

8 | Disability, the Blind, and God's Justice

Sara Minkara is an American Muslim. On her seventh birthday, she woke up and realized that she could not see. Sara's sister had also lost her sight a few years before. Sara's parents assured her that everything would be fine. They were not discouraged by the stigma of blindness in society and did everything in their power to make sure that her disability was not an obstacle. Sara also had a safety net of support provided by the government and private institutions. She went to Wellesley College for her undergraduate studies and received a graduate degree from Harvard University. Sara is also the founder of Empowerment Through Integration, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering youth with disabilities around the world. Because of her work and advocacy for people with disabilities, in 2021, President Joe Biden appointed Minkara as the US special advisor on international disability rights.¹

Sara is an observant Muslim who wears a headscarf. It is not uncommon for her to make references to elements of Islamic theology when she relates to her life story. While she often points to the barriers in Muslim communities against people with disabilities, she also finds strength in her faith. Sara refers to her blindness as the "biggest blessing" of her life.² Her parents believed that

¹ "President Biden Announces Sara Minkara as United States Special Advisor on International Disability Rights," White House, October 28, 2021, www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/28/president-biden-announces-sara-minkara-as-united-states-special-advisor-on-international-disability-rights/.

² "Enabled by Faith: Sara Minkara," Yaqeen Institute, January 11, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/yaqeen-institute/enabled-by-faith-sara-minkara-confident-muslim>.

her disability was part of God's plan, and what comes from God is a blessing. Instead of asking "Oh God, why us, my daughters?" they believed there was a divine purpose for the disabilities of their daughters. The parents also never allowed the stigma about disability in society to enter their home. They embraced the disability and taught their daughters to do so as well. Blindness became a source of empowerment for the Minkara family. Sara points out that God will never test believers with something that they cannot handle. God is the creator, and he is the one who created her in this way. God only creates what is beautiful, and people with disabilities have something beautiful to contribute to society. Sara also criticizes the negative assumptions about people with disabilities in Muslim societies, as they are often marginalized, pitied, and seen as charity cases.

Sara is not alone in her disability. According to the most recent studies, around a billion people (15 percent of the world's population) experience some form of disability in their lives.³ The number is increasing significantly.⁴ Sixty-one million adults in the United States have some type of disability.⁵ That is why those without a disability are frequently called "temporarily abled bodies" in disability studies, since most disabilities are acquired after birth. Disability is often defined as a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, activities, and interactions. However, it is important to recognize the limits of definitions because of the diversity of disabilities.

While there are many models of disability, two of them became more prevalent. One of them is the medical model. According to this model, disability is a medical and individual problem.

³ "Disability Inclusion," World Bank, accessed January 12, 2022, www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability#1.

⁴ "Disability and Health," World Health Organization, November 24, 2021, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health.

⁵ "Disability Impacts All of Us," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed January 14, 2022, www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html.

The impairment of a person needs to be treated and eliminated because it is a medical condition. The other approach is the social model, which focuses on the barriers that people with disabilities face in society. In this model, people with disabilities are not limited because of their impairments; the impediments are constructed by society. While the model does not disregard the challenges of impairment and its impact on individuals, it also does not view people with disabilities as “objects” of charitable work and social protection. They are “subjects” with equal rights, “capable of claiming those rights, able to make decisions for their own lives based on their free and informed consent and be active members of society.”⁶

People have raised questions about and attempted to determine the origins of disability for centuries. The Greek and Roman cultures were concerned with the perfection of the body because beauty and strength mattered in their societies. While a healthy body was seen as a divine blessing, deformity was viewed as a sign of divine wrath. A child with a disability was believed to be an affliction upon the parents from God. Blindness, for example, was interpreted as a divine punishment for sin.⁷ Plato believed that children with defects should be abandoned in “mysterious unknown places.”⁸ The Romans viewed birth defects as an indication of a broken covenant with their gods; so-called monstrous births could incur the wrath of deities.⁹ While there have been diverse interpretations of disability in Hinduism and Buddhism, it is usually

⁶ “Social Model of Disability,” People with Disability Australia, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://pwd.org.au/resources/disability-info/social-model-of-disability/>.

⁷ Susan Baglieri and Arthur Shapiro, *Disability Studies and the Inclusive Classroom: Critical Practices for Creating Least Restrictive Attitudes* (London: Routledge, 2012), 56–57.

⁸ Chomba Wa Munyi, “Past and Present Perceptions towards Disability: A Historical Perspective,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32 (2012): 2, https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3197/3068&sa=U&ved=oahUKEwjIpcnIlubKAhULaz4KHX_YDyoQFggoMAc&usq=AFQjCNEWdZ_ojsTkoB8Q2JDebeZzNgp2QQ.

⁹ Vardit Rispler-Chaim, *Disability in Islamic Law* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 5.

associated with the concept of karma in these dharmic traditions. Disability might be related to a person's actions in the past or their parents' actions.¹⁰ In Judaism, disability is seen as part of God's creation. Examples of God punishing people because of their disobedience are part of the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, where breaking the covenant may result in certain disabilities, including blindness and madness.¹¹ In the New Testament, we repeatedly see Jesus healing people with disabilities miraculously. There are many examples in which Jesus cares and shows compassion for people with disabilities. However, it is not uncommon for disability to be seen as caused by sin and its healing as a means of purification and grace in Christian theology.¹²

Islamic tradition also addresses the question of disability. In what follows, we explore people with disabilities in the sacred sources of Islam as well as its theology. We begin with the Qur'an.

The Qur'an and People with Disabilities

While there is no one term that refers to disability in the Qur'an, there are a number of occasions where it engages with people with disabilities. The Qur'an's attitude toward disability is most evident in a story that is mentioned in chapter 80. One day, Abdullah bin Umm Maktum, a blind man, came to Muhammad seeking his guidance. At the time, the Prophet was in conversation with a number

¹⁰ Arie Rimmerman, *Disability and Community Living Policies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 15–16; Susan L. Gabel and Jagdish Chander, "Inclusion in Indian Education," in *Disability and Politics of Education: An International Reader*, ed. Susan L. Gabel and Scot Danforth (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 72–73.

¹¹ Deut. 28:28–29.

¹² Pauline A. Otieno, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Disability: Implications on the Rights of Persons with Disability in Kenya," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29 (2009): 4, <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/988/1164>.

of elites of Meccan society conveying the message of Islam. When Abdullah kept asking for guidance, the Prophet then frowned at him and continued his conversation with the unbelievers. Upon this case, the first ten verses in the chapter were revealed, in which God admonished Muhammad for frowning at the blind man. The same chapter of the Qur'an also takes its name from the occasion, "He Frowned" ("Abasa").¹³ This became an occasion of learning for the Prophet and his followers. The Qur'an was delivering a clear message: Those who are blind to the truth in their hearts should not be preferred to a blind person who is open to and seeking the truth. Also, it is likely that the Prophet thought if he could convince the Meccan elite to become Muslim, their contribution to the Muslim community would be greater than the work of an old disabled person. The Qur'an challenges this approach, as people's contributions and spiritual growth cannot be judged according to their rank and appearance.

Ibn Umm Maktum was at the center of another occasion of revelation. When it was revealed that those who attend the war to defend the Muslim community and those who stay at home are not equal, Ibn Umm Maktum told the Prophet that he is unable to attend because of his blindness. Another verse was then revealed, excusing the disabled from participating in wars. Ibn Umm Maktum still participated in a war with a major role and died on the battlefield.

It is reported that whenever Muhammad would see Ibn Umm Maktum, he would greet him by saying: "Welcome to him on whose account my Lord rebuked me."¹⁴ Ibn Umm Maktum remained a key companion of the Prophet. He was sent to Medina as a teacher alongside Musab ibn Umair prior to the Prophet's immigration.¹⁵

¹³ Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "Commentary on Surat 'Abasa," in Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 1475.

¹⁴ Lumbard, 1474.

¹⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab manaqib al-ansar, bab maqdam al-nabiy sal al-allah 'alayh wa salam wa ashab al-madinah.*

During the Prophet's time in Medina, Ibn Umm Maktum served as the person who issues the call to prayer (*muezzin*) for the Prophet's mosque (Masjid al-Nabawi). Also, if the Prophet left Medina, he would put Ibn Umm Maktum in charge of the city.¹⁶ He would even lead the prayer.

Another major example of disability is the story of Moses. The Qur'an mentions that Moses had a speech impediment, and Pharaoh belittled him because of his impairment: "Am I not better than this fellow, who is despicable and can hardly express himself clearly?"¹⁷ Moses prayed for God to untie the knot from his tongue.¹⁸ God eventually removed his impediment, and Moses was able to convey his message to Pharaoh and his people.¹⁹ The Qur'an also relates the story of the prophet Jacob, who lost his sight because of his sadness concerning the disappearance of his son Joseph. His sight was eventually restored when he was gifted with Joseph's shirt and placed it on his eyes.²⁰ Like the New Testament, the Qur'an brings up how Jesus healed the disabled. With God's permission, Jesus would cure the blind and the leper and give life to the dead.²¹

The Qur'an also uses disability as a metaphor to convey its message. For example, verse 58 in chapter 40 reads: "The blind and the seeing are not equal, nor are those who believe and perform righteous deeds and the evildoer. How seldom do you keep this in mind!"²² In another place, the Qur'an uses a different analogy: "The worst creatures in the sight of God are the deaf and the dumb who do not use their reason. If God had known there was any good in them, He would have made them hear, but

¹⁶ *Hadislerle İslam* (Istanbul: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2014), 4:268.

¹⁷ Qur'an 43:52.

¹⁸ Qur'an 20:27.

¹⁹ Qur'an 20:36.

²⁰ Qur'an 12:96.

²¹ Qur'an 3:49.

²² Also see Qur'an 35:19–20.

even if He had, they would still have turned away in rejection.”²³ Muslim scholars do not interpret these verses literally. With these passages, the spiritual disability of humans is emphasized. In the Qur'anic picture of community, people with disabilities are active participants, and they are a key dimension of forming a collective identity.²⁴ One can observe a similar approach in the life of Muhammad and his relationship with people with disabilities as well.

Muhammad and People with Disabilities

Muhammad had a number of disabled companions who were active participants in the Muslim community. One of them was Muaz Ibn Jabal, who served as the governor of Yemen. It is reported that one of the blind companions came to Muhammad and complained that it was difficult for him to go to the closest mosque in his neighborhood because of his disability. He asked the Prophet to come to his house and pray with him. Muhammad accepted his invitation and went to the companion's house and prayed and enjoyed a meal with him.²⁵ In another case, Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet, and his father came to the mosque to see the Prophet right after the conquest of Mecca. Abu Bakr's father had lost his sight in old age. When the Prophet saw the old man, he turned to Abu Bakr and said: “Why did you not leave the old man in his house so that I could come to him there?”²⁶

In one of the hadiths, it is reported that Muhammad said that God looks not at one's appearance and property but at their heart

²³ Qur'an 8:22–23.

²⁴ Staffan Bengtsson, “Building a Community: Disability and Identity in the Qur'an,” *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 20 (2018): 1, www.sjdr.se/articles/10.16993/sjdr.18/.

²⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-tahajjud bab salat al-nawafil jama'ah*.

²⁶ *Hadislerle Islam*, 4:269.

and deeds.²⁷ The point is that no one will be judged based on the way they look or what disabilities they might have. What matters is whether they have a pure heart and good actions.

Islamic Law and Disability

Muhammad's and the Qur'an's approaches to disability are also manifested in Islamic law. Muslim scholars took this Qur'anic teaching as their departure point: "God does not burden any soul beyond its capacity."²⁸ Experts of jurisprudence made certain accommodations for the participation of physically disabled people in religious practices.²⁹ They advanced the situation of people with disabilities based on the Prophet's care and compassion in their writings.³⁰ In any discussions about the practices of Islam, people with disabilities were included, and their obligations were discussed like any other Muslim.³¹

The books of jurisprudence discuss the questions of people with disabilities in the context of worship and rituals (*ibadat*) such as the five daily prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, transactions (*muamalat*), marriage and divorce, crimes (*hudud*), and leadership. Classical Islamic texts of law address the issues concerning disability along with people without a disability. Disability was not discussed in the books of law in a separate section. For example, in the case of blind people, the schools of jurisprudence examined whether they could lead the prayer (be an imam). The overwhelming majority

²⁷ *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-birr wa al-salah wa al-adab, bab tahrir al-zulm al-muslim wa al-khadhlih wahtiqarih wa damihi wa 'irdihi wa malihi.*

²⁸ Qur'an 2:286.

²⁹ Kristina L. Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 22.

³⁰ Ali Altaf Mian, "Mental Disability in Medieval Hanafi Legalism," *Islamic Studies* 51:3 (2012): 262.

³¹ Mohammed Ghaly, "Disability in the Islamic Tradition," *Religion Compass* 10:6 (2016): 155.

of scholars maintained that it is permissible for a blind person to guide the ritual. For the permissibility, they pointed to the reports about the companions who led the prayer during the Prophet's time. Also, having sight is not one of the requirements of leading the prayer. However, scholars still argued that a nonblind person is preferable to a blind person when it comes to conducting the prayer. The cleanliness of clothes and the space for the prayer are important. Also, the imam should know the time of the prayer as well as the direction to the Kaaba. The scholars' concern was that a blind person may be in need of help for these requirements. To fulfill these conditions, it is safer to have a nonblind person lead the prayer. However, there are a number of scholars who argued that a nonblind person should not be preferred to a blind person. There are advantages on both sides. For example, a blind imam would be less distracted by their surroundings, and they can concentrate on the prayer better. Unlike a blind person, a sighted person can pay more attention to the cleanliness of dress and space for the prayer.³²

While Muslim jurists attempted to further the Qur'anic and the prophetic care and compassion for people with disabilities, it does not mean that their rulings were always practiced in Muslim societies. A case in point is a major mosque that was officially opened in the state of Maryland in the United States in 2016. It was constructed to replicate Ottoman architecture. A prominent element inside the mosque is a pulpit (*minbar*). This is where the leader of the congregation stands to deliver a sermon during Friday or holiday (*eid*) prayer. Like in other major Ottoman mosques, the pulpit has a nine-step staircase. The regulations of the state of Maryland require access to the pulpit for people with disabilities, and as such the pulpit needed either a ramp or an elevator. In order to deal with this complication, the representative of the mosque told state officials that a disabled person is ineligible to give a sermon and lead

³² Hilal Özay, "İslam Hukukunda Bedensel Hükümlere Tesiri Bakımından Bedensel Engel" (PhD diss., Selçuk Üniversitesi, 2010), 126–28.

the prayer according to Islamic tradition.³³ He wanted to preserve the traditional architectural form of the pulpit. For him, installing a ramp or an elevator would distort the aesthetic of the pulpit. In this situation, appearance is preferred to accessibility. It excludes people with disabilities. Unfortunately, mosques are often known for their inaccessibility. In order to address this problem, a number of Muslims in the United States founded an organization called Muhsen in 2014. Among Muhsen's services is a three-tiered certificate program (silver, gold, and platinum) for mosques in order to make them more accommodating for Muslims with special needs. Currently, there are around 3,000 mosques in the United States. So far, only seventy-five of them had received the certification, and among those, only a handful have qualified for the gold certificate, while none are eligible for the platinum.³⁴

Theological Views on Disability

Disability is an important theme of Islamic theology as well. There are a number of principles from the Qur'an that can be departure points for the theological discussions concerning disability and the problem of evil and suffering. First, misfortunes can only happen with God's permission.³⁵ Second, God is not only compassionate and merciful; he is also just.³⁶ Third, God created humans in the best form.³⁷ Whatever God creates, he creates beautifully.³⁸ God is also the one who creates human faculties:

³³ Yaşar Çolak, *Din, Siyaset ve Mimari: Amerika Diyanet Merkezinin Tarihi* (Istanbul: Kopernik, 2021), 71.

³⁴ For the organization and the list of the mosques that received the certificate, see "MUHSEN Masjid Certification," MUHSEN, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://muhsen.org/muhsen-masjid-certification/>.

³⁵ Qur'an 64:11.

³⁶ Qur'an 4:40.

³⁷ Qur'an 95:4.

³⁸ Qur'an 32:7.

Then He fashioned him, and breathed into him of His Spirit.
He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts. How little do you give thanks!³⁹

Have We not given them two eyes, a tongue, and two lips?⁴⁰

If God is compassionate and just and creates with perfection, then why is there disability? Here it is important to distinguish between the aspects of disability that involve natural evil and moral evil. In the cases that involve natural evil, we engage with the views of three theological schools: the Mutazilites, Asharites, and Maturidies.

For the Mutazilites, God is just and does not do anything unjust. He creates what benefits people. There is nothing unnecessary in his creation. If God's creation involves disability, then it is there for people to learn from. God's justice also requires an eternal reward for the people who are disabled as a result of natural evil. For the Asharites, however, God is free in his creation and creates people the way he wants. He is not obliged to create according to people's benefit. God will reward people with disabilities not because he is required to do so but because of his power, compassion, and generosity. The third school, the Maturidies, emphasize God's wisdom in creation including disability. Even if we cannot understand this wisdom, it does not mean that there is no plan behind God's creation of disability.⁴¹

The disabilities that involve moral evil can be discussed in the context of predestination and free will. For the Jabriya school, human movements are predestined, and therefore humans do not have power over what they do. For followers of this school, God is the sole creator, and everything depends on him. So he is the architect of all types of disabilities as the result of both natural and moral evil.

³⁹ Qur'an 32:9.

⁴⁰ Qur'an 90:8–9.

⁴¹ Harun Isık, "Engellilik Sorununa Kelami Bir Yaklaşım," in *Ekev Akademi Dergisi* 57 (2013): 1–22.

For the Mutazilite school, people are the originators of disabilities that involve moral evil. God is just, and disabilities because of human agency are incompatible with his justice. Moral evil is the result of the freedom that humans enjoy. Those who bring about disability will face severe punishment, and those who suffer at the hands of evil people will be rewarded.

Unlike the Mutazilites, the Asharites and Maturidies believe that God is the creator of the events that involve moral evil. In this regard, God is the maker of all kinds of disabilities. However, humans will still be held accountable for their actions leading to disability. They explain this view with the doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*), because people made moral evil as their choice through their free will. While humans are not the creators of their actions causing disability, if they desire or wish to cause disability, then God creates the conditions for them.⁴²

Spiritual and Practical Responses to Disability

Islamic tradition not only engages with disability theologically; it has also developed spiritual and practical approaches. First, one of the key responses to disability is patience. In a hadith, it is reported that God said that when he tests his beloved servants with blindness and they respond with patience, he rewards them with heaven.⁴³ Second, disability is a test not only for people with disabilities but also for temporarily abled people. It is a reminder for them to be thankful for what God has given them. Third, people with disabilities are often discussed in the context of the “needy.” Muslims are encouraged to be compassionate, charitable, and accommodating toward them. Among the charitable acts listed by the Prophet

⁴² Çağlar Tekkanat, “Bir Kelam Problemi Olarak Engellilik” (MA Thesis, Istanbul 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi, 2019), 111–12.

⁴³ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-marda, bab fadl man dhahaba basaruhu.*

Muhammad are removing harmful obstacles that might be in one's way, helping those who have speech impediments express themselves, leading blind people on their path, and offering help to those who are in need of it.⁴⁴ Fourth, people with disabilities should have the space to participate in all matters of life, including spirituality. For example, blind people served as muezzins and *huffaz al-Qur'an* (those who know the entire Qur'an by heart) in Muslim societies. Some of them became celebrities because of their beautiful voices as well as their ability to memorize the scripture. In many cases, they would learn the Qur'an alongside sighted Muslims at the Qur'an schools. In rituals that involved the recitation of the Qur'an in people's homes, the blind *huffaz* were favored by women who preferred gender segregation. This way, the women would be out of the sight of men. One example is Shaykh Muhammad Rifat (d. 1950) of Egypt. He memorized the Qur'an by the age of ten and became one of the most gifted Qur'an reciters.⁴⁵ He was the first *hafiz* to recite the Qur'an on Egyptian Cairo radio in 1934. Rifat served as the official reciter of the Qur'an at Mustapha Pasha Mosque in Cairo for twenty-five years. Fifth, while people with disabilities will be compensated in the hereafter for their struggles and sufferings in this world, people who treat them with dignity and respect will be rewarded for their actions.

Despite the stigma toward people with disabilities in Muslim societies, disability is not regarded as a punishment or a sign of sinfulness in Islamic theology.⁴⁶ The sacred sources of Islam, including the Qur'an, hadiths, and sharia books, discuss the situation of people with disabilities and create a vision for a positive attitude in society toward them.⁴⁷ In forming a collective identity, people with disabilities have been included and remain active participants in the Muslim community

⁴⁴ *Hadislerle Islam*, 4:265.

⁴⁵ M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, "The Blind and the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3:2 (2001): 123–24.

⁴⁶ Rispler-Chaim, *Disability in Islamic Law*, 11.

⁴⁷ Ghaly, "Disability in the Islamic Tradition," 158.

from the inception of Islam. The Islamic tradition emphasizes the weakness and vulnerability of all human beings in relation to God's power, so the idea of "temporarily abled people" fits into Islamic theology. It is a reminder that life is fragile and temporary. This approach can potentially form an environment where people are more mindful of people with disabilities and their dignity and become part of the effort to build a more accommodating space for them.