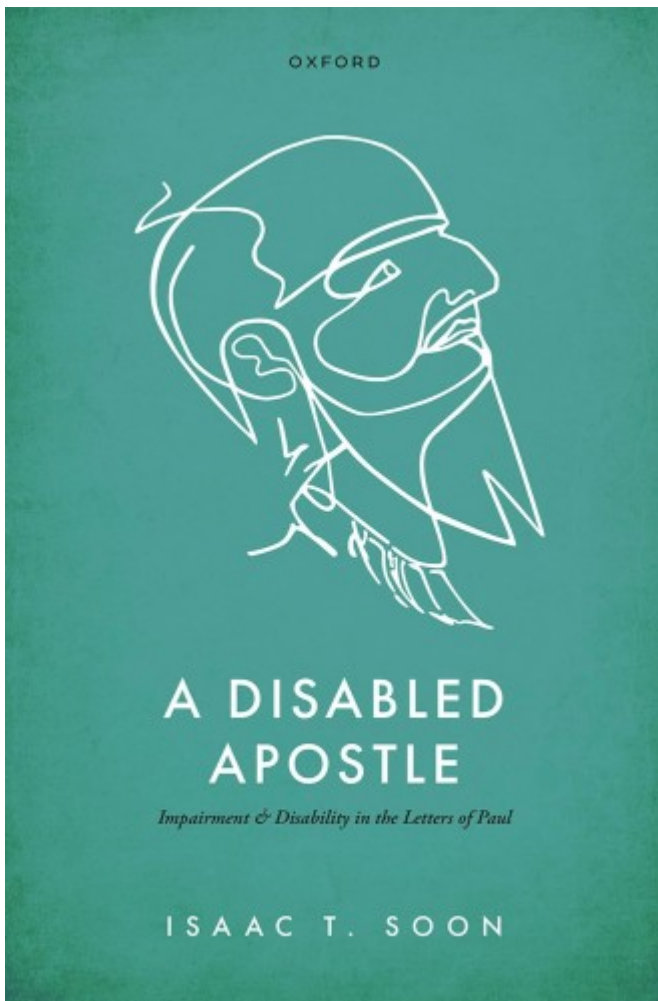


Was Paul disabled?

Isaac Soon employs a sociocultural model of disability as a lens for reading the apostle's letters.

by [Aaron Klink](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue
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In Review



A Disabled Apostle

Impairment and Disability in the Letters of Paul

By Isaac T. Soon

Oxford University Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Christians have long wrestled with the meaning of Paul's writings and the implications they have for us in our own contexts. Some see Paul as a herald of Christian freedom through justification by faith, while others see him as the villain who transformed the egalitarian Jesus movement into a hierarchical church. Some scholars attempt to arrange Paul's writings into a systematic theology, while others argue such attempts fail to grasp the episodic and pastoral nature of Paul's writings, as he sought to apply unfolding understandings of the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to the communities he guided.

The scriptures Paul knew were concerned with human bodies: what purified and defiled them, what sort was needed to enter the Jerusalem temple, what they should and should not eat. Paul's writings shared that concern, and so he, too, wrote about bodies: how to clothe them, with whom they should and should not have sex, and how they should arrange and conduct themselves at worship and communal meals. For Paul, those who believe in Jesus form a collective body of their own, which he calls "the body of Christ." Paul is also concerned with his own body: how it is perceived, what it signifies, and what he wants his communities to see in it. He argues that his body is a sign of his faithfulness to the call he received to be an apostle: his scars and suffering prove both his commitment to the gospel and God's ability to work through a weak body.

Isaac Soon argues for a reading of Paul as "a disabled apostle" who "participates in and experiences disability as his impairments interact negatively with the society and culture around him." Soon uses the framework of disability to elucidate how Paul's communities might have perceived his body, focusing on three ways Paul's body falls short of cultural expectations: his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7), his circumcision, and his short stature. Soon avoids trying to give medical explanations for Paul's body and instead employs a sociocultural model of disability, which understands disability as resulting from systemic social exclusion.

Soon begins by exploring the nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh, noting four common scholarly explanations of the thorn: as an illness, as a cosmic force, as a way of

putting Paul's persecution into words, or as an unknowable mystery. Soon believes that the thorn is how Paul talks about his possession by an angel of Satan, a possession ordered by God to keep Paul from disclosing what he saw during his "ascent to heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2) to those not ready to know the truths he learned. Soon notes that such a possession would mean that Paul was not in total control of his body, which would render his body somehow compromised.

Soon turns next to Paul's circumcision, which most readers will not see as a traditional disability. For Paul, his circumcision was a God-commanded sign of his membership among God's chosen people, Israel. However, Soon demonstrates that non-Jewish Greco-Roman audiences saw circumcision as a sign that a body was no longer intact. In addition, circumcision was an indicator of hypersexuality, and Soon draws on sources in material culture that show Greco-Roman art depicting circumcised individuals in derogatory and hypersexual scenes and poses.

The notion that Paul's body was far from any cultural ideal seems to have been widespread in the early church.

Soon goes further in his technical analysis of Paul's writings on the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15, noting that Paul seems to indicate that circumcised bodies would be raised as circumcised. Jewish readers of the letter would have considered this an eternal sign of the covenant with God, "a magnificent corporeal transformation" of the fleshly covenant marker into material that will never decay. Readers steeped in Greco-Roman notions of circumcision as a defect would have found this view abhorrent, since they saw circumcision as nothing more than unnecessary bodily mutilation.

Finally, Soon examines the ways Paul's short stature deviated from Greco-Roman ideals. He notes that diagnosing Paul with something like dwarfism is irresponsible, since ancient cultures had no lexical term for the condition and lacked a medical understanding of the diagnosis. The biblical basis for the belief that Paul was short in stature is his account of being lowered over a wall in a "woven basket" (2 Cor. 11:33). While baskets transported heavy items, Soon argues, they would not have supported a man of average height. Turning to early artistic depictions of Paul, Soon notes that most of them show Paul as being short and balding. The notion that Paul's body was far from ideal seems to have been widespread across various geographic regions in the early church.

This meticulously argued, theoretically astute book impressively weaves together scripture, material culture, and disability theory. Soon's conclusion challenges New Testament scholars to not simply assume that Paul was fully able-bodied because of the amount of traveling his ministry entailed. While Soon writes primarily for scholars, all readers of this book will have their views of Paul challenged, changed, and enriched.

As pastor and chaplain, I often encounter Christians concerned about the size, shape, and health of their bodies, the bodies of those they love, and the collective body of Christ. Soon makes a strong case that Paul's communities saw his body as falling short of cultural ideals—and still found it to be capable of inspiring and communicating the transforming power of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.