

## Outline of the Doctoral Project

### Working Title

Disabilities and the Purpose Assigned to the Divinity: A Comparative Analysis of the “Theologies of Disability” in the Hebrew Bible and in Ancient Near East Religions.

### Brief description of the content of the intended doctoral project

The Hebrew Bible offers various representations of physical and mental disabilities (e.g., Lev 21:16–23; Deut 23,1–4; Isa 56,3–8), most of which stand in juxtaposition to the “normate” model of a (ideally male) human being. The deviation from such a normate model gives rise to stigmatization and marginalization strategies aimed to exclude the disabled from cultic settings and, in worst cases, from society altogether. Seen from another angle, the biblical attestations suggest that the representations of disabilities bear witness to the instrumentalization of a certain theological agenda, which promotes, and is endorsed by, a specific representation of God. The link between impairments and the depiction of the deity is not unique to the Israelite culture alone but can be found in the other Near East civilizations. Interestingly, the type of linkage differs significantly from culture to culture. Hence, the proposed research aims to study the roles that are attributed to God in the Ancient Israelite theological understanding of disability in comparison to the deities of the neighboring religions.

As expected, impairments are found in a plethora of different genres, whether inside the Hebrew Bible or in the literature of the neighboring cultures. The texts give different hints to how the role of the deity/deities is understood with respect to the disability as a means of punishment and to the creation, societal and cultic role, and/or marginalization of the disabled. My doctoral project will focus on main representations of the deity:

(1) *The punishing deity*. Texts that treat the violation of oaths and treaties associate the punishment for the infringement with the will of the gods or divine intervention. In the Hebrew Bible, mutilation is ordered by God in the law of retaliation (cf. Exod 21:22–27; Lev 24:17–22; Deut 19:16–22) and is mentioned in the case of war captives (cf. Judg 16:21). In Mesopotamian and Hittite treaties, the violating party is punished by the deity with recurring sets of disabilities (cf. Deut 27:27–29).

(2) *The disabling deity*. In the Hebrew Bible, God is said to have created disabilities (cf. Exod 4:11). Comparably, the Mesopotamian myth of Enki and Ninmah, which also offers an interesting list of impairments, ascribes the presence of the disabled to the creation by the gods; in turn, the gods also find a profession that the disabled can practice. In the older Mesopotamian diagnostic manual, every diagnosis is considered to be caused by an evil force, a god/goddess or by the abandonment of the worshipper to his/her fate (Job 1–2).

(3) *The protecting deity*. Unique to the Israelite and Egyptian culture is the protection of the disabled from mockery. The instruction of Amenemope states explicitly that persons with disabilities were not to be ridiculed as they were part of god’s creation (cf. Lev 19:14; Deut 27:18).

(4) *The worshipped deity*. The attestations often mention the disabled in cultic settings. In the Hittite culture, only those mutilated—but not the blind and the deaf—are considered impure and cannot enter the temple (cf. Deut 23:2, Engl. 1), an infraction of the proscription may cause the gods' anger. On the other hand, persons with congenital disabilities could well serve in cultic settings and were considered ritually pure. In Ancient Egypt, persons with impairments were not barred from priesthood (cf. Lev 21:16–23) and could hold any religious or public office: e.g., blind people performed as singers or musicians in religious event and dwarfs were highly regarded as servants in elite households. Interestingly, while some Egyptian and Assyrian kings suffered from significant disabilities, a disability in the Israelite society may have debarred a person from becoming a king (cf. Mephibosheth: 2 Sam 4:4; 9:1–13). In the Persian literature, the king embodies physical perfection and is never represented as disabled.

(5) *The disabled deity*. Finally, Unlike in Mesopotamian religion, pharaonic Egypt there is no record of infant exposure and disability was not considered a sign of divine retribution. This may be linked to variety of the Egyptian pantheon, which entailed deities such as the dwarf gods Bes and Ptah-Pataikoi. In the Book of Psalms, God is also said to be mute or deaf (e.g., cf. **הָרֵשׁ** in Ps 35:22; 39:13; 50:3; 83:2; 109:1), hence paralleled metaphorically to a disabled person. Conversely, none of the Hittite, Hurrian, or Luwian gods are disabled, although myths revolving around disabilities exist (e.g., when the Stormgod loses his eyes and heart in a battle with a dragon). This leads to different approaches toward the social inclusion or exclusion of persons with disabilities.