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To cite this article: Simon Masiga & Helen Nambalirwa Nkabala (22 Oct 2024): The Biblical Discourse of Disability and Implications for Religious Communities in Uganda: A Hermeneutical Review, Journal of Disability & Religion, DOI: [10.1080/23312521.2024.2412768](https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2024.2412768)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2024.2412768>



Published online: 22 Oct 2024.



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The Biblical Discourse of Disability and Implications for Religious Communities in Uganda: A Hermeneutical Review

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ABSTRACT

This hermeneutical review of biblical discourse of disability seeks to promote inclusive religious participation. Although the Bible is a religious book among Ugandans, there is limited discussion on how it can enhance social and religious participation of persons with disabilities. The review revealed that disability representation, human dignity and essence, divine human integrity and social empowerment dominate biblical discussion of disability. So, the article asserts that disability interpretation and representation shapes the construction of social identities and enhances inclusive participation for persons with disability. Therefore, an African disability hermeneutics is recommended to transform religious teachings and theological interpretations of disability.

KEYWORDS

biblical discourse;
disability interpretation;
hermeneutics; inclusion;
religious participation

Introduction

The prevalence of disability in Uganda is estimated at 13%, with 2.5 million children living with a disability (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2019; UNICEF, 2022). In Uganda, the Persons with Disabilities Act (2019) corresponds with the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disability (CRPD) to define disability as “a substantial functional limitation of daily life activities caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment and environmental barriers resulting in limited participation in society on equal basis with others” (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2018, p. 5). The distinction between impairment and disability is embedded in the historical dimension of how social environments shape the identity of persons with disability integrated within society. Scholars have argued that persons with disability experience diverse challenges, due to the religious and cultural beliefs regarding disability (Mukushi et al., 2019; Nyangweso, 2021).

Historically, the challenges to disability inclusion in Africa are “Indigenous, colonial and post-colonial stigmas, legacies of armed conflicts and vast rural areas with epidemiological risks” (Falola & Hamel, 2021, p. 1). According to the World Report on Disability and other studies carried out in Namibia, Kenya, and Nigeria, the common challenges associated with disability are lack of equal access to health care, education, and employment opportunity, discrimination, stigma, neglect, subjection to violence, abuse, and prejudice (Bunning et al., 2017; Chibaya et al., 2022). Such challenges have made disability attract great attention both globally and locally.

In Uganda, disability remains a significant challenge, mainly due to negative attitudes that are fueled by ignorance, poverty, harmful cultural beliefs, misconceptions and customs, among others, about the causes and nature of disability (Aley, 2016; Mkabile et al., 2021; NUDIPU, 2014). As a result, disability has historically persisted as a barrier to social growth and development and a high prevalence of exclusion for people with disabilities, even from religious activities. Persons with disability have also continued to face stigma and discrimination that consequently limits their participation in all aspects of life (NUDIPU, 2014; Ojok & Musenze, 2019; Uganda Disability Situational Analysis, 2020).

To improve the religious participation of people with disability, an understanding of how various interpretations of the Bible regarding disability is required. Recent studies have not entirely tackled how the biblical discourse of disability can be resourceful for religious communities to promote inclusive religious participation. So, this article discusses how religious perceptions and practices can be transformed to shape how communities interact with people with disability. The article mainly reviews biblical scholarship works that focus on disability discourse to explore the interpretations and representation of disability.

Theoretical perspective

Previous studies have not discussed how the biblical discourse of disability can promote disability inclusion in religious communities. Two reviews that have looked at disability in the Hebrew Bible have focused on critical issues and methodological approaches in biblical scholarship of disability studies (Jones, 2021; Melcher, 2019). Jones (2021) highlights major works in the discipline of disability and biblical studies, and makes suggestions she consider relevant for further research in the discipline. As part of the contribution to what Jones (2021) raises, the current study provides themes that can inform a disability theological framework that influences interpretation and representation of disability, which are cross-cutting issues among biblical scholars of disability studies (Melcher, 2017; Moss &

Schipper, 2011; Olyan, 2008 as cited in Jones, 2021). Melcher (2019) makes a survey of disability in the Hebrew bible to provide literally ground for engaging disability studies from a biblical perspective. She focuses on methodological issues, and so as part of its novelty, the current study suggests an African disability hermeneutics as an approach to shape the religious and theological interpretations of disability in the Global South. Other studies have focused on barriers that limit the participation of persons with disability, both in social life and political affairs and culturally contextualized interventions (Huus et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2018; Nalugya et al., 2023).

In this hermeneutical review, the biblical interpretations of disability are examined using the liberation theology of disability of Eiesland (1994) to identify inclusive discourse narratives that can aid in removing the religious and cultural barriers to disability inclusion. Although bible interpretations are often used to prohibit people with disabilities from participating in religious activities (Mabula, 2021; Sande, 2019), Eiesland's liberation theology of disability describes the dimensions that can be used to promote inclusion. This model is a practical theological framework that the church can employ to assess the practices of a religious discourse of disability inclusion. Kamba (2013) recounts that, "people with disability belong to normal life" (p. 10). This make it necessary to socially empower people with disability in order to provide "justice, self-confidence, and real identity as being created in the image of God" (Eiesland, 1994 as cited in Kamba, 2013, p. 10). So, the article asserts that the interpretations of biblical texts on disability should shape the religious perceptions and practices to promote inclusive participation of people with disability.

Methodology

A hermeneutic review methodology was followed and considered to provide an adequate understanding of texts and interpretation of the meanings accorded to texts by the authors (Gadamer, 1976, as cited in Boell & Dubravka, 2014). The biblical scholarship of disability is reviewed to determine how to enhance the religious participation of persons with disability in Uganda. The review was guided by the following research question: "In what ways can the biblical discourse and religious interpretation of disability enhance inclusive participation for persons with disabilities in religious communities?"

An integrative literature search based on "the search and acquisition hermeneutic circle" (Boell & Dubravka, 2014, p. 263) was employed, Based on the framework of liberation theology of disability of Eiesland (1994), the search strategy included vital concepts such as the representation of disability in the Hebrew Bible, the Bible and Disability, Disability in the

Old Testament, and religious interpretation of disability inclusion. Studies that contained qualitative research on the Bible and disability, focused on disability representation in the Hebrew Bible, and discussed the biblical interpretation of disability were included in the review. Nine studies were reviewed and the included three books, two commentaries in a collection, two essays, and two journal articles. Using interpretative hermeneutical analysis, narratives concerning disability in the Hebrew Bible cutting across the selected books, commentaries, essays and articles, were identified to form the common units of analysis. This was done by understanding the whole text; understanding the text in part; and the original textual meaning (Cercel et al., 2015; Saputra et al., 2021). Four textual themes were identified and categorized based on the biblical interpretation of disability in the Hebrew Bible.

The biblical discourse of disability in the Hebrew Bible

This section presents the results of the review on the biblical scholarship of disability in the Hebrew Bible. The broader themes were categorized regarding biblical discourse of disability include: disability representation, which focuses on how authors and scholars have described presentation of disability in the Hebrew Bible; human dignity and essence, which reveals the biblical dignity accorded to human beings, the identity of humanity in creation as spiritual beings that live meaningfully in society; divine human integrity, which entails the respect that the Hebrew Bible instructs to be given to persons with disability; and finally social empowerment that expresses the social status for persons with disability. The results presented indicate how the above themes can enhance social and religious participation of persons with disability.

Representation of disability in the Hebrew Bible

This theme explains the ways disability is represented in the Hebrew Bible. Four studies indicate that disability in the Hebrew Bible is presented in aspects of social identity, disability language and imagery. The works of Belser (2019) and Bengtsson (2014) present discussions on how disability is represented in dimensions of perfect bodies, bodily normality and perception of impairment. At the same time, Melcher (2017) and Schipper (2006) discuss how disability language and imagery are used to establish social standards for recognition and inclusion. The results from the studies reveal that Hebrew Bible does not have concrete terms to mean disability or categorize impairments but instead borrows disability concepts, such as defects (מִזְמָ, *mum*), blemish (מִזְמָ, *mum* or *momos*) and impurity (מִמָּ, *amam*).

mamm) of ancient Near East, to represent disability and impairment (Belsler, 2019; Raphael, 2008; Schipper, 2006).

The concepts of defect, blemish and impurity create a contestation between disability, power, holiness and election (Raphael, 2008), which limits one from full participation in religious activities. Raphael recounts that the restrictions of how humans interact with God and God to them make a representation of disability very complex. She further shows that the writers employ disability in the genres of the Hebrew literature to articulate the nature of God as powerful, holy and distinct from human beings, who are presented as disabled and rhetorically weak. This constitutes the notion of divine–human communication in biblical literature.

Human dignity and essence

The theme of the discourse of human dignity and the essence of being human for persons with disability has been extensively studied by many scholars. However, for this article, we concentrate on the works by Stewart (2017) and Olyan (2011). Their discourse on disability argues against stigmatization, which reduces persons with disability to worthless individuals. Olyan's work shows that the attribution of physical disability to icons devalues persons living with a disability. The essay contests the biblical idol polemics as stigmatizing in nature due to the language used to describe idolatry. Olyan (2011) reviews biblical texts, such as Jere. 8:19, 5:19; Ezek. 36:25 and Psa. 38:4, that do not contend with the cult of idolatry to indicate that the notion of writing adopted by the biblical writers present a stigma against people with disability. The results of the textual analysis indicate that the ascriptions of physical disability limit inclusion and stigmatization within the biblical context should be removed (Olyan, 2011). Stewart (2017) mentions the fact that disability is part of creation, and so all persons with disability should be treated with dignity because of the essence of humankind created by God. In his analysis of the narrative of God and Moses, which he thematizes as “The ‘Disabled’ Body: The Bodies of God and Moses,” Stewart recounts how disability does not reduce one's essence as created by God, who gives human bodies (dis)abilities (2017, pp. 58, 65). Both studies are recounted for divine perspective to be used for underscoring humankind's dignity and essence, whether able-bodied or not.

Divine human integrity

The theme of divine–human integrity is based on the notion of humanity as created in the Image and likeness of God to exist for His glory. The commentaries on disability in the Bible by Stewart (2017) and Melcher

(2017) and the essay by Baden (2011) discuss the theme of divine–human integrity. Stewart (2017) indicates human integrity as instructed in Deut. 27:18, “A person who is blind should not be misdirected.” Stewart asserts that Deuteronomy does not speak concerning the Hero of the Torah, Moses, as disabled. He is treated with integrity in the Pentateuch. Equally, Lev. 19:14 prohibited the practices of orally attacking persons with specific disabilities, such as “the deaf and the blind” (Bengtsson, 2014). Every created member of humankind has the potential to participate in social and religious activities. In the Hebrew Bible, we are presented with examples of the individuals enabled for divine service (Lev. 8, and Num. 6:2–21 in Stewart, 2017, p. 63).

Melcher (2017) also comments on human integrity by emphasizing human value, limits, and worth. In her essay, Baden (2011) reveals that human fertility is at the will of divine beings–universal blessings for all women. Thus, to Baden, representing disability as a curse limits the integrity that humankind deserves, and the notion of biblical Normalcy and rhetoric of divine implications challenge disability inclusion (2011, p. 14). The essence of being human involves recognizing the limits of humankind and the potential embedded in the created nature of humanity (Eccl. 2:14, Melcher, 2017). Any social stigma subjected to persons with disability should be addressed by considering the human integrity of humankind in creation and the human limitations in death. No one holds a unique position, with or without disability, as they live or experience disability (Cf. Eccl. 12:7, Melcher, 2017, p. 172). Referring to Job’s narrative, Melcher (2017) argues that “the person with a disability can be fully worthy and fully righteous as well as favored by God” (p. 174). This provides lessons for transforming views that consider disability as punishment for wrongdoing.

Social empowerment

According to Bengtsson (2014) and Melcher (2017), there is a need for social empowerment for persons with disability. The authors recount that social perspectives of disability depend on social expectations. Thus, social empowerment implies that social and political rhetoric adopt disability as a criterion for empowering those struggling socially (Bengtsson, 2014). Concerning Lev. 25:35, Deut. 23:19–20; and Exod. 22:25, Bengtsson indicates that the Jewish community recognized the social empowerment required for persons with a disability. They assisted the blind and the lame in social affairs (Job 29:15 as cited in Bengtsson, 2014, p. 285). Persons with disability are socially empowered when “disability becomes the domain for others to prove themselves worthy of God’s recognition” (2014, p. 286). The existing social hierarchy that divides the superlative

valued bodies and ordinary and devalued bodies that deviate from the set standards (Melcher, 2017) is a critical framework for understanding how disability is conceived in biblical cultural contexts. So, the way the community conceives cultural embodiment and the role of disability within that conception is relevant to the promotion of social empowerment (Melcher, 2017).

Implications of the biblical discourse of disability

The review's outcome demonstrates explicit discussions on the biblical discourse of the disability phenomenon. The studies reveal scholarly interpretations of disability in the Hebrew Bible and argue that disability is represented in perfection and normalcy, restrictions and privileges, social identity and power, and human integrity. The findings show that the language adopted to represent disability in the Hebrew Bible is essential to efforts toward inclusive religious participation. Disability perception is directly associated with participation privileges, and the presentation of disability impacts inclusive participation in society for people with disability.

In accordance with the framework of Eiesland's liberation theology of disability, it is evident that religious interpretations and socio-cultural standards present barriers to inclusive religious participation for people with disabilities. Understanding the religious perceptions and social identities regarding disability is necessary for removing harmful practices. The findings further indicate that disability should be a criterion and category for interpreting the Bible on disability issues. The themes of human dignity and essence and divine human integrity are directly associated with transforming the community approaches to disability inclusion (Belser, 2019). According to the review, the Jewish community's priestly rituals and social expectations provided the basis for how disability is approached and interpreted in the Hebrew Bible (Belser, 2019; Bengtsson, 2014). So, the way disability is interpreted must be done for inclusive participation.

Moreover, likewise, social empowerment and disability representation are linked to social identity and restoration of the social status for persons with disability. The debate on disability representations rotates around the discourse of perfection and purity. Creating a standard system of service leaves power dynamics in place that categorize disabled bodies as inferior and defective (Belser, 2019). In my view, creating the borderline of Normalcy and superiority has limited many people with disability not to participate in religious activities. In addition, representing disability and impairment as defects (מזמ, *mum*), blemishes (מזמ, *mum* or *momos*) and impurity (ממם, *mamm*) also limits one from full participation in religious activities (Schipper, 2006; Stewart, 2005 as cited in Raphael (2008) and

Belser (2019)). Similarly, Abram (2007) recounts that disability in the Hebrew bible was categorized based on temple service. Abram asserts that the priests were required to have perfect bodies-without blemish to create a safe interface between the earth and the heaven (2007, p. 127).

Furthermore, the language representing disability is an essential dimension of the campaign toward inclusive religious participation for people with disability. The studies recounted that the language of disability representation should be inclusive and less harsh to promote religious and social participation (Belser, 2019; Olyan, 2011; Raphael, 2008). Also, the tyranny of normality and the social hierarchies of living must not be the standards for considering those with impairments. Moreover, in light of human integrity and social empowerment, it is essential to recognize the limits of humankind and the potential embedded in the created nature of humanity. So, social hierarchies and existing standards of separating able-bodied and disabled are irrelevant since humanity is limited (Eccl. 2:14 as cited in Melcher, 2017). Instead, we need to recognize the social and spiritual value of persons with disability. This is supported by the study by Melinda et al. (2023), which acknowledges that religious perceptions and recognition of disability can positively impact the acceptance and inclusion of persons with disability.

In addition to language, scholars have recounted that the Hebrew bible uses disability imagery and figures to represent often more complex things (Avalos, 1995; Mitchell & Synder, 1995 as cited in Raphael (2008) and Schipper (2006)). Moreover, using disability-related imagery, narratives create social challenges, making bodies with disability serve as social inadequacies. Disability has therefore been seen as a hindrance to service at the altar (Belser, 2019). However, seeing disability as a limitation confirms that physical appearance is essential in communicating holiness in the context of divine service (Belser, 2019). One can argue, based on Lev 21:16–24, that the Jewish community has defined the qualities that idealized humans share with God.

The findings of the review correspond interestingly with a study by Trecartin et al. (2021), who argued that religious communities should be places of spiritual inclusion for persons with disability, since disability does not lessen the right of people to contribute to society; Gosbell (2018) who discusses how societal expectation of Normalcy socially constructs disability phenomenon and dictates who is considered worth human, disabled or deviant; Moss and Schipper (2011) who revealed that the socio-cultural construction of disability as a non-normative category challenges human integrity and social inclusion; and finally, Creamer (2009) who argued for human respect and dignity toward others, since all humanity is created with limits and so need each other.

Religion and disability inclusion presents a critical debate in African communities. Scholars have reviewed biblical and religious conceptions of disability and indicated that the identity of people with disability is religiously shaped by the community's cultural norms, rituals and rites. This review's findings can be used to shape society's perceptions and the debates on inclusive development for persons with disability. Since the problem of living with a disability spans the whole social and spiritual dimensions of life, I argue for a religious understanding of the essence of being human. It is also essential to note that society and its religious beliefs can directly influence a person's life narrative regarding disability.

Religious leaders, community leaders, academics and researchers who seek to promote inclusive social and religious participation will find the results of this review relevant in several ways. First, the review highlights that religious interpretations of disability can be used to enhance disability inclusion by focusing on human dignity, social identity, human integrity in creation, and the essence of being human to explain the disability phenomenon. Second, it emphasizes promoting inclusive and less harmful disability language. The social service agencies, academics and researchers need to evaluate how disability language has affected social and religious inclusion.

Furthermore, finally, the review indicated the need to transform perceptions, practices, and cultural norms regarding disability. This implies that religious leaders need to adopt a theology and hermeneutics that can help them remove social and cultural barriers to disability inclusion. Although the nature of the study challenges suggestions for policy changes, the issues of disability language, social stigma, and inclusive religious participation are essential concerns for policy consideration.

A significant implication of this hermeneutical review is that considering the biblical discourse of disability about themes of disability representation, human dignity and essence, divine-human integrity, and social empowerment can help to liberate scholars from a hermeneutics that objectifies the people with disability and make them target for textual application. This work suggests that the new direction for disability research in Africa should be interdisciplinary, applying a hermeneutics that is inclusive and informed by the religious perceptions of disability based on the Hebrew Bible's religious texts. The findings are essential in that most works that have considered the Bible and disability have been esteemed in the Western context, and little has been emphasized in African communities. So, future research in disability and religion should consider an African religious discourse of disability based on African disability hermeneutics.

Conclusion

Disability representation essentially shapes the interpretation and discussion on reconstructing disability images within African societies. This hermeneutical review is the first of its kind in disability and religious research in the African context. The review outcomes indicate that considering the biblical and religious interpretation of disability is the basis for developing religious inclusion. The findings reveal that human dignity and essence is a critical dimension for addressing social stigma resulting from attributing disability to human worthlessness. Findings call for divine-human integrity and social empowerment to promote human values, divine potential and human worth for people with disability. This, in particular, requires a response to the rhetoric of biblical Normalcy that can challenge disability inclusion.

Furthermore, it is revealed in this study that the language representing disability should promote inclusive social identity and a proper image of persons with disability. This can be done by avoiding the rhetoric of perfection, holiness, power, and social standards when referring to the social and religious participation of persons with disability. The significant implication for research is in adopting an African religious hermeneutics that can aid in removing social and cultural barriers to disability inclusion. Since previous studies had not discussed how the biblical discourse of disability could be used to promote disability inclusion in religious communities, this review is intended for that purpose.

Acknowledgments

The Gerda Henkel Stiftung Foundation and the fellowship coordination office at College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University are appreciated enormously for their financial support and logistics. The mentorship of Dr. Veneranda Mbabazi, the Head of Department, Religion and Peace Studies, Makerere University is greatly appreciated. The Duke Center of Jewish Studies, at Duke university is much appreciated for the library research fellowship that enabled accessibility to resources. And finally, the 2021 Cohort team members and mentors are also appreciated for academic, moral and intellectual support.

Disclosure statement

This article is part of a research study of a PhD fellowship under Gerda Henkel Stiftung Foundation tenable in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Makerere University. The authors declare no competing interests in the writing of this article. The corresponding author (Masiga) is a PhD fellow writing his thesis under the promotion and mentorship of Assoc. Prof., Helen N.Nkabala herein as second author.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and the materials referenced.

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