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Introduction

Scriptus means 'having been written', and this *Scriptus Paper* concerns some biblical perspectives on human disability. It's a top-of-mind matter for many, which is consistent with the estimate that almost everyone in the world will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their lives. Already, some 1.3 billion people – about 16% of the global population – experience significant disability, have poorer health, experience more limitations in everyday functioning than others, and they die earlier (WHO). Most of these folk live in developing countries ([White](#)).

Our view of disability has evolved, from a medical model of the individual, to a social-cultural-environmental one ([Aydogdu](#)). Of course for the Christian, the focus ought to be a theological model, and some scholars have widened our perspective of disability by considering what the Bible has to reveal on the topic. This is my concern here, and so what follows is a brief biblical oversight of the concept of disability, its cause, its challenge, its care, and its cure, compared with viewpoints from our contemporary world.

1. The Concept

In the Biblical world

It will therefore not surprise us to learn that the boundaries within which disability is perceived in biblical culture are different from those in our own. For example, the Hebrew Bible has no word that parallels the English "disability" precisely, but it does categorise persons on the basis of physical or mental condition, appearance, alleged vulnerability ([Olyan](#)). Similarly, there was no term in Greek for "disability" that corresponds to our modern word. Instead, very diverse physical, mental, cultural and social conditions were loosely grouped together and considered disabling ([Bruce](#)).

However, English translations of the Hebrew Bible use the word *disabled* in the following texts:

Hebrew Bible

Translation	Reference	Text	Notes
Orthodox Jewish Bible	Exodus 17:13	And Yehoshua disabled [<i>khalash</i>] Amalek	<i>khalash</i> = disabled, weakened, prostrated
NASB	2 Samuel 4:4, 9:3, 13	Now Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son who was disabled [<i>nakeh</i>] in both feet...he fell and became lame [<i>piççeach</i>]	<i>nakeh</i> = smitten, i.e. (literally) maimed <i>piççeach</i> = to hop
Complete Jewish Bible	Proverbs 26:7	The legs of the disabled [<i>piççeach</i>] hang limp and useless;	<i>piççeach</i> = to hop
Common English Bible	Jeremiah 31:8	The word that came to Jeremiah. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel. The days are surely coming, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it. 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 disabled [<i>piççeach</i>], those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here (Jeremiah 30:1-3, 8).	<i>piççeach</i> = to hop

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In the Biblical world continued

Further, English translations of the New Testament use the word *disabled* in the following texts:

New Testament

Translation	Reference	Text	Notes
Christian Standard, NET	Luke 13:11	A woman was there who had been disabled [<i>astheneia</i>] by a spirit for over eighteen years, and she was not able to straighten herself up completely	<i>astheneia</i> means weakness, or rather the absence of strength: impotence or infirmity
Christian Standard, NIV, Mounce	John 5:3, 5, 7	Within these lay a large number of the disabled [<i>astheneia</i>] - blind, lame, and paralyzed	<i>astheneia</i> means weakness, or rather the absence of strength: impotence or infirmity
Christian Standard, Complete Jewish Bible	Acts 4:9	If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a disabled [<i>astheneia</i>] man (crippled from birth)	<i>astheneia</i> means weakness, or rather the absence of strength: impotence or infirmity
NASB	Acts 14:8	In Lystra a man was sitting who had been disabled [<i>adunatos</i>] from birth, and had never walked.	<i>adunatos</i> means impossible or incapable
Good News, NIV	Hebrews 12:13	Keep walking on straight paths, so that the lame foot may not be disabled [<i>cholos</i>], but instead be healed.	[<i>cholos</i>] means lame. It probably derives from the verb <i>chalo</i> , to slacken or loosen

Moreover, none of these uses of 'disabled' is out of place to us in the English-speaking world. We understand them intuitively as a deficient condition.

In our world

What is disability in our contemporary world? For example, the UN definition, is any *long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which...may hinder the full and effective participation of disabled people in society on an equal basis with others.*

Moreover, contemporary notions of disability refer to a wide variety of human conditions, that may not share many common medical or biological traits. In this sense we have cerebral palsy, dyslexia, or blindness ([Schipper](#)), and the most prevalent types of disabilities are visual and hearing impairment, mental handicap, and physical disabilities ([White](#)).

Recently the focus of the concept of disability has moved away from the individual, or the medical model of disability, and a framework that situates a disabled body in the context of an individual's pathology or deficit, to the environment and society ([Gosbell](#), [Olyan](#)). Accordingly, this takes the emphasis off physical deformity as an individual feature, and towards the social situation in which the individual's physical deformity is emphasised ([Aydogdu](#)).

In this category, Barnes argues that disability is primarily a social phenomenon, a case of having a 'minority body', a way of facing social oppression, but not a way of being inherently or intrinsically worse off. That is, disability is not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do (Harvey 2023). However, the idea that disability is not a sub-optimal condition seems disconnected from reality, and people are right to be skeptical of it.

In the Biblical world

In the biblical references to follow, there are six causes of disability.

Nature

When Isaac was old, his eyesight was dim (Genesis 27:1), and Jacob's eyes were heavy (Genesis 48:10). Eli was 98 years old and his eyes looked straight ahead, or "were set" and unable to see (1 Samuel 4:15). Similarly, Ahijah could not see. His eyes "were set" or "were fixed," because of his old age (1 Kings 14:4). In each case here, the natural ageing process is identified as the cause.

Accidents

Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul, was just five years old when news arrived that his father and grandfather had been killed. His nursemaid tried to spirit him away, for fear that his grandfather's enemies would come for him next, but she dropped him and he was disabled. For the rest of his life, he did not have the use of his legs (2 Samuel 4:4).

Man-inflicted

Samson went down to Timnah where a Philistine girl caught his eye. He asked his parents to get her to be his wife. But his parents objected and counselled him to get a wife from his relatives. But Samson refused for she was right in his eyes. His eyes eventually got him into trouble for the Philistines captured him and took revenge by gouging out his eyes (Judges 14:1, 16:21).

Satanically-inflicted

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath, and there appeared a woman with a spirit of weakness, or impotence. Satan, had disabled her for eighteen years, and she was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight (Luke 13:10-17).

God's purpose

God is good. God made the world 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). That is, wholly, exceedingly good, or beautiful, and bountiful, joyful, precious, and prosperous, ready and sweet. Since sin entered, our world is very different, and disability is just one of its many characteristics.

God is great. This is an inescapable reality no matter how jarring it reads. The sovereignty of God is unavoidable when He asks Moses, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11).

And, what about Psalm 139:13-17?

Certainly you made my mind and heart; you wove me together in my mother's womb. I will give you thanks because your deeds are awesome and amazing. You knew me thoroughly; my bones were not hidden from you, when I was made in secret and sewed together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw me when I was inside the womb. All the days ordained for me were recorded in your scroll before one of them came into existence. How difficult it is for me to fathom your thoughts about me, O God! How vast is their sum total.

God is gracious. *The barren women.* If disability is some loss of physical function then barrenness is a disability. So, Sarai was barren and had no children, but God gave her a multitude (Genesis 11:30). Similarly, Rebekah, and Leah (Genesis 25:21, 29:31), Samson's mother (Judges 13), and Elisabeth (Luke 1:7).

The blind man. John 9:1-3 gives an explanation of why he was born blind. The reason was not because of any particular sin by himself or his parents, but that God's works might be revealed in him.

The four lepers. King Ben Hadad of Syria assembled his army and attacked and besieged Samaria, and its food supply ran out. So, four lepers decided to defect to the Syrians hoping to be spared. When they came to the Syrian camp, no one was there because the Lord had caused the Syrian camp to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a large army so they fled. The Lord used these disabled men to take the good news back to Israel and inform the palace (2 Kings 6:24, 7:3-20).

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God's punishment

In some instances, disabilities are the consequences for sins.

Physical. *Men of Sodom.* Who tried breaking down Lot's door to have sex with the visiting men (angels) inside. The angels struck those would-be intruders with blindness (Genesis 19:10-11).

Saul. The Spirit of the Lord turned away from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. It's unclear whether it was a demonic spirit (1 Samuel 16:14).

Jeroboam. When he objected to the Lord's messenger speaking against his self-appointed altar in Bethel, Jeroboam pointed his hand to the prophet and commanded his attendants to capture him. But the Lord paralysed his hand and he could not pull it back (1 Kings 13:1-4).

Uzziah. He was largely a good king of Judah but his pride destroyed him. He disobeyed the Lord by entering the Lord's temple to offer incense on the incense altar. Kings, of course, could not be priests, but when confronted by a large company of priests, he became angry, at which point a skin disease appeared on his forehead, because the Lord afflicted him (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

Michal. As David returned the captured ark of the Lord to the City of David, Saul's daughter, and David's wife Michal saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord and despised him. She thought that he was a vulgar fool, but David was celebrating before the Lord in an act of humiliation. Consequently, the Lord vindicated David and humiliated Michal for He struck her with barrenness, and she had no children to the day of her death (2 Samuel 6:20-23).

Psychological. *Israel.* If Israel did not obey God and keep all His commandments and break His covenant, God promised panic and terror by way of physical emaciation, and deadly diseases, extremely hot fever, inflammation, paleness, blindness, and psychological effects, anxiety, depression as the soul pines away, draining the vitality of life until they perished (Leviticus 26:14-16, Deuteronomy 28:20-37).

The nations. Zechariah's oracle against the nations that besiege Jerusalem reveals that the Lord will strike every horse and its rider with madness and craziness (Zechariah 12:1-4).

Symbolic. The following texts take literal disabilities and give them a symbolic meaning.

No one who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God - no one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or 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. He shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, that he may not profane (bore, wound) my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord; I sanctify them (Leviticus 21:17-23).

You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable in your behalf; it must be perfect (entire, complete) (Leviticus 22:20-21).

When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong (bad, evil)? (Malachi 1:8).

The focus here does not seem to be to stigmatise the disabled, but by disability to symbolise imperfection, and to exalt the perfection of the Lord. People and offerings that are disabled, or blemished, God regards as bad, and profane or wound the sanctity of His holy place, and the offerer is thereby not accepted before the Lord. Such blemishes placed an individual, and an offering outside God's standards of purity and holiness, and therefore incomplete ([Sheerin](#)). They, therefore, symbolise imperfection, and are rejected.

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Symbolic continued. However, the texts below are using the language and imagery of disability as a symbol, a figure to represent some aspect of character beyond the physical disability itself, such as lack of mental or spiritual insight - that is, being spiritually disabled ([Harvey](#), [Schipper](#), [McAllister](#)). They are a metaphor for Israel's moral, ethical, and spiritual departure from God.

Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear (Jeremiah 5:20-21, Ezekiel 12:1).

Listen, you that are deaf; and you that are blind, look up and see! Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger whom I send? Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of the Lord? He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear (Isaiah 42:18-20).

Israel's sentinels are blind, they are all without knowledge...(Isaiah 56:10).

The legs of a disabled person hang limp; so does a proverb in the mouth of a fool (Proverbs 26:7).

In our world

What is the cause of disability as seen by our contemporary world? Literature studies on disability show that there are at least four major causes of disability; congenital disability; biological disability; socio-emotional disability, and accidental disability. Biological disabilities are the result of changes in the child's body, brain development, height, and weight. Cognitive disabilities involve challenges in one's thinking, intelligence and speech (speaking ability). Socio-emotional disability is a result of changes in one's relationship with other people, changes in emotion and changes in personality ([White](#)).

Nevertheless, people with disabilities have spoken out for themselves, defining disability not in medical terms, but identifying disabling aspects of society as the main barrier to inclusion. The result was the development of the social model of disability in which a distinction is drawn between "impairment", which arises from biological factors and refers to the lack of part of or all of a limb, or to "having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body", and "disability" which refers to "the collective experience of oppression resulting from a disabling society" ([Bruce](#), [Bengtsson](#)). In other words, society causes disability, and individuals with an impairment do not have a disability unless they are prevented from participation or recognition in society ([Bennett](#)).

The impairment-disability dichotomy seems like playing with words. Notice the incoherency; an impairment is not a disability unless exclusion is involved, in which case it is a disability! It seems to me this is pushing the stigma off the individual to society, and both society and the individual are disabled!

Summary of causes

We can say that the picture of the disability spectrum from our contemporary world is incomplete? Perhaps the most important category of disability, namely spiritual impairment, is not separately identified.

Further, the evolution of meaning from disability being a personal condition to being a societal condition, seems designed to erase a reality, which cannot be done, in favour of societal impairment, which undoubtedly exists, and in part is serious, could be dangerous because it may take the focus off the genuine needs of the disabled.

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3. The Challenge

In the Biblical world

As [de Bruin](#) so ably puts it, the cross of Jesus is the ultimate example of disability that was stigmatised by society. So, while disability places people at the margins of life, the cross places disability at the middle. It does this, because His subsequent resurrection conquered disability. This is the challenge for Christians to approach disability as a victory, not a defeat.

Which Paul alluded to when the Lord gave him a messenger of Satan to torment him, to keep the exceptional character of the heavenly revelations from going to his head (2 Corinthians 12:6-10). Christ's grace was made perfect in Paul's disability (*astheneia* the absence of strength).

So, Paul became content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever he was weak, then he was strong. This is counterintuitive, paradoxical and the challenge is to acknowledge its truth when it doesn't make human sense.

In sum, Paul's paradox of power in weakness puts biblical disability right where it belongs. For Christianity, disability isn't at the margins, but at the centre. It brings everything together. To remove disability from Christ was to remove the scandal of the cross, and turn the world turned upside down no less. For Paul, the role of God's power in weakness was a sign that the world had been finally turned right-side up.

In our world

The challenge for the disabled is not so much how individuals' bodies or minds work but rather the barriers in the physical, programmed, planned, or attitude factors in one's environment and social life. The disabled often experience depression and anxiety disorders ([Aydogdu](#)). Others experience isolation, and stigma; still others wrestle with questions related to their value, worth, and purpose ([Hodge](#)).

Additionally, they are more likely to be victims of violence or rape, and in some countries less likely to obtain police intervention, legal protection or preventive care, and appropriate schooling. In Africa, in particular, people with disabilities have been subjected to prejudices, discrimination and segregation ([White](#)).

Nevertheless, it is the nature of human beings to long for wholeness, yet the disabled often must endure brokenness. In the quest for wholeness the challenge is not the individual with disability, but rather, it is our societal expectations and structures that limit access for those with bodies outside of what is deemed 'normal' ([Gosbell](#)). Others take a higher view in which the challenge is for the non-disabled to find a "spirituality" for the disabled ([Muldoon](#)).

Research from the US, France, Korea, & Germany revealed the needs and aspirations of the chronically diseased and disabled. They want to find :

- fearless dying
- a deeper connection to the here & now
- hope & peace
- meaning & purpose of life, dying and death
- spiritual resources
- peace of mind
- a relationship with God ([Bussing](#)).

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4. The Care

In the Biblical world

The deaf and blind

The Hebrew Bible commanded the Israelites to treat persons with disabilities as one would treat those without disabilities, free of discrimination ([Bowa](#)). They were not 'to curse a deaf person or put a stumbling block in front of a blind person' (Leviticus 19:14), and 'Cursed is the one who misleads a blind person on the road' (Deuteronomy 27:18).

That said, Bowa notes that at the core of the experiences of the disabled are contradictory perspectives from the Hebrew Bible which have served as both inclusion and exclusion mechanisms. For example, the Hebrew Bible discriminates against persons with disabilities (Leviticus 21:16-24; 22:17-22; Deuteronomy 28:28) as well as calling for non-discrimination (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18).

Accordingly, these contradictions provide the foundation for the systematic exclusion and stigmatisation of, and discrimination against persons with disabilities, certainly in African societies, which are partly rooted in the Church's engagement with biblical texts on disability. Such exclusion is the primary mechanism that perpetuates the connection between disability and poverty.

Bowa argues from the Social Model of Disability, that there has to be a paradigm shift in the way that society has addressed the issue of disability. The Church should take appropriate action to guard against the systematic exclusion of persons with disabilities through a liberative reading of biblical texts that cultivate a social ideology of inclusion in the context of disability.

The alternative view already noted here under 'symbolic disabilities' is that such contradictory texts may not be stigmatising the disabled, but rather, by disability, to symbolise imperfection, and to exalt the perfection of the Lord.

The paralysed

The crippled Mephibosheth was a regular guest at king David's table (2 Samuel 9:9-12).

The threatened

Jezebel threatened Elijah's life, and once courageous, he is now crippled with fear and ran away to the desert and asked God to take his life. God's angels gave him food and strength for 40 days to travel to Horeb. His depression was still present and clouded his assessment of himself as the only loyal one left in Israel. He was instructed to return and appoint Elisha as the prophet in his place. He couldn't function any longer as a prophet, so God gave him a replacement and granted his request to take his life, which God did by taking him to heaven in a whirlwind (1 Kings 19:1-4, 2 Kings 2:1).

Messianic recovery

'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 labor, together; a great company, they shall return here' (Jeremiah 31:8).

The needy and destitute

The Lord would not withdraw His punishment from Israel who sold the needy for a pair of sandals, trampled the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and pushed the depressed out of the way (Amos 2:6-7).

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In the Biblical world continued

Jesus and the disabled

Jesus instructed His hearers that when one hosts a dinner or a banquet, don't invite friends or brothers or relatives or rich neighbours, but invite the disabled then you will be blessed, and repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14). Jesus himself healed the lepers, the sick, the lame, the blind, the paralysed, the demon possessed, the mute, the dumb.

Speak up

So commands Proverbs 31:8-9:

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.

Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Persons with disabilities form part of the marginalised in society, and it is, therefore, imperative that their rights be respected, promoted and preserved ([White](#)).

While this text is Hebrew Bible wisdom literature, given how the Lord cared for the disabled, this is also a text for the church, to stand up and speak up for the marginalised, and stigmatised in our society, and in the church.

In our world

Religious rituals, spirituality, and meditations such as belonging, transcendence, search for meaning and purpose, and creativity have been shown to positively effect the psychological well-being of the disabled. However, well-being is facilitated by accepting disability and seeing it as part of one's identity ([Aydogdu](#)). Also, research shows that the capacity of the disabled to cope over an extended period of time has a direct positive effect on the outcome. One way to cope with chronic illness is through spirituality and/or religious involvement (conversations), and many individuals report being more spiritual or religious after the onset of chronic pain conditions. Those who reported more person-centeredness during their conversations had higher levels of perceived emotional support, esteem support, and more emotional improvement ([Rafferty](#)).

Additionally, spirituality and religious practices enhance, foster, or augment already existing pathways toward health and wellness among those with chronic illness ([Corrigan](#), [Ivtzan](#), [Roger](#)). Indeed, they have a positive and significant direct and indirect effect on life satisfaction in the older adults with chronic diseases. This highlights the importance of addressing spirituality in healthcare for patients with chronic illness. Healthcare providers should consider incorporating spiritual practices and beliefs into treatment plans to improve overall well-being and life satisfaction ([Shabani](#)).

5. The Cure

In the Biblical world

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14-15).

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people (Matthew 4:23).

Jesus sent out the twelve instruction them: Proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons (Matthew 10:5-8).

The Lord and His disciples gave a preview of what life would be like in God's kingdom, when He rules the world alone. 'Cure the sick', He said, indicating that there will be no disabilities, for there will be no disease, or sickness, physical, mental, or spiritual, or dying, or death.

It is here that the needs and aspirations of the chronically diseased and disabled chronicled by Bussing, can be met. Such aspirations as fearless dying, hope & peace, the meaning and purpose of life, dying and death, spiritual resources, peace of mind, and a relationship with God are all satisfied in the good news of the kingdom of God.

There is a catch, however. Notice that Jesus said, '*repent, and believe in the good news*'. Our disabled world is because of sin against God. To get into His kingdom requires a change of mind about sin and a full embrace of God's rule.

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In our world

Our contemporary world knows no cures for many disabilities, so the word 'cure' is not part of its lexicon. At best, our world can ameliorate the suffering of many, and improve their lot by way of medical science, by removing the many barriers society has wittingly or unwittingly placed as roadblocks to a better life for them, and, as we have already noted, by way of providing spirituality, and spiritual practices and beliefs in healthcare for patients with chronic disabilities.

However, there are cures for all disabilities but they are 'out of this world', already discussed.

Conclusion

Disability is characteristic of our dysfunctional world. It may be mild or severe, and has many causes, whether nature, man, Satan or God. God may inflict disability to provide an opportunity to display His pleasure or to administer punishment.

Only God can cure the disabled.

It's a responsibility of the Christian Community to care for the disabled, rather than consign them to the fringe, for the Lord will punish those who mistreat and disparage them. Instead, they should be on the top of our invitation list for hospitality and fellowship. They must feel that they belong to all of us.

As Mahatma Gandhi put it so well: 'The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members'.

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