

## The two-sided coin – disability, normalcy and social categorization in the New Testament

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### ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of disability, normalcy and social categorization in relation to the New Testament. It discusses how disabilities ended up in elusive and contradictory categories where a number of various mechanisms and roles coincided and where different systems of logic converged. The scrutiny suggests that people with disabilities simultaneously were considered to be both a threat and an opportunity. The analysis illustrates how the interpretation of disability is a malleable phenomenon continually affected by changes within the cultural context.

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### Introduction

Disability is closely related to how a society is organized in terms of values and norms that shape the cultural framework in a given time. An intensified struggle has been undertaken by the disability movement and others to combat stigma and social injustice and to strengthen participation and human rights. According to Barton (1996), the social status of people with disabilities is something that stems from cultural images and notions of normalcy and deviance. These borders, as noted by Drake (1996), are more or less constructed by imposed values, beliefs and bodily ideals embedded in societies and communities. Indeed, the quest for normalcy has been identified as a crucial cultural trait and a vital component in the modernity project of the Western world (Foucault 1987; Hacking 1990; Davis 2013). Even though diversity has emerged as a new ideological core in our society, the 'older concept of normal', as Davis (2013) points out, 'still holds sway', since disability, unlike other forms of lifestyles and identities, is not understood in terms of free choice (6). Bodily difference has therefore emerged as a key component in our Western culture, as something special in need of attention. As noted by Mitchell and Snyder (2000), narratives have historically used disability and deviance as special features in the plot, something that has to be singled out and treated outside the ranks of the normal. One area where these issues of normality and deviance deserve attention is the religious domain, since it encompasses societal questions concerning values and norms in relation to disability.<sup>1</sup>

In the Western world, Christianity has had a huge impact on the social and cultural structures of society. One dimension of the Christian message is rooted in the idea of a spiritual kingdom in relation to the individual's striving for salvation. As stated by McKay, Hill, and Buckler (1996), it originally stressed a willingness to include people regardless of their social positions. But when it comes to disability, there may be an intriguing relationship, since religious scriptures touches upon the tension between the normal and the deviant body and the expected will of a divine power. Throughout history, the Christian church has sometimes contributed to marginalization and a negative view

of disabilities, even though it established systems of support (Barnes 1996; Yong 2011). Parallel to this, persons with disabilities 'are not always welcome participants' in religious settings (Eiesland 1994; Rose 1997, 396; Black 2006; Otieno 2009; Yong 2011; Reynolds 2012). Simultaneously, we are witnessing intensified activity among faith-based welfare organizations, which raises further questions regarding how religious values and norms come to influence NGOs and community work (Clarke 2006; Schuelka 2013). Voices are being raised regarding the necessity for social workers to engage more in religious dialogues with their clients, which also highlights various ethical concerns in this respect (Knitter 2010). For instance, the perception and depiction of certain groups in the religious scriptures and the categorizations these images underpin in relation to normalcy and deviance relate clearly to a cultural understanding of disability, including issues such as stigma and discrimination (Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper 2007).

How then is disability treated in the New Testament? For one thing, biblical scholars have emphasized the difference between the Old and the New Testament. According to Schipper (2007), disability in the Old Testament is foremost used for social commentary rather than being concerned with the lived experience of persons with disabilities. Schuelka (2013) claims that in the Old Testament there are passages that exclude people with disabilities from fully taking part in vital socio-cultural arrangements, while in the New Testament people with disabilities become important elements in showing God's glory and power. Stiker (2006) too stresses how the New Testament puts mankind in a new relationship with God that downplays the prohibitions of the Old Testament. The religious dimension takes a backseat to the ethical dimension in which persons with disabilities are more integrated and their dignity more recognized. In this respect, Stiker proclaims, 'The Gospels disturb, deconstruct, sow panic, and become a source of instability' (36).

As noted by several biblical researchers, disability plays an important role in these narratives, and people with disabilities are in various ways caught up in the tension between normalcy and deviance. One thing that has been highlighted is the moral dimension where disability is related to evil, sin, punishment and exorcism, which derives much from a culture that explained health issues with the activities of Gods and demons (Rose 1997; Covey 1998; Black 2006). Another critical aspect concerning the New Testament is that these narratives emphasize the incapacity and shortcomings of individuals with disabilities and that disability is either used as a metaphorical technique that signals ignorance and moral deficits, or as a marker that converts disability into various stereotypes (Covey 1998; Koosed and Schumm 2005; Schuelka 2013).

The issue of disability and the New Testament is a growing field within theology that touches upon contemporary religious and ethical practices and interpretations. Eiesland (1994) argues that the New Testament can be seen as an upgrading image of diversity, a call for solidarity and a stepping stone towards a liberating theology concerning disability and Christianity. Reynolds (2012), Creamer (2013) and Yong (2011) also make the case for the necessity of a more inclusive theology of disability that downplays ideas of normalcy – reflections that touch upon the different discourses that Brock (2012) discerns concerning Christian theology and its treatment of disability over time. In the activist discourse, Christian thinkers deal with the question of care and support. In the discourse of definition, thinkers raise questions concerning what constitutes human capacities, while in the existential discourse, discussions circle around humans' self-awareness and perceptions of others.

Even though the theological literature raises several interesting questions regarding disability, Christianity and the understanding of humanity, this article should not be seen as a theological reflection as such.<sup>2</sup> The ambition is rather to study these texts as historical sources and – from a cultural and anthropological perspective – to conduct a categorization analysis regarding how disability appears and is depicted in these kinds of stories. The objective of the article is to analyse and discuss narratives of the Gospels and Acts in the New Testament using normalcy and social categorization as analytical concepts. The analysis has been guided by the overall question: What kind of social categorizations concerning people with disabilities can be identified in these narratives, and how can they be understood from the tension between cultural ideas concerning normalcy and deviance?

## Analytical framework

Disability as a concept and a phenomenon can be understood from a multitude of models and perspectives (Thomas 2004). A dividing line runs between the medical and social models. In the medical or individual model, disability is linked to bodily deficits and functional limitations. It highlights the role of experts and the attempt to normalize and adjust a disability described as a personal tragedy (Rhodes et al. 2008; Oliver 2009). The social or collective model places disability on a more structural level, focusing on disabling environments and social barriers (Oliver 2009). According to the views of critical realism, disability touches upon a stratified reality and can hardly be reduced to either biology or society. Rather disability must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that occurs on different levels with different operating mechanisms (Danermark 2001).

The perspective in this study is foremost linked to the anthropological understanding of disability outlined by Whyte and Ingstad (1995). This approach means that the researcher strives to understand disability in relation to culture and shifting contexts and communities, using cross-cultural juxtapositions as a starting point. Thus, the analysis focuses on values, norms and movable positions in a certain context. For instance, the cultural approach to disability can be reconciled with the community model of disability discussed by Walls (2007). This model focuses on various prescribed and expected roles and the values attached to those roles, indicating that disability is hardly a static phenomenon but rather constantly intertwined with socio-cultural transformations and premises within a given context. In turn, these roles can be linked to perceptions of normalcy and social categorizations, since societies have a tendency to produce orders and classifications concerning disabilities (Kirkebaek 1999). But, as Drake (1996) concludes, normalcy is not a natural preordained state, but rather the 'acknowledgement of the values which have come to dominate in a particular community at any given time' (147). Simultaneously, these processes are born out of the various meanings of normality, which can be both a statistical phenomenon and put in relation to the normative values of a certain context. The concept leans to the normate theory, which states that normality is a socially constructed ideal and a cultural image of the complete human being, a template against which others can be measured (Wynn 2007; Bolt 2014). As Wynn (2007) points out, in relation to disability the 'further one moves from the normate image, the more powerless and marginalized one becomes' (92). Normalcy is therefore linked to social categorizations in which we construct and attach meaning to certain objects (Loseke 2003). Agents thus use social comparisons in order to shape in-groups and out-groups in terms of *us* and *them* (Jenkins 2008). Social categorization contains a prominence effect highlighting certain characteristics, as well as a masking effect that downplays other aspects. Finally, categorization entails a contagion effect where members of a category are presumed to be more or less identical (Santesson-Wilson 2001).

The study of normality and deviance in relation to disability has been limited to the so-called *narrative writings* of the New Testament, which include the Gospels and Acts (Ström 1974). The textual analysis has focused primarily on descriptions leaving, for instance, more allegoric interpretations of spiritual meanings out of the study. In order to address the research question, a thematic analysis has been conducted (Padgett 2008). In the first phase, the Gospels and Acts were read in their entirety with the ambition of becoming familiar with the style and content of the narratives. In the second phase, all chapters were subjected to repeated reading, with the attempt to identify passages/units that touch upon the functioning of the body and the tension between normalcy and deviance. The various units were, in the third phase, coded into categories addressing similar issues. Subsequently, in the fourth phase, these categories were turned into more abstract themes. However, interpretation cannot be reduced to a mechanical procedure, since the analytical process is an interaction between the text parts and the whole. It is also influenced by previous research and links to disability theory in terms of the cultural model of disability and its analytical concepts of normalcy and social categorizations. In order to validate the outcome of the constructed themes, the coding was thoroughly tested against the overall research question. One must also keep in mind that analysing an historical text such as the New Testament poses a number of challenges

and that interpretations are always affected by linguistic, temporal and cultural factors. There are always limitations regarding how much we can understand a certain text (Jeanrond 1991). For instance, disability did not exist as a general concept in the biblical context; the modern division between 'physical', 'mental' and 'spiritual' does not always fit into an ancient understanding of the body (Whyte and Ingstad 1995; Albl 2007). Furthermore, it is not possible to be certain what type of impairment or disability is actually being dealt with in the biblical narratives. Even so, the concept of disability is used here to denote a limitation of bodily function in relation to societal barriers that hinder activities and participation.

## Dimensions of categorization

### *The recipient of virtue*

An analysis of the stories in the New Testament reflects a categorization that was not uniform but held several dimensions, revealing different and opposing systems of logic. One important factor in relation to social categorization was the issue of economic independence and vulnerability. The narratives of the New Testament stress how the negative consequences of a disability were largely determined by a lack of economic resources, which, in turn, affected how the afflicted person was supposed to respond to others. According to these texts, a person with a disability was restricted to certain roles in the economic sphere and was forced to adapt to the expectations of others. Lacking financial resources due to disability relegated the individual to a system of charity and begging. In doing so, persons with disabilities were also caught up in a most contradictory category. For one thing, charity correlated with a Christian message that stresses the virtue of charity, highlighting the golden rule of solidarity and upgrading poverty as a phenomenon (Matt. 7:12, 19:21; Luke 6:20; Covey 1998; Stiker 2006).<sup>3</sup> Throughout the Gospels and Acts, the disabled beggar is thus presented as a natural feature in the socio-cultural landscape, and there is no attempt to oppose or condemn that form of support. On the contrary, members of the community could even assist persons with disabilities by trying to improve the outcome of begging (Acts 3:2). The institution of begging and the need for solidarity can be seen as a central extension of an important principle in the Old Testament (Bengtsson 2014).

At the same time the narratives reveal a mixed attitude towards the beggar as such. Even though they offered the donor the opportunity to do well in the eyes of God, the beggar could sometimes cause social unrest, as in the case of two blind men approaching Jesus in an improper manner (Matt. 20:31). According to Mitchell and Snyder (2000), historical texts have foremost produced negative images of persons with disabilities. This seems partly true when talking about the New Testament. Passages similar to the above indicate that a certain dramaturgy was attached to the institution of begging and that even an *outsider* was expected to act according to certain moral standards. But begging and vulnerability also triggered compassion. In other words, the giver and the receiver both had their given roles to play.

The correlation between persons with disabilities and a state of poverty that the New Testament seems to take for granted also meant that people with disabilities were easily struck from the list of those who could contribute economically. In Luke, Jesus advises someone who is about to arrange a feast to invite 'the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind'. In doing so, the organizer would 'be blessed', because the people with disabilities could not 'repay' the inviter (Luke 14:13–14). These passages are interesting since they suggest a mixed message: firstly, the idea that people with disabilities were to receive more recognition in social settings and that the interaction with people with disabilities should increase; secondly, the idea that these individuals had less to offer given the material factor, which, paradoxically, could grant them a higher status in a religious sense.

Worth noticing in this passage is also the fact that poverty seems to be limited to certain categories of disabilities; for instance, the connection between deafness and poverty is weakened. In other words, there are no consistent categorizations of disability in the material dimension. Being

identified and classified as blind or lame most clearly triggered connotations that spelled victim and *the recipient of virtue*. In doing so, the New Testament in some way promoted the image of the *legitimate beggar*, which indicates a shifting attitude towards begging and disability as phenomena. Being an accepted beggar seems to have required the right type of disability. Parallel to this, not all infirmities appear to have limited the ability to achieve material independence in the same way.

Disability thus created a narrative bridge between scarce economic resources and social deviance, a link that has survived into contemporary society (Bolt 2014). The perceived relationship between blindness and begging is therefore grounded in a culturally and historically constructed character. Indeed, important traits of the construction of the poor and the disabled can be traced to these biblical narratives. According to Rose (1997), these images also engulf people with disabilities in a sense of pity which stresses the tragic status of disability and to some extent turns the individuals into projects upon which others may exercise mercy. In one sense, persons with disabilities are depicted as inactive and dependent on others. They seem incapable of forming functioning communities of interest, as in the parable saying: 'Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?' (Luke 6:39). Simultaneously, as noted by Yong (2011), persons with disabilities were not presented as 'entirely passive', since they are actively involved in begging and demanding attention (74).

Thus, the narratives underline the complexity and contradictions associated with the categorizations of people with disabilities in the New Testament. The idea that people with disabilities were an economic threat is weakened by religious commitments that downplayed the material dimension of life. The focus for this act of solidarity seems to have been on the giver rather than the receiver (e.g. Luke 6:38). In a way, persons with disabilities became a necessary category for the givers' forward-looking investments with their embedded heavenly rewards. This reasoning can also be linked to Walls' (2007) community model of disability in which the individual is valued in relation to functions and socially prescribed tasks. In this case, it is interesting to note that a disability that could affect a treasured norm such as the capacity for work could be parried with other counter-mechanisms within the religious system, which makes the question of normalcy more complicated in the biblical context. According to Walls (2007), persons with disabilities can be given important roles despite their impairments, since various capacities in certain areas could compensate for functional deficits. The Gospels, on the other hand, indicate how vital roles did not necessarily spring from the ability to perform activities. In the case of receiving virtue, the valued role seems to be grounded in bodily deviance as such. In doing so, the construction of the biblical narratives strengthened the image of the *normal disabled beggar*, an image that still persists (Bolt 2014).

Given the material factors these depictions thus highlight, a crucial phenomenon that emerges within the New Testament, namely the tension between disability as being both a threat and an opportunity. On the one hand, not being able to support oneself caused societal unrest and disturbance. On the other hand, this exposure presented opportunities concerning ethical actions, which gave a person with a disability a rather mixed, and perhaps confusing, role within the community.

### *The tocsin*

This tension can also be found in other aspects of disability in the New Testament; social categorization was also shaped within a broader story that highlighted the struggle between good and evil. In that sense, categorizations surrounding disability also touched upon explanatory models concerning the aetiology and origins of disability. Episodes and narratives in the Gospels are frequently engaged in trying to understand and explain why a certain disposition came to be, and disability is inexorably interlaced in a wider metastory. In general, disability is something that has been inflicted upon man due to external forces that in some way have besieged the body (Matt. 9:33, 12:22, 17:18; Mark 5:2–13). Therefore, regaining the functioning of the body is in many cases about the removal of this negative force. The narratives usually follows the same dramaturgy, where the healer recognizes the suffering caused by possession by the demon and casts it out, thereby erasing the disability and restoring the functioning of the body. By moving people with disabilities closer to the world of

demons, bodily deviance as a category was more clearly linked to a force that was described as something that stood in opposition to something good (John 10:21; Luke 11:20, 13:16). This philosophy also carried a wider range of categorization than did the category of beggars, since the idea of demons as an explanatory model is not restricted to the blind and the lame but rather embraces a broader variety of disabilities.

Ideas about demons also meant that people with disabilities were placed in a difficult prescribed category where the tension between threat and opportunity seems constantly present. What makes disability an elusive category in this respect is the fact that these descriptions of possession provide no uniform or choral explanation in this respect, which also gives an unclear image of people with disabilities and how their difficulties should be met. For instance, looking at disability from the perspective of demons suggests that disabilities were not judged and perceived in the same way. The most prominent story when it comes to disability and demons is the story about the demon-possessed man living among the tombs (Mark 5:2–13). The man is portrayed as someone with deviant behaviour that caused disturbances in the community. According to Toensing (2007), this story supports the notion that mental illness is perceived as something unclean and alien from the pure human, a perception that further nourished processes of marginalization. The negative attitudes towards this deviant behaviour are reinforced by the fact that the isolated man was placed within Gentile territory and surrounded by tombs and pigs, all of which were unclean symbols in the biblical context. This character thus also turned mental deviance into an unclean phenomenon that had to be isolated from the rest of the community. The fact that the man had been repeatedly tied up, and that the people could not ‘tame him’ (Mark 5:4), suggests that mental illness moved the individual further from the normate than did other forms of disabilities. Worth noting is also the fact that other disabilities appear in the middle of the crowd, where the community even tries to assist the individual, while mental illnesses seems more associated with loneliness and isolation. Another characteristic that moves mental deviance even further away from the normate is the fact that, unlike blindness or deafness, it is not caused by a single demon, but that it harbours a multitude of evil demons. Yet another point that differentiates this phenomenon from other disabilities is the harsh intervention by the community, which implies that this kind of behaviour was regarded as more appalling. In other words, as stated by Toensing (2007), this story not only brings to mind many of today’s attitudes concerning mental illness. But this episode also suggests a more fragmented approach to disability in the biblical context. The idea of demons in relation to disability underlines once again the ambivalent approach to disability. Even though the narratives used demons as an explanatory model that turned disability into a threat, the Gospels do not prescribe an exclusionary order where people with disabilities should be isolated from the rest of the community. On the contrary, the narratives frequently illuminate contact and interaction with people with disabilities.

Another thing that turned disability into a somewhat confusing and tension-filled category was the unclear relation between demons and sin. Black (2006) argues that passages in the New Testament support the notion that disability is caused by sin, while other passages contradict this relationship. In one episode, when asked, Jesus weakens the idea that a certain disability could be explained from sin (John 9:1–3). Other episodes emphasize this correlation in the sense that Jesus combines the healing act with a proclamation in which he liberates the person from their earlier sins (Matt. 9:2). In one episode, according to John, Jesus even tells a disabled man, just being healed, that he should ‘sin no more, lest a worse thing’ happen to him (John 5:14). This must also be seen in the light of Jesus’ explicit and all-encompassing mission to reform sinners (Luke 5:32), which is interesting given the fact that the New Testament pays so much attention to the encounter between Jesus and persons with disabilities. But one must keep in mind that these narratives grew from a religious culture which considered every man to be more or less part of a sinful humanity (Rom. 3:9–10, 3:23; Luke 11:4). In that regard a person with disabilities was placed within a category that was more on a graded scale of normalcy, leaving disability to balance between the general and the specific. This in turn left persons with disabilities in a most contradictory landscape with no final answers regarding the origin of disability or the relation between sin and demons. This kind of uncertainty and mixed

messages embedded in the explanatory model surrounding disability helped turn it into a more elusive category.

According to Bolt (2014) and Wynn (2007), the normate reductionism tends to promote an image of a person with just a single attribute, omitting other qualities and capacities. This phenomenon is present in the biblical narratives as well. But the narratives of the New Testament also suggest that bodily deviance was perceived as a negotiable phenomenon, presenting disability and deviance as a non-fixed category dependent on the moral status of the individual. Thus, as noted by Rose (1997), the New Testament stresses the idea that faith can overcome disabilities. Indeed, faith is clearly pointed out as a prerequisite for that kind of desired outcome (Matt. 8:5–13, 9:29, 9:22; Acts 14:8–9; Mark 10:46–52). On one occasion, Matthew even explains how Jesus was unable to perform miracles because people lacked the right kind of faith (Matt. 13:58). In that sense, normalcy and deviance became a question of individual choices (Luke 11:23).

According to Davis (2013), disability in our contemporary media culture is given a rather allegorical function with the objective of conveying some kind of 'moral truth' (13). This is also evident in the biblical context, where disability to some extent becomes the antitheses to normal human happiness. The dividing line between the happy and the unhappy individual is governed by both the bodily and the religious transition in collaboration. The moral truth underlying these texts seem to be that normalcy to a large extent equals happiness and activity.

At the same time, it is clear that the concept of demons and sin can be problematized, and the narratives give little guidance concerning their real essence or root in relation to disability. In addition to this, Yong (2011) notes that not all cases of disability narratives were traced to demons. The explanatory model concerning the aetiology of disability rather illuminates the tension and ambivalence that seems to have characterized the social categorization of disability in the New Testament. From one angle, disability seems to represent a threat in the sense that bodily deviation was associated with a negative force. From another angle, disability represented an opportunity – a promise that this force, affecting functionality, could be fought and that man was dynamic and not locked into being unhappy, and that elements of social exclusion could be overcome. So even if disability could signal some kind of tocsin, its implications and outcomes were not given.

### *The transformable man*

The tension that seems to have been embedded in social categorization can therefore be understood from the perspective of normalcy in a broader sense, where the notion of threat and opportunity coexisted. This tension can be traced in actions of healing. For instance, utterances such as 'maimed made whole', when describing miracles (Matt. 15:31), raise questions about whether a person with a disability was looked upon as a complete human being? As stated by Toensing (2007), this is also crucial in the story of the man, apparently suffering from mental illness, who is depicted in terms of an animal-like metaphor. When the narrator presents the man as naked and howling (Mark 5:2–20), he seems to suggest that this kind of deviant behaviour was not fully in the range of the human nature, indicating a line between *us* and *them*. But this frequent interaction with people with disabilities as a part of successful salvation and the creation of the grateful Christian also meant that the diversity of mankind became more visualized (e.g. Acts 3:8; Luke 17:15–19). In that sense, persons with disabilities carried a dynamic potential and dimensions of both proof and promises. As noted by Schuelka (2013), disability therefore became a vital component in the effort to convince and persuade the community to change. According to Matthew, Jesus urged witnesses to tell how these miracles – 'the blind see and the lame walk' – were signs of his power (Matt. 11:4–5). The repeal of disability also confirmed prophecies of the Old Testament, which further strengthened the status of Jesus as a religious leader (Matt. 8:16–17). Thus, an important ingredient in the stories of normalization and disability was the audience, where the number of believers rose, while disabilities decreased (Matt. 9:8, 15:31; John 4:48). Interesting enough is also the fact that the transformation always seems complete, with limited latitude for partial changes. You are either disabled or you

are not. Melcher (2007), who applies Ricoeur's method of identifying root metaphors governing a certain text, stresses the idea that the Old Testament depicts God as 'the restorer' for Israel. The Gospels seems to take it one step further by making the restorer work on a more individual level in relation to normalcy. In this effort, the normate constitutes a template against which others can be measured, which draws attention to contemporary cultural phenomena. Just as the medical era underpins the idea of the 'quick fix' and the restoration of normal happiness, the biblical narratives too seem to touch upon this idea, albeit from within a religious framework (cf. Davis 2013).

At the same time, the social categorization did not fully comply with the separation between the in-group and out-group. Disability as a phenomenon also meant that solidarity could be exercised and consolidated. The stories of miracles being conducted are, as noted by Yong (2011), likewise described as actions of compassion with the ambition to alleviate suffering and vulnerability and increase social inclusion in the biblical context. When Jesus on one occasion heals 'the blind and the lame' in the temple, this also sends a message of solidarity that these people were to be allowed in holy settings, which in turn implies elements of recognition (Matt. 21:14). Therefore, disability also came to represent a moral opportunity for someone to exercise acts of solidarity, which in turn challenged older purity codes and the splitting between us and them. Besides this, there are, as Yong (2011) stresses, narratives in the New Testament which contradict the idea of normalization and the perfect body as a prerequisite for salvation. Even though the sinful tax collector Zacchaeus remains a man of 'short stature' he is, after repentance, being recognized as a son of Abraham (Luke 19:2–9). Nor was normalizing a requirement for the Ethiopian eunuch to become a Christian servant (Acts 8:26–39).

As Wynn (2007) points out, in relation to disability, comparison between various categories comprises a power dimension that can lead to further marginalization. In that sense, several of the narratives of the New Testament can be linked to Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) argument that cultures tends to view disability as a 'signifier of social and individual collapse' (47). But the New Testament also underlines a more complex scene comprising various mechanisms. In accordance with the community model of disability outlined by Walls (2007), the roles and social categorizations concerning disability were clearly interpreted and determined in the cultural framework in which they appeared. As a consequence, disability resulted in a malleable and contradictory categorization in which disability harboured both positive and negative elements and where narratives seem to present inconsistent descriptions in relation to how disability was to be understood.

## Concluding remarks

Even though there are difficulties in analysing disability in historical texts such as the New Testament, this study points to several interesting observations regarding how disability is described and categorized in the narratives. The argument of this article is that the social categorization of disability in the New Testament, to a large extent, is characterized by contradictions and opposing logics that derive from cultural tensions between normalcy and deviance. In line with previous research, the New Testament was also found to promote a stereotype image of disability. But, there were *a number* of stereotypes in play, and these stereotypes maintained social categorizations that, to some extent, opposed one another. Parallel to this, disability was not looked upon in the same way, suggesting a much more complex scene when it comes to normalcy, deviance and categorizations in the biblical narratives.

This kind of contradiction is also evident in the narrative's quest for bodily normalization. To start with, this normalization was not just about a visible change; it was also about the modification of an inner state. In the New Testament, disability to high degree becomes equivalent with being a deeply unhappy and suffering victim. For instance, there is no effort to describe individuals, such as the blind, as having extraordinary senses because of their disabilities, something that is frequently found in other historical narratives (Bolt 2014). At the same time, people with disabilities are not fully without agency, as the image of the active beggar shows.

Simultaneously, the categorization of *us* and *them* in the Gospels and Acts is one where the identity of being a true Christian to some extent challenged the status of being disabled, and where disability becomes a matter of free choice. However, the pursuit of normalcy also went hand in hand with elements of solidarity and recognition that, in turn, weakened the boundaries between us and them. For one thing, there are no clear demands in the narratives that persons with disability should be systematically separated from the rest of society, and there are even narratives that contradict the call for normalization, indicating a movable boundary between the in-group and out-group. This uncertainty was also reinforced by an explanatory model that gave unclear answers regarding the aetiology of disability. The fact that people with disabilities were to be normalized, while at the same time fulfilling important roles as recipients of virtue, also suggests that opposing kinds of logic transformed disability into an even more confusing phenomenon. It underlines ideas of critical realism in which different mechanisms can oppose one another, affecting the meaning and the outcome of a certain phenomenon.

This way of perceiving normalcy and deviance is above all produced within a religious and cultural landscape in transition. For instance, since the social categorizations of disability entailed elements from both the older tradition (charity) and new ideas (normalization), people with disabilities became a contradictory category that was hard to interpret. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) claim that narratives traditionally have used disability as something that deviates from a natural order, portraying it as a mystery that needs to be explained. The narratives depend on disability to achieve an effect or to emphasize a point – something that can be traced in the biblical narratives as well. Disability becomes foremost a special feature, a mystery that needs to be solved and placed within a broader story, an interpretation that highlights the anthropological model of disability as a malleable phenomenon in relation to the culture in which it appears (Whyte and Ingstad 1995; Walls 2007).

That is why it is anachronistic to determine these texts by applying the medical (individual) or the social (collective) model. There is little indication that people with disabilities identify themselves or act as a group guided by their own interests, struggling for a higher grade of recognition. In all, contemporary concepts such as empowerment, participation *and* disability simply do not fit into historical narratives such as the New Testament. These phenomena remain ideologically impregnated concepts of the modern democratic state, and they make no sense in the understanding of disability in the biblical context. On the contrary the narratives of the New Testament indicate how disability and ideas of normalcy are social constructions shaped by shifting cultural values and interpretations. To conclude, the analysis suggests that disability in the narratives of the New Testament was largely highlighted as a contradictory category consisting of conflicting logic that turned it into a two-sided coin – perceived both as a threat and an opportunity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. Religion is, as discussed by Hamilton (1995), an elusive phenomenon that involves a system of belief and practices that has both psychological and sociological implications.
2. For a discussion of what constitutes a theological reflection, see Jeanrond (1991).
3. All biblical references are consistently taken from The Holy Bible (1982).

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