RITUAL PERFECTION: MAKING THE PHYSICAL MEANINGFUL

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the injunction that the People of Israel should be holy (Lev. 19:2; Ex. 19:6). Furthermore, the People of Israel should differentiate the holy from the ordinary and the ritually clean from the unclean (Lev. 10:10). This sense of holiness and of exclusivity applies to the cultic rituals of the Sanctuary. At the most differentiated and exclusive level, fully serving the Deity and carrying out of the sacrificial rites is limited to the priest who is considered perfect, without mum (blemish/defect). Exclusivity also applies to animals brought for sacrifice. Animals with a mum are ritually unfit for sacrifice (Lev. 22:19-24). Exclusivity applies even to the stones used for the building of the Sanctuary. Only avanim shlemot, literally, whole stones, are fit. Broken stones are ritually unfit for use in building the altar (Ex. 20:22; Deut. 27:6).

The Holiness Code (Lev. 21:17-23) lists the physical blemishes (mumim) that would make the priest unfit to carry out the most prestigious of the priestly tasks. These include the blind, the lame, those with any maimed or asymmetric visible body parts, broken bones, damaged testicles, eye disease, skin diseases, hunchback, and being of small stature. The priestly code is specific as to the classification of the mumim. Yet, it is unclear why some bodily disfigurements are considered mumim while others are not. The diverse list of the mumim resists easy classification and interpretation. The priest with a mum is not presented as ugly. Indeed, in principle, the mum-less priest may be extremely ugly by commonly accepted standards. As result of his mum the

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priest becomes ritually “disabled” and unable to carry out the sacrificial ceremony fully.

What then is the explanation for these particular disqualifications? The defects can be viewed as a legal category, which are meaningful in the context of the Holiness Code in order to differentiate the holy from the mundane, but have questionable application in secular contexts.¹

PERFECTION AND AWE AS A MORAL STRATEGY

A second approach regarding the possible function that the exclusion of mumim serves within the context of the cultic service relates to the celebration of wholeness. The Temple rituals are to be observed by the congregation in order to create a sense of awe in the beholder. The congregation sees the perfection and is uplifted to practice social justice and moral living. In the words of the 13th century work Sefer HaChinuch, in his explanation of commandment 275, “That the blemished priest not enter the Sanctuary”, “The root of the commandment is that most human actions are seen as desirable and important by their audience in terms of the importance and attractiveness of those who carry them out… Thus it is proper that the one who presides over the rituals be physically attractive... Beyond this, it is possible that in physical wholeness is a hint of that which will purify and elevate the mind thus it is improper for any physical defect to be allowed to affect the ritual.”

There has always been a strong historic relationship between religion and the aesthetic. Psychologists have argued that the need to experience beauty may have deep roots stretching back to the dawn of humanity’s ontological development. We react emotionally, even viscerally, to the aesthetic.² The priest, the Sanctuary, and the ritual relate to this deep need for aesthetics. Beauty is associated “with what is good, happy, right, appropriate, and desirable.”³ The observed wholeness of the physical connects the congregation to the religious experience.

For example, sacred architecture provides the setting to facilitate the deep internal and external connections intrinsic to the religious experience. Religious encounters often trigger an awe response. Through interaction with the sacred, nuanced meanings are more substantively accessed. The Sanctuary, as
sacred architecture, had the capacity to create awe, as did the appearance of the non-*mum*-affected priest.

The physical perfection of the Sanctuary and its service can be seen as a strategy that promotes a moral beauty as well as aesthetic beauty. Moral beauty often arises in religious and spiritual contexts and has a large impact on the psychological development of the person. Positive emotions can motivate moral behavior.\(^4\) Moral beauty is predictive of caring for, being empathic of, loving, and valuing benevolence toward others. The appreciation of beauty is “the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds.”\(^5\) In this way, the beauty of the Sanctuary and the perfection of the priests are the media through which the congregation becomes spiritually and morally improved.

**THE DISABLED IDOL AS A STRATEGY**

A third approach to the *mum* disqualification may be seen in the biblical use of body imaging to strengthen monotheism in the congregation.\(^6\) Ascribing physical disability to the pagan idol is a stigmatizing strategy that shows it as being false, impotent, and useless. The idol is deaf, blind, lame, and otherwise disabled (Deut. 4:28). The idol has no value. As it cannot communicate, it has no independent power and is a false god. Human beings not only create the idol but the idol destroys those who serve it. As is noted in Psalms, *They have hands, but cannot touch, feet but cannot walk, they can make no sound in their throats ... all who trust in them shall become like them* (Ps. 115:7, 8). God’s salvation is presented in terms of the physical body. Unlike the false idol, the omniscient and omnipotent God of Israel offers protection and caring to those who follow Him. [God] *is coming to give you triumph. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud* (Isa. 35:5-6).

**THE DARK SIDE OF THE PERFECT BODY: A DISABILITIES READING**

The Bible makes the physical meaningful. Beyond the context of the Holiness Code and outside of the Sanctuary, the physical is also made a point of reference. Although the Bible does not generally offer physical descriptions
of its protagonists, leading to the conclusion that physical beauty is largely irrelevant, on occasion the Bible does mention what are considered attractive physical characteristics. The Bible gives the height of Saul as evidence that he is fit to be king (I Sam. 9:2). David is described as having beautiful eyes as a Divine sign that he has “vision” and should lead (I Sam. 16:12). This demonstrates that the Bible acknowledges that although physical appearance is not fundamentally significant, it is something that impacts the way people relate and think about each other.

Recent scholarly biblical literature has considered physical differentness from a disability perspective. This disability reading of Scripture suggests that if being _mum_-afflicted means being disqualified from ritual worship, then physical difference is functionally a disability in mundane society as well, making the disabled vulnerable to the sociological processes of marginalization and stigma. The _mum_-less person becomes an exaggerated standard of physical normality and affects the way people relate to those with what is perceived in society as some kind of physical defect.

Thompson uses the term “normate” to denote the composite, standardized, image of those persons who meet the cultural picture of the unblemished and not disabled. The “normate hermeneutic” impacts biblical interpretation, alters the readers’ perception of the characters, and informs the very meaning of the narrative. For one example, in Genesis 27 Isaac is old and blind; therefore, in a society that marginalizes the blind and elderly, Isaac would be understood as being powerless and dependent. This makes him an easy victim of manipulation at the hands of Rebecca and Jacob; they can easily deceive him. This reading of the biblical narrative is possible because of the socially constructed meanings attached to old age and blindness. Isaac deviates from the normate and so can be marginalized. In various texts in the prophetic books, the physically different are presented as weak, marginal, dishonored and pitiful.

Disability theory argues that for the physically different person, one’s disability becomes one’s identity, or at least a major part of it. When David asks about a survivor of Saul’s family, he is answered that Jonathan _had a son, disabled in his feet_ (II Sam. 9:3). Initially the son, Mephiboshet, is not mentioned by name. His disability is his identity. That is how others relate to him.
and it is even how he thinks about himself. In this understanding, the disqualification of an individual with a *mum* is tantamount to a rejection of the individual as a person.

A HUMANIST HERMENEUTIC

Society values a particular physique; a “body beautiful”. The mass media bombard individuals of all ages and both genders with images that glorify youthfulness, and messages that associate worth to culturally prescribed, ideal bodies. The various products that promise youth and beauty forever are ubiquitous. People are confronted with the impossible task of trying to defy nature through a variety of means resulting in issues of weight preoccupation and eating disturbances often leading to voluntary food restriction, depression, social withdrawal, lowered self-esteem, and disordered eating. While the appreciation of beauty is crucial to sensitive human development, preoccupation with the “body beautiful” dulls sensitivity to human nuance and responds to different-ness with stigma.

Wynn argues that when freed from the normate hermeneutic, the physically different characters in the Bible cease to be models for disability and vulnerability. She presents an alternative reading of the disadvantaging of Isaac in Genesis 27:18-27. Freed of the normate hermeneutic, Isaac is seen as a powerful patriarch carrying out his Divinely prescribed role in spite of his infirmity within the context of a dysfunctional family. He is viewed as heroic rather than pitiful. The degree to which this description fails to ring true to the average Bible reader today is a result of the extent to which the normate hermeneutic dominates our reading. The dominant normate hermeneutic along with a stereotype of the blind and the aged can only perceive Isaac as disabled, incompetent, powerless and dependent. In his response to the Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper collection of essays, Birch comments that recent directions in biblical studies allow for reading Scripture in a fresh context rather than from the assumed “normate” context.

A humanist hermeneutic is implicit in the Judaic concept that all humanity is created *b’zzelem Elohim* - in the image of God. *God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God – creating them male and*
female (Gen. 1:27, The Contemporary Torah, JPS, 2006). This image of God is not one particular appearance, but embraces a diversity of physical characteristics. TB Sanhedrin 37a comments on this passage pointing out that the word “human” (Adam) is written in the singular, “Adam was created alone to teach us the greatness of God for if a human ruler was to print numerous coins from a single mold each would be identical but the Ruler of Rulers created humans from a single mold and each is different and unique. Therefore, each person is able to say the entire world was created for my sake.” The fact that humans all look different from each other is considered to be evidence of the greatness of God.

A humanist hermeneutic allows us to approach biblical reading appreciating the awe-inspiring beauty of the holy and, at the same time, not impinging upon Scripture by inducing an implied normate hermeneutic to biblical persons. The Bible becomes the story of human beings in interaction with the Divine. Their actions would be seen as determined by their humanness.

In conclusion, the fact that specific, and perhaps arbitrary, physical criteria able or disable priestly participation within the Sanctuary need not become the basis for an exclusive and discriminatory normate understanding of the characters in the Biblical narrative and the roles they play. This article raises the possibility of and the need for the development of an approach to the characters in the Hebrew Bible based on a humanist hermeneutic that allows specialness without deviance and differentness without worthlessness. The biblical narrative when freed from the normate hermeneutic teaches that all bodily images can transcend stigma and represent the image of God.

NOTES
With grateful thanks to David J. Zucker for his incisive editing and assistance in developing this document.
3. Olyan, Disability, p. 25.
4. Diessner et al., pp. 303-317. Research shows that engagement with natural, artistic and moral beauty can lead to an increase in optimism and hope.

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