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If reference works measure the status of a field, then one need only read the article “Lame” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (1962) to gauge how some biblical scholars conceptualized disability in the 1960s. The main preoccupation for the author, Roland K. Harrison, was in diagnosing the disability in modern medical terms. Thus, the lame man in Acts 3:2 suffered from “weakness of the astragalus and metatarsus bones of the foot.” The person healed at Lystra (Acts 14:8) probably “suffered from some form of cyllosis.”

Another stream of scholarship had a more ethnocentric and “orientalist” approach. Merrill F. Unger’s article “Diseases” in *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (1966) tells readers: “Insanity is much more rare in the East than in the West. This is doubtless due to the freedom from the strain which so severely tests the endurance of the more active minds of the Japhetic stock.”

If we fast-forward to more recent reference works (e.g., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*), we find mixed results at best. In fact, most biblical scholars, critical or not, still see disability in essentialist medical terms, and view their job as translating biblical descriptions into modern medical terminology.

## Justifying Disability Studies

A survey published by David Pfeiffer and Karen Yoshida (1995) showed that not a single Disability Studies (DS) course was taught under the sponsorship of a religious studies program or department in 1993. A 2003 survey compiled by Steven J. Taylor and Rachael Zubal-Ruggieri of the Center on Human Policy at Syracuse University shows that not much has changed since 1993 in this respect.

My own unscientific survey of the key term “disability” in the archives of the American Academy of Religion Syllabi Project found 13 matches, and none referred to actual course content about disability, but rather to accommodations for the disabled. I was unable to find a single course in biblical studies in my search that had even a reference to disability studies.

An obvious reason for this situation is that DS competes with many approaches already in place, not to mention others that could also be introduced. There are only so many weeks in a semester or quarter, and there are potentially dozens of perspectives that deserve attention. But selection of topics has always been subjective and adaptive. For example, literary source criticism is deemed important in a graphocentric culture. Yet, not all people in the world are literate, and most societies in biblical times were not graphocentric.

If demographics alone could justify disability studies, we could note that 100 percent of people live in an “embodied” state in literate or nonliterate cultures, ancient or modern. Indeed, one important reason for integrating disability studies into almost any subject, including teaching the Bible, is helping students become aware of how their bodies are conceptualized, disempowered, and valued by societies.

Disability studies should be an important part of biblical studies for at least two other reasons: 1) the Bible has exerted tremendous influence on how we have conceptualized and valued the body in European and American societies; and 2) biblical authors use “disabilities” to promote theological and literary agendas in their narratives and discourse. Accordingly, much may be missed in the literary analysis of the Bible if attention is not paid to disability discourse.

### **How to Integrate Disability Studies**

While there is a plurality of disability studies models for conceptualizing disability, most of them are a response to an essentialist medical model of the “normal body.” Many disability studies scholars emphasize that “disabilities” are created when societies obstruct the ability of persons to perform certain actions, rather than when certain physical features render persons unable to

perform certain actions. Other scholars may emphasize that the disabled should be accepted for the body they have rather than be rehabilitated to conform to the “normate” body.

Given the plurality of models and perspectives that one could emphasize, integration of disability studies may range from including DS materials in opportune moments of a course, to a course devoted fully to a disability studies perspective. Regardless of the level of integration, there are at least five approaches to integrating disability studies into undergraduate courses on the Bible:

1. An “attitudinal approach” may be introduced as the class encounters relevant texts. For example, students may be asked to meditate on how “blindness” is viewed in Deuteronomy 28:28, which suggests that it can be the result of sin. Discussion about the assumptions of this biblical author can generate further discussions of whether any modern societies see disabilities as the result of sin. Many of my students note how some in our society see AIDS as a punishment for sin, which then engenders discussion about other conditions. The Book of Job, which denies that sin is a necessary cause of disability, can be used for comparison with the views expressed in Deuteronomy.

2. The literary role of disability can also help students understand how authors “use” disabilities to tell their stories. This is an insight systematically explored by David Mitchell, who argues that disabilities play a central role in narratives and film. One example may suffice: Deuteronomy 6:4 (NRSV) says, “Hear, Oh, Israel, YHWH, our God, is one YHWH.” Although the selection of “hearing” may seem insignificant to some, the use of this “sense” may be part of a systematic privileging of hearing over seeing that one finds in other parts of the Deuteronomistic History. We are specifically told, for example, that the Israelites did not see Yahweh, but rather heard him (Deut. 4:12). The verse 1 Samuel 9:9 contains the seemingly odd note that prophets were formerly called “seers” in ancient Israel. The prophet Ahijah (1 Kings 14:1–7) is portrayed as perceptive despite the fact that the story specifically emphasizes that he is unsighted. Ahijah’s correct information comes from hearing God’s message rather than from seeing. The last example specifically shows how the author uses one disability, “blindness,” to tell a story about the privileged nature of “hearing” God. At the same time, such differential attitudes toward the senses may also help the student understand how the privileging of specific “abilities” (perceiving without “seeing”) are constructed by theological and social agendas. In a full-scale course emphasizing disability studies, one can study systematically how different biblical corpora view disability and privilege some senses above others.

3. The fact that biblical scholarship itself reflects ideological investments in the body can be illustrated by comparing writings from various periods and perspectives within biblical scholarship. Merrill F. Unger's view of "insanity" can be contrasted with other views of madness/insanity. We may note that Unger and other scholars were not concerned with how biblical authors empowered or disempowered the disabled through their rhetoric and theology.

4. Books and/or articles may be assigned that include discussion of disability from the perspective of disabled scholars. John Hull, for example, writes about blindness in the Bible from the perspective of an unsighted scholar.

5. Sociological studies may be introduced that focus on how modern persons of faith use the Bible to address their own disabilities. Lisa Copen of Rest Ministries, for instance, develops devotional literature to aid the disabled in living productive lives. Even if one does not agree with her theology, such resources are useful in studying how some disabled persons use the Bible on more practical levels.

As noted by a number of disability scholars, experiential, inclusivist, and activist pedagogical approaches can also be useful. One's experience as a disabled faculty member can be a model for empowering disabled students. The plasticity of the disabled identity can also be important to note. Due to chronic respiratory problems caused by Wegener's Granulomatosis, I experienced highly restricted mobility for a significant portion of my life, but now surgery has increased my breathing capacity to near "normal." Thus, I sometimes address how one can move from "abled" to disabled identities and vice versa.

## Conclusion

Disability studies is at least as deserving of attention as any other approach to biblical studies. It can be seen as part of a larger body of experience that may be called "corporeal studies" or "corporeal criticism," which focuses on how different cultures value and conceptualize the body. If education means knowing more about the world in which we live, then students of the Bible should know more about how the most influential book in history addresses our embodiment. Yet, there are still many challenges and obstacles in the way of a thriving (systematic?)

disability studies approach to biblical studies. One desideratum is a corpus of scholarly literature that addresses disabilities in the Bible and the ancient Near East in a more systematic manner.

## References

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For how some persons of faith integrate the Bible in addressing their disability, see [www.restministries.org/pro-devotion.htm](http://www.restministries.org/pro-devotion.htm)

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