to continue to enjoy the exemption.²⁸ Thus one purpose of the commandments in Exodus 31 and Leviticus 21 may be to safeguard the divinely established social order of mercy.

2 Samuel 5:8: David's Attitude toward the Lame and Blind

As it is rendered in most translations, 2 Samuel 5:8 seems to report an instruction given by David specifically to his soldiers to slay those who are lame or blind in their conquest of the city of Jerusalem. Here, according to these translations, David says that his soul hates those who are lame and those who are blind. The verse is also significant because of what appears to be a popular saying, preserved at the end of the verse, that those who are blind or lame may not enter “the house”—usually interpreted as the temple.

This verse presents a number of interpretive difficulties, which arise from both the apparent textual corruption of the verse and its convoluted grammar. The following sampling of a few prominent

English Bible translations illustrates the variation arising from different attempts to reconcile the difficulties in this verse:

KJV: And David said on that day, Whosoever getteth up to the gutter, and smiteth the Jebusites, and the lame and the blind, *that are* hated of David's soul, *he shall be chief and captain*. Wherefore they said, The blind and the lame shall not come into the house.

NRSV (similar to NIV): 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."

New Jerusalem Bible: That day, David said, "Whoever gets up the tunnel and kills a Jebusite . . ." As for the blind and the lame, David hated them with his whole being. (Hence the saying: the blind and the lame may not enter the Temple.)

The principal difficulty here is that the verse seems to contain one or more incomplete sentences.²⁹ Rendered woodenly, David's speech in the vocalized Masoretic Hebrew text reads as follows: "Whoever slays a Jebusite, and he will reach (or *that he might reach*) the water shaft, and the lame and the blind, those hated by David's soul." The King James version inserts a whole clause to resolve the incomplete grammar: "*he shall be chief and captain*" (the italics indicate that the words are supplied by the King James translators; the clause is added based on the parallel verse in 1 Chronicles 11:6—which is, however, different enough that the insertion is unjustified). The New Jerusalem Bible similarly assumes an unexpressed predicate, signaled by an ellipsis. The NRSV tries to resolve the difficulty by inserting an extra verb, *attack*, to go with the direct object *the lame and the blind*.

From an exegetical standpoint, all of these interpretations are problematic because they conflict with the portrayal of David elsewhere in 2 Samuel. No other passages portray David as bearing any particular hatred toward either those with disabilities or Jebusites.

On the contrary, he provides generously for his friend's lame son Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9:3–7), and David engages in a friendly transaction with Araunah the Jebusite (2 Samuel 24:20–25).

The difficulties with this verse may be resolved by taking David's speech as a single sentence, with the final phrase governing what precedes. This final phrase presents its own complexities because of textual variation. The received consonantal text can be translated as either "they hate David's soul" or "David hates him with (his) whole being."³⁰ This was changed in the vocalized Masoretic text to "those hated by David's soul." Another reading is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls manuscript 4QSam^a: "David's soul hates." Adopting the reading of 4QSam^a, David's entire speech can be rendered without difficulty as follows:

David's soul hates anyone who slays a Jebusite that he might reach the water shaft, or (who slays) the lame or the blind.

In terms of the overall syntax, the speech would then be very similar to Psalm 11:5 and Isaiah 1:14, both of which also refer to the Lord's soul hating something, with the complex direct object coming first in the sentence, followed by the verb and the subject. In this interpretation, the direct objects *the lame* and *the blind* go with the participle *who slays*.

A similar interpretation could be applied to the Masoretic Hebrew text (with a slight change to the vowels of the last verb), although this interpretation is somewhat messier:

Whoever slays a Jebusite that he might reach the water shaft, or (who slays) the lame or the blind, David hates him with (his) whole being.

This interpretation of David's speech makes it consistent with other indications of David's attitude toward his enemies and toward those with disabilities. David repeatedly becomes angry at those who slay his enemies unrighteously (2 Samuel 3:27–39; 4:5–12). And we have

already discussed David's compassion toward Mephibosheth, the lame son of his friend Jonathan (2 Samuel 9:3–7).³¹

The last part of the verse seems, at first glance, to report a general saying that excludes those who are lame or blind from entering sacred space. The NRSV, for instance, translates this last part of the verse thus: "Therefore it is said, 'The blind and the lame shall not come into the house.'" Most translations are similar, including the ancient Greek version known as the Septuagint, which even specifies that it is "the house of the Lord" (*oikon kyriou*) that those who are lame or blind are not to enter.

Yet the interpretation of this last part of the verse is also ambiguous. In fact, rather than construing the complex subject *the lame and the blind* to relate to the singular verb *he shall enter* (*yābôʿ*), it makes better grammatical sense to construe the complex subject with the plural speech verb:³²

Therefore the blind and the lame kept saying, "He shall not enter the house."

In this interpretation, 2 Samuel 5:8 aligns with the statement by the Jebusites just two verses earlier that David "shall not enter here" and that the blind and the lame could repel him (2 Samuel 5:6).

That "the house" here refers to the temple is not certain. When David conquered Jerusalem, the temple on Mount Moriah had not yet been constructed. The NIV renders this word as "the palace," an interpretation also explicitly argued by biblical scholars Vargon, Schipper, and others.³³ This last part of the verse could thus be understood as reporting that those who are lame or blind among the Jebusite defenders, when they heard of David's resolve not to kill any of them, decided to use this to their advantage in order to protect the palace area from David's men.

In summary, the entire verse 2 Samuel 5:8 could be translated as follows:

David's soul hates anyone who slays a Jebusite that he might reach the water shaft, or (who slays) the lame or the blind. Therefore the blind and the lame kept saying, "He shall not enter the house."

This translation is in accordance with the earliest attested reading, namely that of 4QSam^a, which I believe to be the closest to the original.

The interpretation here argued for 2 Samuel 5:8 resolves the grammatical and exegetical difficulties inherent in most other interpretations. It is therefore appropriate to read this verse in a way that is consistent with the ideal of compassion toward those with disabilities, as attested elsewhere in David's career. With this interpretation, we can see that the two passages—2 Samuel 5:8 and 2 Samuel 9:3–7—present the cultural hero David as a role model of the compassionate ideal.

Conclusion: Compassion as a Cultural Value

This study has not reviewed all the biblical texts that have to do with disabilities and attitudes toward those with disabilities. The analysis shows, however, that the ideal of compassion toward those with disabilities is a strong theme that runs throughout the Old Testament. Some passages which may initially seem to support a contrary, purposely stigmatizing attitude can be shown to align with the charitable ideal or at least to permit such an interpretation. The picture that emerges from this investigation is one of consistency, with biblical passages showing a single cultural value of compassion toward those with disabilities during all periods of ancient Israelite history. This differs from the picture offered by some modern studies, such as that of Olyan, which portray an ancient Israelite world having diverse cultural values.

It is interesting that the only institutional response to disability evident in the various passages discussed above serves to legislate

protection of those with disabilities from physical harm or denigration by other people. The laws in Leviticus 19:14 and Deuteronomy 27:18 are framed as negative commandments, forbidding one to hinder or curse the disabled. Likewise, Leviticus 21:17–23 mandates that people with “defects,” including some classes of people with disabilities, shall not serve at the altar (thus protecting them from physical and social straits). One modern scholar claims that this passage in Leviticus 21 provides “a sort of social security in the case of later acquired impairment.”³⁴ However, this provision does not extend beyond the allotment available to priests in general. No proactive legislation on an institutional level, such as a mandate for inclusive employment or for buildings to be accessible, is evident in the Bible. Instead, the biblical text promotes the responsibility to care for those with disabilities as a personal religious expectation—not legislated, but inculcated as a cultural value. This teaching includes the frequent portrayal of God as the model champion of the rights of those who have disabilities, as we see in Leviticus 21:17–23, among other passages. It also includes the association of the popular hero David with compassion toward those with disabilities, as we see in 2 Samuel 5:8 and 2 Samuel 9:3–7.

On the basis of these conclusions, it is possible to suggest some thoughts concerning the wider implications of the cultural ideal that prevailed in ancient Israel. First, from the standpoint of those with disabilities, the emphasis on personal responsibility to provide care no doubt required grace in accepting help from others, as well as some degree of physical hardship and even risk of not having basic needs met. Those with disabilities could not expect institutional aid as a right, other than priests receiving their portion of the sacrificial food to eat in the sacred precincts. Many biblical texts classify those with disabilities along with other people who are disadvantaged, especially those who are poor. Those with disabilities, like those who are poor, would likely have to beg for assistance from their peers, unless they had close friends or family who would give them consistent help (Leviticus 19:14–15; Isaiah 29:17–29; Proverbs 31:8–9).

Second, these findings in the Old Testament may permit a reinterpretation of the overall history of attitudes toward disabilities in the Jewish and early Christian traditions. The compassionate ideal found in the Old Testament reverberates in other ancient scripture, such as the story of the individual with paralysis who was carried by his friends in Mark 2:3–12, the numerous New Testament stories of Jesus healing people with infirmities, and the healing of the multitudes in 3 Nephi 17:6–10. We can therefore discern hints of a *longue durée* history of this ideal beyond ancient Israel. We see this ideal also surviving in modern communities of faith, including in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³⁵ As with so many other religious values, ancient and modern covenant Israel share a common heritage.

Notes

1. The treatment of slain enemies is similar, including the removal of the foreskin (1 Samuel 18:25, 27), decapitation (1 Samuel 17:51, 54; 31:8–13; 2 Kings 10:7), and the severing of the hands and feet (2 Samuel 4:12).
2. Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Disabilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 38–45.
3. Joshua Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 264–65. Fox derives the pattern ultimately from *qattil.
4. Postbiblical Hebrew nouns belonging to this category include *qittēaʿ*, “missing a hand or foot”; *giddēm*, “missing a hand”; *šimmēm*, “with misshapen ears”; *šimmēaʿ*, “with misshapen ears”; *ʿiqqēl*, “clubfooted”; and *ḥiggēr*, “limping.” Also significant in this connection is the Hebrew *qattal-t pattern for diseases and blemishes, showing that there was a semantic separation made between bodily divergences/disabilities and diseases/blemishes: *qaddaḥat*, “fever”; *yallepet*, “scab”; *sappaḥat*, “scab”; *baḥeret*, “white patch of skin”; and *šāraʿat*, “skin disease.” See Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns*, 234. In Arabic, the pattern for bodily divergences is *ʿaqtal (fem. *qatlāʾ, pl. *qutl), the same pattern used for colors. As in Hebrew, a distinction is

- made between these divergences and diseases, which use a different pattern (**qutāl*).
5. For the evidence of the use of prosthetics in ancient Egypt, see Jacqueline Finch, "The Ancient Origins of Prosthetic Medicine," *Lancet* 377 (2011): 548–49.
 6. By way of comparison, a moral obligation to care for people with disabilities in one's own family is evident in ancient Egypt, but there we also find evidence of palace-supported care for workers with disabilities. See Rosalie David, "Egyptian Medicine and Disabilities: From Pharaonic to Greco-Roman Egypt," in *Disability in Antiquity*, ed. Christian Laes (New York: Routledge, 2017), 82–83.
 7. In order to represent my understanding of the terms for disabilities as accurately as possible, I use my own translations of biblical passages except where otherwise indicated.
 8. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 78–92, sees all of these texts as reinforcing the stigmatization of disabled people in various ways. Many of his claims in this regard are unwarranted. For instance, the promise of a future in which disabilities will be healed is a message of hope and does not necessarily imply that disabled people "have no place in a model world," nor do I see any implication that "disabled persons require Yhwh's special intervention to mitigate the marginalizing effects of their disabilities, thus allowing their inclusion." It is true that disabled people in these prophetic passages "function, to a large degree, as vehicles for the display of Yhwh's agency," but this is only because the texts are not primarily about disabilities, but about the Lord's future works.
 9. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 31.
 10. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 27–36.
 11. In the context of priestly initiation, the priest would eat the food "at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation" (Exodus 29:32; Leviticus 8:31); in other cases, the appropriate location was in the court of the tabernacle, where the altar was located (Leviticus 6:16, 26).
 12. The pre-1978 policy restricting black members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from ordination to the priesthood may be cited as an example of the significant distinction between policy and scripture.

The only scripture directly related to this policy is Official Declaration 2 at the end of the Doctrine and Covenants, which revokes the policy and explicitly permits ordination to the priesthood “without regard for race or color.”

13. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 31.
14. On the ritual meal, see David Calabro, “The Lord of Hosts and His Guests: Hospitality on Sacred Space in Exodus 29 and 1 Samuel 1,” *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 27 (2007): 19–29.
15. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 29–31; Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 34–39.
16. Being deaf or mute would not have presented a major problem for most aspects of temple service. This perhaps coincided with an avoidance of loud voices by humans on sacred space. Zacharias’s performance of the duties of high priest was therefore permissible, even after he was rendered mute by an angel (Luke 1:8–22).
17. The idea that some of these “defects” are associated with captivity is supported by a text from the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q266, which mentions “captivity among the Gentiles” as a factor that disqualifies a descendant of Aaron from priestly service. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1829.
18. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 30–31. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1821–22, 1825–28, 1836–40, pursues the connection between these two passages in depth.
19. Edgar Kellenberger, “Mesopotamia and Israel,” in Laes, *Disability in Antiquity*, 49.
20. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 31.
21. For a thorough treatment of this distinction in Leviticus 21, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1831–32.
22. See the similar statement by Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1825.
23. Other passages referring to “profaning” the Sabbath using this same Hebrew verb include Ezekiel 22:8; 23:38; Nehemiah 13:17.

24. This declaration is common in passages having to do with the law of the Sabbath. See also Leviticus 19:3; 30; 26:2; Ezekiel 20:12, 20.
25. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 320.
26. Other passages also draw a parallel between the Sabbath and the sanctuary, including Leviticus 19:30; 26:2; Ezekiel 23:38.
27. The Sabbath day, like other sabbatical periods of time like the release of debts on the sabbatical year and the release of Israelite slaves on the Jubilee year, is a sign of the Lord's mercy to his people in freeing them from oppression—it is a day on which nobody can be forced to labor. Thus Deuteronomy 5:12–15 enjoins Sabbath observance in memory of the deliverance from Egypt: “And remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”
28. A personal anecdote may help to illustrate this principle. When my daughter Esther was born, I became eligible for several weeks of paternity leave. Although I was tempted because of my work ethic to forego some of the leave, my supervisor insisted that I take all the leave for which I was eligible; to do otherwise, he said, would be to jeopardize the benefit that others had fought to obtain.
29. Jeremy Schipper, “Reconsidering the Imagery of Disability in 2 Samuel 5:8b,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 426–27n13, ably describes the grammatical difficulties in this verse, but he does not consider the solution proposed here (see below).
30. Compare Isaiah 26:9: “With my whole being (lit. ‘my soul’) I have desired you in the night.” In both cases, the noun *soul*, without a preposition, is understood in an adverbial sense.
31. S. R. Driver reports an interpretation by Budde along the same lines, resulting in the following translation: “Whoso smiteth a Jebusite, toucheth his own neck (i.e. brings his own life into danger); the lame and the blind David's soul hateth not.” However, this interpretation involves extensive conjectural emendation of the Hebrew text. Driver concludes that “[Budde's] conjecture is clever . . . and it attributes to David a fine and chivalrous thought; but it is too bold to command acceptance.” See S. R.

Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, rev. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 261.

32. See Gesenius-Kautsch-Cowley, *Hebrew Grammar*, 468, §146d–f.
33. Shmuel Vargon, “The Blind and the Lame,” *Vetus Testamentum* 46 (1996): 499–500; Schipper, “Reconsidering the Imagery of Disability,” 422–23n2.
34. Kellenberger, “Mesopotamia and Israel,” 49.
35. “Disabilities,” *Gospel Topics*, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/disability>.