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Disability Studies and Biblical Interpretation: Toward Emancipation?

The establishment of the Biblical Scholarship and Disabilities program unit within the Society of Biblical Literature in 2004 (since renamed at least twice, now going under the title Healthcare and Disability in the Ancient World) has begun to generate a steady stream of scholarship, both monographs and edited volumes, at the interface of these two disciplines. The goal of *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, edited by Candida R. Moss (University of Notre Dame) and Jeremy Schipper (Temple University), is to familiarize the reader with research on disability and the Bible done by scholars who specialize in biblical studies (p. 2). Besides the editors' introduction, which surveys and situates this volume within the state of the discussion at this intersection, there are twelve chapters by biblical scholars who each draw innovatively from the discipline of disability studies in order to illuminate the scriptural material. In particular, social and cultural models of disability prevalent in the field of disability studies provide alternative perspectives that, on the one hand, distinguish between bodily impairments and the social experiences of prejudice and discrimination, and on the other hand, show how disability is a product of the ways that cultures use physical and cognitive differences to narrate, organize, and interpret their world (p. 4). When deployed as lenses through which to revisit the biblical material, new light is shed on impairing conditions and disabling realities in the ancient world.

For instance, half of the essayists explore new angles

on gender, sexuality, and reproductive aspects of the human experience as social and cultural phenomena. Most straightforwardly (David Tabb Stewart), injured testicles, castrated genitalia, genital discharges, and related conditions set people apart in relationship to various social dimensions of life in ancient Israel. But these bodily impairments are especially noteworthy because they impeded the first commandment to appear in Genesis, which is to be fruitful and increase (Gen. 1:28). The centrality of this motif for Israelite life is further unfolded in two chapters, each devoted to barrenness and to eunuchs. On the one hand, there is something quite abnormal about infertility, even as it is Yahweh who opens up the womb to ensure the progeny of the people of God (Joel S. Baden). On the other hand, barren or infertile women are also excluded from cultic venues and sanctuary space, as are eunuchs, their reproductively incapacitated male counterparts (Susan Ackerman). Yet eunuchs are also depicted as inhabiting a wider spectrum of socio-cultural roles in the ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean worlds: capable of accessing honored positions of privilege in some cases but, more often, being disparaged and despised (T. M. Lemos). This is played out in the tale of two eunuchs (Sarah J. Melcher) in the biblical traditions: stigmatized figures within the Isaianic (56:1-8) and Lukan (Acts 8:26-40) corpora reflect the possibility that a religious community could give up its purity-related pre-occupations that inhibited males incapable of reproducing from entering into sacred space and participating in esteemed activities within those spaces.

The chapter focusing specifically on gender (Rebecca Raphael) also spotlights, deploying a feminist disability hermeneutic, how negative images of the female body (e.g., the whore) are sometimes combined by the biblical authors with the impaired or disabled body (e.g., the cripple) to represent condemned forms of religiosity. Here we arrive at themes more traditionally associated with disability tropes in the Bible. In a related vein, the prevalence of disability rhetoric as a stigmatizing strategy in iconic polemics (Saul M. Olyan) exhibits how especially the Hebrew Bible prophets attacked the worship of other gods by describing them as physically or sensorily impaired. In the Christian testament, etiologies of epilepsy that associated this condition with demonic possession (Nicole Kelley) functioned in turn both to warn against rival groups and practices (thus policing the community's boundaries) and to lift up the superiority of Christian exorcism and therapeutic skills (thus elevating the community's identity). Yet epilepsy not only was an occasion to separate the *âusâ* from the *âthem,* but may also have been the disabling condition that St. Paul called *âa thorn in the fleshâ* (Adela Yarbro Collins).

A final group of three essays further fills out a lacuna in prior literature: that of engagements with the Christian Testament from disability studies perspectives. One does so in tandem with postcolonial analysis to specify how disabled bodies in the Fourth Gospel are sites manifesting the presence of imperial power, in particular the suffering of the Judean nonelite within the existing Roman political-economic-social system (Warren Carter). Another, applying a Foucaultian analysis of how discursive practices provide windows into a society's power structures (that exclude the *haves* from the *have nots*), compares and contrasts the abnormal versus wise bodies of the Hippocratic corpus, healthy versus sick bodies at the Asklepios cult, and the conventional/worldly/*âhealthyâ* versus the suffering/crucified bodies in 1 Peter (Meghan Henning). This subversive symbolism of the Petrine community can be understood also to parallel the subversion of physiognomic assumptions within Lukan circles (Mikeal C. Parsons), in particular as illuminated in the case of the man lame from birth at the Gate Beautiful (Acts 3). If the man's lameness portended his spiritual incapacity, then his leaping and dancing in the temple courts characterized the manifestation of the long-awaited renewal of Israel.

There is much to discuss about how the disability studies lens can shed even further light on the Jewish and Christian canonical texts, especially since these represent practically initial forays into this interdisciplinary con-

versation. As a theologian, however, I want to query the specifically normative notions that seep through these essays. While none of the contributors write from a specifically confessional perspective, each is dealing in some respect with sacred texts that belong to communities of faith. The texts themselves have engendered faith expressions *vis-À-vis* disability that, for good or ill, are in turn justified from them. These are theological issues that invite further comment in light of the probing and exploratory character of these essays, especially since these normative concerns appear to be not just inscribed, but foregrounded in the texts under consideration.

For instance, in the discussion on barrenness, one of the authors (Baden) concludes: *âIt is not clear from the biblical texts that barrenness is a particular concern in its own right; it is either the logical mechanism by which Yahweh's promise of progeny is challenged or a single element among others used to claim Yahweh's power to alter the normal course of human lifeâ* (p. 23). The point is that the contemporary politically correct notion in disability circles of allowing the voices and perspectives of people with disabilities to represent themselves is basically inexistent in the biblical narratives. If we find the voices of people with disabilities in the scriptural canon, these are recorded, not for their own sake, but as contributing to the story of Yahweh and of Yahweh's dealings with the world. A similar case can be made with almost every one of these chapters: they illuminate not necessarily the phenomenon of disability understood on its own terms, but always as subordinate to the terms of the major *âplotâ*—that concerning Yahweh and the covenant with the people/s of God. If this is so, then theological concerns are all pervasive in the biblical canon.

Interestingly, what emerges is a kind of *âbiblical modelâ* of disability that parallels the modern medical model: both individualize and privatize disability. The latter does so by medicalizing disability as a biological condition, *âsufferedâ* by individuals in the subjectivity of their own bodily experiences; the proper response is to find cures that *âfixâ* such individual problems. Yet the former also results in the exclusion of individuals from the community's way of life and, more important, from its significant social events and functions. Depictions of disability in the biblical literature presumed, consistent with wider attitudes, that sickness and impairment *âwere highly individualizedâ* experiences, and that *âthose with the least power are the most individualizedâ* (p. 193). Further, impairments were also *âlocalized,* so that the sick or impaired are those with less power than the *âwellâ* and are

âalienated from their society by virtue of their higher levels of individualizationâ (p. 194). In short, the rhetorical power of disability tropes in the biblical literature derives precisely from the isolation endured by those with disabilities testified in the ancient world. The experience of disability was a lonely one, as those so marked by it were prohibited from partaking of the benefits available in community life. In many respects, things have not changed much over the centuries. The stigmatizing and marginalizing experience of disability today perpetuates this localized and individualized character. In this case, the theological is the social, and vice versa.

The case of epilepsy and its association with the demonic invites further theological comment along the preceding lines. To be sure, as pointed out in âEpilepsy in Ancient Christianityâ (the subtitle of the chapter under consideration), there are diverse characterizations of this phenomenon even in the Gospels. With regard to the parallel passage in the synoptics about the epileptic boy, Matthewâs description uses the term *seleniazomai*, literally âmoonstruckâ or âlunaticâ (Matt. 17:15). However, all three attribute the boyâs condition to evil spirits, at least through detailing his cure via Jesusâs exorcism (Matt. 17:18, Mark 9:25, Luke 9:42). The history of effects from this cumulative witness has stigmatized countless numbers of lives inflicted with this condition, in part because of the normative theological implications of Jesusâs authoritative diagnosis and treatment.

There are a number of responses possible to this Gospel âwitness.â First, that Jesus responded to the boy with epilepsy precisely by confronting the evil spiritual forces tormenting him has been normative for those who view some or even all such cases to involve similar spiritual activity. The logic runs as follows: if the inspired scriptural authors say that Jesus reacted in this manner, then it must be not only that Jesus believed such to be the case (and if so that belief is true since Jesus could not have been wrong) but also that such was the case (confirmed by the text that the boy experienced relief through exorcism). So whatever else other modern diagnoses—medical or psychological—might entail, the root cause of epilepsy is demonic. (A parallel example of this logic is that if St. Paul believed in a historical Adam, then such must be true and Adam must have existed as a historical individual regardless of what evolutionary science tells us.) While some might consider this to be an extreme response, it is not difficult to follow the line of reasoning given certain normative assumptions, precisely what is at stake in a religious reading of scripture. This view has certainly been behind much of the attitudes that have stigmatized people with epilepsy throughout the centuries.

Other options would be to say that Jesus accommodated himself to the assumptions of first-century Palestinian Jews (which does not necessarily tell us what ought to be believed today); that Jesus was wrong in linking epileptic seizures with demonic activity (which presumes then some kind of causal, psycho-social connection between exorcism and the resulting well-being of the boy); or that this one case is not theologically normative regarding etiologies of epilepsy (demonic possession here is the exception rather than the rule). The author of the essay does not venture into this theological territory in her analysis. Rather, she traces the reception of these texts among the patristic authors and concludes: âEpilepsyâs marginality ... was exploited in the service of Christian authorsâ moral and polemical agendas: because it signified that which was to be avoided, it was effective as a tool for constructing communal identities and policing group boundariesâ (pp. 218-219). Perhaps this is precisely what objective biblical scholarship is supposed to do: merely describe the historical effects of scriptural reception, without rendering theological judgment. The latter is inevitably subjective or perhaps would be indistinguishable from this or that ideological stance, both outcomes of which biblical scholars have been trained to assiduously avoid.

Yet a feminist hermeneutic is effective in part because of its normative theological commitments: that patriarchy and androcentrism need to be challenged. The field of disability studies is similarly committed to championing the rights of people with disabilities against their marginalization from the dominant, ableist culture. So if disability studies is to inform contemporary readings of the biblical literature, is there not a presumption here in favor of a resistance toward ableist or normative readings of the Bible? Put alternatively, if femaleness is not negative and thus feminist readings of the image of the whore are designed to critically interrogate the effects of such associations, is it not also the case that disability is not negative and disability studies readings of the image of the cripple (or whatever other impairing condition) ought to critically interrogate the effects of such associations? If so, is not the emancipation and liberation of those with disabilities an underlying goal, and in this case, readings that intentionally engage the theological dimensions of the biblical texts would not only be appropriate, but also in some sense be required? *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* opens the doors to the latter; may others working in the field of biblical scholarship and related theological disciplines, broadly understood, walk through them.

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