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## **BREAKING THE STAIRS, ASCENDING THE SLOPE: ENABLING TEXTS**

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### **Abstract**

Disability studies have received a new impetus in the world arena of academia, augmented by the proliferation of social media and technology. Empathy and inclusiveness are concepts and approaches that have made major inroads into the sequestered world of Disability Studies. However as we attempt to escalate the various barriers that still exist and aspire to move forward in this field in leaps and bounds it is important to pause and reflect on the perspectives, inspiration and strength offered to us by significant literary texts that form the foundation of a large body of thought and the basis of western civilization.

**Keywords:** Disability, Disability Studies, Alienation, Bible as a Literary text,

Stairs are often ways to a means, a structure that bridges the gap. These inviting and innocuous structures do not garner a second glance by many as they are considered merely as means to reach other levels. The presence of these universal structures is ubiquitous no doubt but they are not always uniform or homogeneous in their appearance. They maybe sweepingly grandiose in some cases or plain and unpretentious in others, awe inspiring in some or merely functional in some places. In literary texts stairs are commonly viewed as symbols of ascension or rather transition from one level to an another. But these seemingly pedestrian stairs can also stand as traumatic symbol of pain, agony and alienation to many. To some these stairs stand as a testimony to the horrors and pain of disability that are not easily communicated or shared effortlessly. The seemingly banal stairs are just one distressing example among many other.

The challenges that disabled people encounter can be incredibly alienating resulting in a creation of an isolated world that they inhabit invisibly and suffer in silently. But what is intriguing is to note that this silent suffering does not characterize all disabled people. There are some who use the very disability that can isolate and hold them back as a spring board to great success. In human history we are can witness many examples of the triumph of the human spirit where the disabled have surmounted their disabilities to reach even greater heights than the physically able. Disability is a challenge that some view as a restrictive cage but then there are some that use their disability as a catalyst to help them achieve great heights. They have tackled the stairs and come up victoriously ascending and emerging as beacons of hope to

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many. In essence one important aspect that aids them in this is their perspective and attitude toward disability. This makes the all important difference and helps them create a paradigm shift in their lives. There are many triggers that can change a person's perspective and literary texts are undoubtedly one of them. There are numerous examples that are a testimony to the power of the word. Texts have the power to motivate and inspire people with their words. These enabling texts are like a catalyst that hold within them enormous power. Enabling Texts especially scriptural texts can be that steady rock that the disabled need to stand on, to hold on to and clamber to greater heights.

This academic paper attempts to delve into the literary text of the Bible hoping to garner and present the biblical perspective on Disabilities and analyse it in a way that can provide much needed hope, an attitudinal shift perhaps and a better understanding of how the Bible views disabled people. Christianity is the largest religion in the world with 2.4 billion followers in total (Waltner) and the Bible is considered as a sacred text by a minimum of more than "2.3 billion people in the world" which amounts to about 30% of the world's population (Pewresearch.org). The Bible also has a time honored tradition of being a literary classic that has stood the test of time, maintaining its record of being the bestselling book of all time (Guinness). It was and still continues to be a sacred text for many communities and continents for many centuries and holds sway over the beliefs and foundations of many countries and nation hoods. Thus it seems an extremely pertinent and viable academic pursuit in a world where about about "15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, of whom 2-4% experience significant difficulties in functioning"(Disability-WHO) This paper hopes to analyse biblical perspectives on disability with the hope that it would provide us with a macroscopic view of a few enabled characters to see how they channeled their pain and overcame their handicaps to create a legacy that can continue to inspire others today.

### Disability in the Old Testament

A superficial reading of the Old Testament can provide one with a misinformed and misunderstood opinion of how the disabled are viewed. Disability in the Old Testament is often coloured by a stigma that is actually born from a popular misunderstanding disability and sin. Disability is generally viewed as an defect and a certain negative perspective given to it by the dark shadow cast by this oft quoted but easily misunderstood verse.

'For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to the LORD by fire. He has a

defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food; yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy. (Leviticus 16:21-23)

At first reading, this many seem too harsh to a modern reader, but what we very often miss seeing here is that, this is a symbolic expression of an attempt sorely inadequate nevertheless, to serve a Perfect God with a symbolic yet visible perfection that is possible and viable within the constraints of the corporal. God wants to make the perfection of the sanctuary so symbolically and visibly clear that he preempts the viewing and witnessing public to establish a mind-body correlation between the deformity of the physical body and the deformity of the sanctuary. Thus there is a symbolic correlation between the sought perfection of those who approach the sanctuary and the perfection of the sanctuary itself which is again a reflection of God's own perfection. The important clause here that we need to focus on is 'holy'. God is holy and perfect hence requires perfection in worship. Since perfection is impossible a symbolic attempt is made in the public worship service with one priest representing the entire community. This does not gainsay the fact that God embraces the disabled wholeheartedly and loves them tenderly and is moved with compassion for the disabled. There are numerous instances to demonstrate and confirm this in the very same Bible itself so an understanding of this action of approaching priests as a symbolic gesture and representative is a correct interpretation of this passage keeping in mind that beauty is a relative and human construct. Who is to opine what the divine finds as beautiful? Maybe this was established so only for the eyes of the people. In fact some of the most impressive figures in the Old Testament that God personally reached out to carry out his wish were people who suffer from some form of physical impairment.

God does not discriminate against the disabled we see this proved again and again in the Old Testament. Issac was blind but became the patriarch of the nation of Israel, Jacob had a limp yet it was through him that the nation was established, Ehud had a shriveled hand but was a very victorious leader with numerous military achievements, Moses stuttered but still it was he who delivered the Jews from their years of bondage leading them to the promised land. This proves the fact that their disability did not prevent God from using them mightily, and also points us to an important fact. God values disabled people just as he values able bodied people if not more as we see in in several verses. Moses spoke to God as a friend to friend "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." Exodus 3:11. What God looks for is a heart that is turned to him and a attitude that is right. Thus the Bible rightly paints a picture of a God who suffers and struggles with them in their pain and distress. We see this inclusive empathetic all embracing view authenticated in numerous times in the same Bible. We see God's heart going out to them and feeling their pain and walking with them in their trails of trial. In fact we see in the book of Isaiah *In all their distress he too was distressed.*

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(Isaiah 63:9, NIV) This is a very personal view of a very personal God. We also see his public admonishment against taking advantage of their disabilities as we see stated in Leviticus 19:14 “Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD and another instance in Deuteronomy 27:18-19, Cursed is anyone who leads a blind person astray on the road.’ And all the people will reply, ‘Amen.’ invoking a communal response reiterating this empathy and inclusion of the disabled among the public.

### Disability in the New Testament

An analysis of the New Testament section of the Bible also reveals that the disabled are not considered as any different than in the Old Testament. In fact there are numerous instances in the New Testament where the disabled meet Christ and are transformed. There are also instances of his disciples healing the disabled. But before one rushes to draw parables between healing and salvation we also realize that disabilities are not viewed just as something that has to be eradicated in fact it is viewed as something that helps you become a better version of oneself, serving as positive functions in realizing one's potential. Disability is also viewed as a symbol that can display God's power as we see in the Gospel according to John. “He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” and Jesus heals him immediately after this negating the opinion that it is sin or karma that causes disability. (John 9:1-2) He thus becomes a powerful symbol of the power and glory of God. The disabled can magnify God's grace in a resounding and visible manner tremendously more so than the able that is also in need of transformation.

The texts reveal several instances of Christ deferring his path, crossing over and breaking boundaries to meet with and heal the disabled, he meets with them at the point of their need and they come away healed and transformed. There are numerous instances of Christ healing the blind, the handicapped, the paralyzed, the deaf and the dumb. The New Testament details many instances of disabled people meeting Jesus to get healed but it is important to know that all these people were the ones who sought to be healed. One common trend we view in all meetings is the willingness in the disabled to meet with Christ. In fact we see Jesus asking the disabled directly, “Do you want to be healed?” in John 5:6. It is a straightforward admission of the disabled and their acknowledgement for willingness for transformation. In the text of the New Testament is revealed a Christ who “struggled for Justice, reconciliation and self-determination of the disabled. Liberation ethics says God provides strength to struggle, grace to realize and Christ as an example of one who struggles for humanness along with the persons with disability.”(Pradeep, Disabled God)

Thus there is no question of how disability is viewed in the Bible, an investigation into both the Old Testament and New Testament reveal the recurring theme of inclusion and empathy when we consider the disabled. Unfortunately physically disabled people are often viewed not

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as persons but as handicapped persons, with the disability being viewed as an impairment as an identity. People are conditioned to identify the disabled and categorize the disability first and their person hood later, societies find it hard to see them for who they really are, while Governments view them as a statistic. Individuals should not be known by their disabilities because they are simply put, so much more. In a refreshing new finding we can perceive that even a cursory reading of the New Testament texts of Christ dealing with the disabled people however we are witness to a completely different perspective. Christ repeatedly comes face to face with many a disabled person and invariably addresses the individual as a person first and the disability later.

C.S Lewis rightly says, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." which bring us to another aspect of disability that we witness in the texts of the Pauline epistles is the suffering through it and learning to live with it "Paul also writes about how his own personal infirmity, the thorn in the flesh he calls it, his weakness, which is a term for sickness in the ancient world, He says that this is a positive thing and that he's perfected in his weakness. So, even though we have this kind of overarching view of disability as negative and God is eliminating or curing that disability; we also have places where disability serves positive functions for Jesus, the disciples and by extension, the Christian communities"(Moss) Disability is here to stay. We have to find ways and means to make it immanently more inclusive "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, stop inviting only your friends, brothers, relatives, or rich neighbors. Otherwise, they may invite you in return and you would be repaid. Instead, when you give a banquet, make it your habit to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."Luke 14:12-14

This natural corollary to this is to debate the prospects available in the redemptive possibilities of suffering. Surely one conclusion would be that disability which causes immense pain that is non transferable brings us a lot closer to mechanisms of dealing and coping with the pain that is both physical and emotional, internal and external leading us to ways of spiritual transformation. This can eventually evolve to physical transformations too. It can create paths that lead us to God. The redemptive powers of suffering are increasingly gaining scientific approval as an esteemed psychologist states "dealing with this trauma is (was) a powerful spur for personal development. It wasn't just a question of learning to cope with or adjust to negative situations; they actually gained some significant benefits from them. In Tedeschi and Calhoun's terms, they experienced "positive life changes." They gained new inner strength and discovered skills and abilities they never knew they possessed. They became more confident and appreciative of life, particularly of the "small things" that they used to take for granted. They became more compassionate for the sufferings of others, and more comfortable with intimacy so that they had deeper and more satisfying relationships. One of the most common changes was that they developed a more philosophical spiritual attitude to life. In

Tedeschi words, their suffering led them to a "deeper level of awareness." Another persistent image that emerges from the new testament text is the universal symbol of Christianity a supremely enabled God - who is a physically suffering Christ on the cross, a symbol of sacrifice generating empathy and transformation - a disabled God.

Yes disability approached in the right way makes us stronger. It can create something beautiful, exquisite and unique. But arriving at this evolved space is not an overnight journey. People with disabilities struggle with it on a minute by minute trial. It is a journey of acceptance, it is a process that one undergoes to emerge and embrace not just ourselves but others too. The pain that you have gone through will birth a great sense of Resilience that can catapult you to great heights.

Today we live in a world where disability is increasingly being destigmatised however there are still miles to be traversed and many hurdles to be overcome even as Disability Studies gains a lot of ground around the world. It is indeed quite an archaic idea to "challenge the view of disability as an individual deficit or defect that can be remedied solely through medical intervention or rehabilitation by "experts" and other service providers. Rather, a program in Disability Studies should explore models and theories that examine social, political, cultural, and economic factors that define disability and help determine personal and collective responses to difference (Suzanne). Disability studies with a special sensitivity to the needs and sensibilities of the disabled people shows us the way forward, with an empathetic and insightful understanding of the what is needed, providing an hitherto missing progressive path that is also marked by foresight. It takes us ahead and also "highlights the experiences of disabled people in a world built for the nondisabled; philosophies of justice that speak directly to the interests of the disabled; and narratives and analyses of the experience of living with a disability and how that intersects with race, class, and gender." (Rice)

Disabled people who have managed to overcome the detraction and handicap of the disability are people who live not only for themselves. This brilliant minority function as inspiring symbols to the majority. Their lives are their message. The excruciating lives of disabled people who have learnt to overcome their hardships are brilliant and illuminating. Their lives are beautiful because they stand as a testimony to hope and inspiration. Behaviors and destructive attitudes towards disability need to change and more work needs to go into articulating an effective and Liberative Disability Theology that can then be effectively translated and expressed vocally through liberalize literature and highlighted and made manifest through Disability studies. The way forward is through the adopting of a vocal and active liberative literature that batters prejudices, shatters negative stereotypes capable of breaking the stairs and helping us all ascend the slope together.

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