

The Bible and Disability: Historical Perceptions

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A couple of weeks ago *The Witness* reported that the Christian Solid Rock Church placed an advert in Johannesburg's *Northcliffe/Melville Times*. The advert read as follows: "Bring the blind, the lame, Aids and cancer victims. 43 Crutches! 25 Walking sticks! Two White canes from blind people! Already left behind!" As a result the church was later taken to the Advertising Standards Authority for unsubstantiated claims of healing. (*The Witness* 24 July 2010). This advert foregrounds one of the major problems that people with disabilities face in the local church: many people in the church still view people with disabilities primarily as individuals in need of healing, as lacking agency, as victims or, worse, as sinners.

Kabue (a Kenyan who became blind at the age of sixteen) wrote,

"Today, some Christian churches, especially in Africa, still preach that disabilities are a result of works of the devil. The presence of people with disabilities in such churches is viewed as a failure by the church to combat the devil. It is therefore seen as a challenge to the church that calls for constantly invoking Christ's power to heal, and when this does not happen the concerned person with disability is blamed for lack of faith. This is the surest way of telling the person that he or she does not belong" (Fritzson and Kabue 2004:34).

According to Kabue, people with disabilities have identified three key factors that have kept them away from the church: exclusion, an emphasis on physical healing and paternalistic and patronizing attitudes (Kabue *July - September* 2000:2).

In some ways civil society is often more enlightened than the church. The South African Constitution protects the rights of people with disabilities, and the Foreword of a White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy contains this statement: "We must stop seeing disabled people as objects of pity but as capable individuals who are contributing immensely to the development of society." However in recent years there has also been a growing awareness among Christians of the need for "a new theological understanding of disability" (A Church of All and for All 2003:14).

In searching for a new theological understanding of disability we also need to look at the Bible from a fresh perspective and to bring to it some of the issues and insights that are of importance to the modern disability movement. What do we learn about the lives of people with disabilities? Many PWDs are eager to recover the history of disability. How is disability presented in the Old and New Testaments, and in other literature dating back to biblical times? What fresh perspectives can the experience of disability offer in understanding certain texts? Because the Bible is so important in Africa, constructions of disability in the Bible (and how they are received) continue to shape attitudes in the twenty-first century and so we need to grapple with the Bible. Our context impacts on the way in which we read the Bible. Recently a number of theologians with disabilities have reflected on how reading the Bible has, at times, been an ambivalent experience for them since they have found both positive and negative aspects in reading the texts.

The Bible is without a doubt a source of strength and encouragement, but since the positive aspects of reading the Bible are often mentioned, I want to start by highlighting some of the

negative aspects and some of the texts that have troubled PWDs. First of all, certain texts seem to link disability with sin or impurity. Secondly, others imply that God causes disability. Thirdly, the miracle stories have caused particular problems for some. The miracle stories, at first glance, may seem to imply that there is no role for those who are not healed; they do not seem to be valued members of society who are accepted as they are.

One such scholar is Carol Fontaine who writes,

The dignity of the disabled and their status as potentially valued members of their societies is directly challenged by the Bible's continuous portrayal of them as *objects* of divine action. When they are being healed ... they serve as marvelous plot-devices that show off the power of God or the anointed one (1996, 293 – 294).

These stories are also complicated by the fact that although miracles do occur today, they are rare and in most instances no physical healing takes place, despite the enormous emphasis on healing in African countries. I remember watching a documentary that followed up the stories of those who had apparently been healed in services conducted by Benny Hinn and Reinhard Bonke. The documentary showed that no actual healing had taken place in the lives of the particular individuals concerned.

Fourthly, other scholars are critical of the way the Old and New Testaments emphasize the absence of disability in an eschatological future. For instance Isaiah 35:5 – 6 says, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy". These scholars say that instead of disability being seen as a normal part of the diversity of life, texts like this assume that disability is so undesirable that it must be removed in the afterlife along with everything else that is "imperfect and burdensome in earthly existence" (Mitchell and Snyder 2007:181). These texts make it harder for society to acknowledge that PWDs can be integrated into society, but "more importantly, [are] *integral* to embodied experience" (ibid.).

In addition the Bible uses metaphors with negative connotations for PWDs – people without spiritual insight are described as "blind", while those who refuse to listen are "deaf". Apart from this, the way the Bible is translated is sometimes insensitive - in the text from Isaiah, the word "lame" was used and this is not considered acceptable in our context.

How are we deal with these problems?

CONSTRUCTIONS OF DISABILITY

In dealing with an ancient text like the Bible it is important to understand that the way we think about disability, our construction of disability, isn't exactly the same as the way in which people in the ancient world thought about things. Even within our own context there are competing definitions of disability¹ and defining disability is complicated. In today's world

¹ For much of the last century in the West, the voices of those with disabilities were seldom heard. Those who talked most about disability were doctors and rehabilitation professionals. It was therefore not surprising that an individual model of disability was developed in which disability was seen mainly as a medical issue. In line with this model, the World Health Organization once used the following definitions: "*Impairment*: Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function. *Disability*: Any restriction or lack, resulting from an impairment, of ability to perform any activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being. *Handicap*: A disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, that prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors for that individual" (Fritson and Kabue 2004:ix). It is only relatively recently that people with disabilities have spoken out for themselves, defining

definitions of disability are often linked to medical, economic or political factors, although the way in which individuals actually experience disability varies widely and depends on a whole range of circumstances such as education, wealth, class and the way they are treated by others. When thinking about disability in other cultures and other periods of history, scholars have come to realize that what is considered a disability varies over time, and from culture to culture. For example, in the context of Ancient Israel, religious factors played a role in the construction of disability and certain conditions that we would not consider disabling would in practice have been disabling. For instance, some chronic skin conditions would probably be included in a list of disabilities because they would have restricted people's activities and prevented them from fulfilling the roles that they would normally have expected to fulfill, although from a physical point of view they might have been able to function with no particular difficulty in their daily lives.²

In our context we have terms for specific disabilities (e.g. blind, deaf) and we also have the term, "disability" which is an all-encompassing term. In the Bible there are, of course, words referring to specific disabilities but there is no term for "disability" that corresponds to "the modern, overarching term" (Rose 2003:11; Kelley 2007: 32 - 33). In Greek a number of general words are used to refer to disability, but their use is not confined only to what we would classify as disabilities (these include a)sqenh/j,³ a)du/natoj⁴ and a)na/phroj or a)na/peiroj,⁵ as well as cognate words from the same roots). The general impression created by these words is of powerlessness, weakness and marginalisation. The words sometimes refer to those we would classify as PWDs but at other times they are used with reference to a much larger group that that we would not classify as disabled. Very diverse physical, mental,

disability not in medical terms, but identifying disabling aspects of society as the main barrier to inclusion. The result was the development of the social model of disability in which a distinction is drawn between "impairment," which arises from biological factors and refers to the lack of part of or all of a limb, or to "having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body" (Oliver 1990:11), and "disability" which refers to "the collective experience of oppression resulting from a disabling society" (Scully 2003:267). In terms of this model "disabling barriers (such as environments, attitudes, institutions, discourses, policies and practices) shape the experiences of people with perceived impairments throughout the life course (Priestley 2003:189). Miles (1999:49) rightly points out that the Impairment-Disability dyad of the social model has proved a powerful campaign slogan but "oversimplifies the experiences of PWDs" (people with disabilities). Priestley (ibid. 18 – 19) prefers to look beyond the dichotomy between the individual and social models: in his approach, he prefers to think of disability in terms of "four overlapping themes, focusing on the body, identity, culture and social structure."

² In Leviticus 21:16 – 23 many of the physical conditions that debar a man from serving as a priest would not stop him from being able to carry out the tasks of a priest, but, because cultural notions linked purity with physical wholeness, men with certain blemishes were debarred.

³ For instance, John first uses the present participle of the verb in 5:3, then goes on to list three categories: people who are blind, have mobility problems or are paralyzed. The man at the pool is said to have been e)n t\$= a)sqenei/# au)tou= for thirty-eight years (verse 5). a)sqenh/j primarily means "physical weakness" or "sickness" and may or may not be linked to disability. In some contexts it refers to the moral weakness of the "flesh", but also, in the Christian sphere, to being weak in faith and also to the place where God's power is revealed on earth (2 Corinthians 12:9; Stählin 1964:491). In these contexts it refers to a more general weakness. Physical disability could, of course, result in such social weakness and poverty. See also Albl 2007: 146 – 147.

⁴ The word a)du/natoj does not primarily have connotations of physical disability: it is used of inability, powerlessness and lack of agency in social, political, economic, military or religious contexts. If it is used of physical disability, it is qualified by the addition of a Dative of Reference specifying the part of the body affected (e.g. "the eyes" or "the feet"). In the New Testament only in Acts 14:8 does a)du/natoj refer directly to a person with a disability. The word, however, is used in Tobit 2:10 and 5:10.

⁵ The basic meaning of this term is "maimed". It occurs in Luke 14:13 and 21 where people who are a)napei/rouj are listed among those who are poor or have mobility impairments or are blind and who are invited to the Great Banquet. These categories of people were assumed to be marginalised. Since these people could not reciprocate, the host would be repaid at the resurrection. In the LXX the word appears at Tobit 14:2 and 2 Maccabees 8:24 where it is used with reference to specific parts of the body. In the former passage the reference is to the age at which Tobit lost his sight (a)na/peiroj toi=j o)fqalmoi=j) while in the latter passage the reference is to enemies being wounded and having their limbs maimed (toi=j me/lesin a)naph/rouj).

cultural and social conditions arising from many different causes were loosely grouped together.⁶ Two passages in Luke give an indication of this broad group which included those whom we might define as people with disabilities: in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus, reading from Isaiah, said that he had been sent to the poor, the captives, the blind⁷ and the oppressed (4:18), and later, when John enquired whether Jesus was the one who was to come, Jesus responded by pointing to his miraculous healing of those with diseases, plagues, evil spirits and disabilities, and his message of good news to the poor (7:18 - 23). The gospels indicate that Jesus had a special interest in this group to which people with disabilities belonged.

While on the subject of how concepts are understood differently in different cultures, it is perhaps also a good time to point out that the understanding of “healing” in biblical times is much closer to the African understanding of healing than it is to a western understanding of healing. Stinton (2004: 63) describes the African understanding of illness and health in these words:

Illness is viewed as a calamity that not only strikes the particular individual, but also indicates a disruption of social relationships, thereby making it a family and communal concern. Where health is viewed as being more than biological, encompassing physical, mental, spiritual, social, and environmental well-being, illness signifies an unfortunate disruption of harmony in these factors. Organic causes may well be recognized, yet the overriding belief attributes sickness to spiritual or supernatural causes such as offending God or ancestral spirits, possession by evil spirits, witchcraft, breaking taboos, or curses from offended family or community members. Illness is therefore inextricably linked to human relationships with one another and with the universe.

It will be helpful to remember this view of healing when we come to look at the miracle stories.

THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

I want to turn now to some of the problems we encounter when we look at parts of the Bible from the perspective of disability: first of all, let’s look at the idea that **disability is the result of sin**. This was a common perception in biblical times. When Jesus’ disciples saw a blind man, they asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). Although Jesus replied that no-one had sinned, the assumption of the disciples was based on a very strong strand running through the OT.

This strand is known as “contractual theology” and is found, for example, in Deuteronomy 28 where many disasters are listed and attributed to a failure to obey the commandments of God. These disasters include crop failure, war, siege, starvation, captivity, drought, adultery, disease and disability. There is a contract between God and his people, and the idea that a person’s behaviour results in blessings or curses is a major strand in OT theology. The system of punishments and rewards, blessings and curses, deeds and consequences runs right

⁶ The way in which the situations of Tobit and Sarah are paralleled (e.g. Tobit 3:7 and 16 – 17) provides an interesting insight into the way blindness was viewed as something that fell into the same category as being plagued by a demon that killed each of Sarah’s seven husbands on the night of their marriage.

⁷ Marshall (1978:184) suggests that the reference to recovery of sight for the blind in Luke 4:18 is “probably metaphorical, even if Christian readers would recognise the mighty works as physical symbols of spiritual salvation.” On the contrary, I believe that it is more likely to be intended literally.

through the OT, and it is important. It is based on the created order. The world as created and ruled by God has a structure to it - disobedience can impact on creation. God's laws are not like human rules; they arise from the way creation has been ordered. This kind of contractual theology is important for maintaining order and if adhered to would undoubtedly result in a better quality of life in this world. In the OT God usually only punished his people after repeated warnings and attempts to get them to repent.

However it is not easy to apply this contractual theology in today's world. Pain or suffering or disability usually comes without warning. Wrong behaviour has consequences and sin certainly can lead to disaster – a drunk driver might have an accident and be disabled as a result - but equally that driver may crash into an innocent person who is subsequently disabled. Our world is so shot through with evil that it is often not a simple thing to pin the blame on any given individual. The way Jesus answered his disciples shows us that it is simplistic to attribute any of these happenings to sin and that even in Israel not all suffering was understood to be punishment from God. Not only is it simplistic, the other downside of holding strictly to this form of contractual theology is that it implies a world where pain need not occur - pain is a failure to be put right. There is very little hope for the marginalised in this theology, and the very strong links made between sin and the things that happen to us can be extremely discouraging.

As we have seen, Jesus recognises this and within the Bible itself, we find another perspective, where pain can be acknowledged, articulated and presented to God with the expectation that God will receive what one says (and also receive one's pain) and will bring about resolution. As he heard the cry of the Israelites in Egypt, so God hears the cry of his people. The Book of Job, although it poses more questions about suffering than it answers, is an example of this second strand – Job's friends try to convince him that he must have sinned but Job refuses to accept that his suffering is the result of sin, He complains to God that his suffering is unfair and in the end he is vindicated: God says to the friends, "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7).

Although the Bible supports the principle that you reap what you sow, other people have no right to apply this principle to any particular person (Yancey 1999:69 -70) and this principle must always be set against the truth that not all suffering comes from sin and that God will hear our pain when we cry to him. Jesus said that in this world we would have trouble but he also said that we should not be afraid because he had overcome the world. Walter Brueggemann argues that these two strands or trajectories about covenant in the OT must be held in tension. You have to hold on to both of these at the same time. On the one hand, the "blessings and curses" type of theology promotes social stability and upholds order. Order and justice are important in a society, but this kind of theology in isolation doesn't leave room for love and mercy.

In passing, it is interesting to note that in the Bible, if one makes the modern distinction between disease and chronic disability, there are actually very few passages that link disability with sin. In the Old and New Testaments, when disability is meted out as a punishment, it is usually temporary in nature; Zechariah became deaf and mute (Luke 1:20; 62 – 64); Paul was blinded (Acts 9:9), as was Elymas (Acts 13:11). In other passages disability

seems to result from an unfortunate accident⁸ or, in the New Testament, to be the result of demon possession.⁹

As further evidence that sin and suffering are not inextricably linked, the Bible says that God is concerned about society's attitude towards the marginalised - he censures the leaders of the people for not healing the sick and binding up the injured, and says that he will look after them (Ezek. 34: 4, 16), and in Leviticus (19:14) the Israelites are told not to curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in the way of the blind, but to fear their God. Job (29:15) says of himself,¹⁰ "I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame." Although some Israelites, like Job, had a social conscience, it is likely that many people with disabilities in Israel were stigmatised because they were believed to have offended God (Zeph. 3:19). Other texts suggest that the disabled were abused and robbed.¹¹ Where beggars are mentioned in the New Testament, they generally have some form of disability.

Let's move on to the second problem raised: **God causes people to be disabled.** I have always disliked the poem about how God looks for special parents for a disabled baby that He is about to send into the world. It doesn't match with experience: some children do get special parents, others get very bad parents. The idea that God causes disability might seem to find some support from Ex. 4:11 where the Lord tells Moses that he is the one who makes a person deaf or mute, who gives sight or causes a person to be blind. However it is dangerous to take one verse in isolation. I prefer to understand this to mean that we are all part of God's diverse creation, not that God deliberately singles out someone for disability. PWDs are as important to God as those without disabilities. Moses is as much a part of God's creation as someone who speaks fluently. In Job a distinction is made: God permits Job's problems but doesn't directly cause them. However, once we are facing a challenge, God is with us in that situation and ready to help us. How we respond is important to God, and Moses in fact responds badly.

God does not blame Moses for his poor speech – on the contrary, he values him and wants to use him just as he is. The text suggests that it is Moses who thinks of his disability as a problem in doing God's will, and his lack of confidence means that he turns down God's first offer to help. God said, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak". Instead Moses settled for Plan B – to have Aaron speak for him!

Whether we recognise it or not we all have limits. The church in Laodicea was very self-satisfied – "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." In reality they were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked (Rev. 3:17). I recently read a book by Beth Creamer in which she sets out a "theology of limits" that rejects unrealistic ideals and illusions of perfection (111). We all have limits; limits are a normal part of human life – even Jesus limited himself when he took on human form. Saying that we all have limits is not meant to minimise any

⁸ 2 Samuel 4.4 there is a description of how Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, became lame: his nurse dropped him in her haste to flee. Tobit, a righteous man, was blinded when sparrow droppings fell in his eyes (Tobit 2:9 – 10). His sorrowful family cared for him.

⁹ Rensberger argues against the interpretation that the purpose of the man's blindness was to provide an opportunity for God's works to be revealed in the individual (John 9:3). "Grammatically, he changes the man's blindness from a result to a cause...Jesus sees it as an occasion for doing the works of God, that is, for relieving the suffering" (1988, 44).

¹⁰ The word "lame" is an example of the insensitive terminology used in modern translations of the biblical texts. More appropriate translations need to be found.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 28:28 – 29 spells out one of the consequences of God's curse if the law is not obeyed: "The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind; you shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness; but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help." The blindness spoken of in the first part of the verse is probably metaphorical (the Greek word used is *a)orasi/a* cf. its use in Gen. 19:11).

suffering arising from those limits nor does it devalue efforts as individuals and as a society to overcome those limits but it does let us reflect on how we interpret those limits and also to identify those areas where limits become disabling because of social or physical barriers.

If we are open to our own individual limits and abilities, we can care for and appreciate each other more fully and strengthen our community (118). This is very different from merely pitying people with disabilities: it is recognition that in the church we are interdependent on one another for our well-being. This is something that individualistic Westerners battle to come to terms with, but it is something that PWDs can teach the church. Many PWDs are dependant on someone for assistance, and can help us to learn that we need to depend on each other in different ways for our own wellbeing. This is illustrated in 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul uses the physical body as an image for the church. He points out that everyone has gifts and everyone has limits: not all have the same gift and for that reason everyone is needed. It is interesting that in discussion of the different parts of the body, we see something of how the various parts were valued: the hand was considered more valuable than the foot, the eye than the ear or the hand, and the head than the feet. The foot feels inferior to the hand and says, "Because I am not a hand, I don't belong to the body", and the eye feels superior to the hand, "I have no need of you". Paul criticises both those who feel superior and those who feel inferior. We are all part of one another and we all need each other. The scriptural ideal is therefore that we each care for the other in the present.¹² This does not mean that, in the case of PWDs, the care is one way – PWDs also have an obligation to care for others and assist them.

Thirdly, let's consider the criticism that PWDs are **absent from heaven, their bodies transformed and healed**. I actually battle to understand this objection: as Christians the resurrection is a time of hope and each one of us is going to be transformed, spiritually and physically. The limits that we experience here on earth will be a thing of the past. However in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul implies that there will be continuities and discontinuities between our earthly and our resurrected bodies. Paul compares our two bodies to a seed and the plant that grows from it: there is continuity but difference. No-one's earthly body will be suitable for heaven. We will each be given a new body that is right for our new context: imperishable, glorious and powerful. The differences between our earthly bodies will pale into insignificance compared to the difference between an earthly and a resurrection body.

Finally I want to consider the **miracle stories** and look at one in particular. There is some evidence that the religious system in Israel was not very actively concerned for people who were ill or disabled. In the pre-exilic period (for instance, at the shrine of Shiloh), there are indications that people went to temples to pray for healing and that priests, like Eli who were blind, were not excluded from the premises (1 Samuel 1 – 3; Avalos 1995: 334 – 337).¹³ In

¹² This care was reflected in legislation designed for the protection of the disabled in Israel. In the Mishnah it is stated that a man who has raped a woman must marry her whether she has a mobility impairment or is blind or afflicted by boils (Ket. 3:5). Although this is abhorrent to us, the intention was to protect the girl despite her disabilities. People who were deaf-mutes (along with people with mental disabilities and minors) are mentioned quite frequently in the Mishnah, since they were considered to have no understanding (M. Arak. 1:1). This had certain legal and cultic implications and disadvantages,¹² but was also in some instances for the protection of such people. If the wife of a deaf-mute or a mentally impaired person was acting in a compromising way, a court was to warn her of her husband's jealousy so that he could divorce her without payment if he recovered (M. Sot. 4:5). Those who wounded a deaf-mute (or a mentally impaired person or a minor) were culpable but a deaf-mute (or mentally impaired person or a minor) was not culpable if he wounded others (M. B.K. 4:1).

¹³ Even if the functions attributed in 1 Samuel 1 – 3 do not reflect the reality of what went on in Shiloh, the story at least indicates that there was a tradition that accepted prayers for healing and the presence of a blind priest as legitimate (Avalos 1995: 335 – 336).

addition, there are a number of accounts of healings performed by prophets.¹⁴ However, the Temple in Jerusalem seems not to have had a significant petitionary or therapeutic function in Israel (Avalos 1995:379). People received very little direct assistance from the religious system in Israel. They were encouraged to pray for healing but not at the Temple, although the Temple did function as a place where people went to give thanks after healing or to be pronounced clean.¹⁵ There are even hints of a tradition that excluded the blind and those with mobility impairments, amongst others, from the Temple.¹⁶

There were three festivals in the year in which all males were commanded to go up to Jerusalem: the Passover, the festival of Booths and the Festival of Weeks (Exod. 23:14; Deut. 16:16). These were meant to be times when the unity of the people of Israel was visible and yet we learn from the Mishnah that the Rabbis list those exempted from these festivals. A deaf-mute, a person with a mental disability, a minor, a person of doubtful sex, an androgynous person, women, slaves who had not been freed and anyone who had a mobility impairment, or was blind, sick or aged and who could not walk on his feet was exempt from the obligation to appear before the Lord (M. Hag. 1.1).¹⁷ The motive for these exemptions might have been compassion but equally it might have been convenience or rejection of those involved. A festival that should have been a time for unity could foreground division.

People with defects could not serve as priests or make offerings to God, on the ground that they would desecrate the sanctuary (Lev. 21.16 –23).¹⁸ Holiness was thought to involve wholeness, as well as being ritually clean. However, priests with mobility impairments or who were mutilated were allowed in certain parts of the Temple (M. Midd 2.5¹⁹) where they performed different functions.

The pool at Bethesda may have met a need that was not met by the Temple. The pool seems to have become a recognized healing institution after Herod the Great had built the reservoir and porticoes on the Temple Mount to supply water for cultic purposes (Richardson 1996, 190). Healing sanctuaries in the ancient world performed a function in society, given the very limited state of medical knowledge at the time. They “enabled society to put its sick in places

¹⁴ The prophets pray to God and he performs miracles; the son of the widow at Zarephath is healed when Elijah prays (1 Kings 17:8 – 24). Elisha’s dealings with the Shunammite woman are interesting: she was cured of her infertility and then, when her son later died, she had him restored to life when Elisha prayed (2 Kings 4). Namaan was cured of leprosy after Elisha instructed him to wash in the Jordan and call on God. It led him to declare that there was no God in the world except in Israel (2 Kings 5:15). Note that the prophets also acted as oracles and had knowledge of whether people would recover from the disease.

¹⁵ Avalos (1995:379 – 390) suggests a number of reasons for the laws in P: the centralization of the cult on the Temple meant that there was pressure on the space in the Temple and since Yahweh was not restricted to the Temple, there was no need for those seeking healing to go there in person. In addition, purity laws and considerations of power also played a part while holiness was equated with wholeness, these laws expressed differences in status and power since those who were chronically ill were not as productive and were excluded.

¹⁶ 2 Samuel 5:8. See the discussion by Avalos (1995:318 – 320). Avalos (323) points to a clause in the Temple scroll that forbids any blind person to enter the sanctuary city. People who had various skin conditions or injured feet or hands, who were lame or blind or deaf and mute or who were old and feeble were not allowed to belong to the Qumran community (1QSaII:4 – 9, cited by Avalos 1995:376).

¹⁷ Scripture, “in designating these three “foot festivals” (a pun on r^egalim, Exod. 23:14) requires celebrants to walk from Jerusalem up to the Temple” (Wegner 1988, 156).

¹⁸ Josephus records that Antigonus lacerated the ears of the suppliant Hyrcanus to disqualify him from resuming the high priesthood (Jewish War 1:270).

¹⁹ In the four corners of the Court of the Women there were enclosed courts: “That to the north-east was the Chamber of the Wood-shed, for there the priests that were blemished examined the wood for worms, for any wood wherein was found a worm was invalid [and could not be burnt] upon the Altar” (Danby 1933, 592). Josephus provides further information, those who were of priestly lineage but who had some defect “were admitted within the parapet...and received the portions which were their birthright, but wore ordinary dress” (Jewish War 5:228, LCL)

where they would be less of a burden but without being totally excluded” (Theissen 1983: 235). Such sanctuaries offered the sick hope without disturbing the status quo.

Jesus therefore was operating in a context where the religious structures tended to marginalise those with diseases and disabilities. Rules about the Sabbath prevented those who were ill from seeking healing on that day. By way on contrast, Jesus made God’s love for sick or disabled people very clear and exhibited a very different attitude towards the Sabbath: “restoring human health took precedence over rules about time” (Avalos 1999:114). The healings performed by Jesus often resulted in conflict since they were used to legitimate a new religious understanding.²⁰

LUKE 13: 10 – 17²¹

I mentioned earlier that Fontaine criticised the miracle stories because, in them, PWDs “serve as marvelous plot-devices that show off the power of God or the anointed one”. It is true that one function of the miracle stories is to teach us about Jesus and the kingdom of God. This is a kingdom unlike any human kingdom where notions of power and status are completely counter-cultural and where people are not valued because they are rich or strong or healthy or clever or from a noble family. The healing miracles played a central role in the ministry of Jesus and it is likely that the authors of the gospel narratives expected their readers to receive the accounts of those miracles as good news. It seems to me that Jesus’ intention²² was actually much more in line with the aspirations of modern disability activists who work for the liberation of PWDs: namely, to include those whom the religious structures had excluded and to show them God’s favour. In Jewish culture it was important that this favour should be shown in physical and material ways.²³ While it is true, as Fontaine argues, that people with disabilities in the New Testament are all seen to need healing, they are not, in my opinion, necessarily considered to be merely objects of divine action. In my analysis of Luke 13:10 – 17 I hope to show that those who healed are not always depicted as objects, and that the woman bent double is a subject, someone who takes action. This story also attaches no blame to the woman and confirms that the woman had been “a daughter of Abraham” even during the eighteen years before she was healed.²⁴

No aspersions are cast on the moral character of the woman. In v.11 the woman is described as having a “spirit” of weakness (a)sqenei/aj).²⁵ Although scholars have debated whether she had a demon or whether this was simply a way of talking about her condition (Hendrickx 2000: 277), the reference to Satan (13:16) seems to indicate that Luke was thinking of a spirit, but without suggesting that she had done anything wrong. On the contrary, she had been wronged by Satan. She had been caught up in the spiritual battles raging behind the scenes of history. The impression that sin had nothing to do with her condition is strengthened by the

²⁰ It should be noted that not all of Jesus’ healings produced conflict. Conflict usually arose in the case of those performed on the Sabbath or those linked to a controversial claim (e.g. Mark 2:7).

²¹ In this section I have drawn on my article in *Journal of Constructive Theology*, “A Daughter of Abraham”: Luke 13: 10 – 17 and the Inclusion of People with Disabilities.”

²² In speaking of Jesus’ intention, I refer not only to the literary accounts in the gospels, but also to the socio-historical context of Jesus ministry. In addition, from the narrative and socio-historical context one can make theological claims in our own context.

²³ It is, however, interesting that the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19 – 31) seems to present an implicit challenge to this perspective. Lazarus is only rewarded after death.

²⁴ Cf. Albl’s analysis of Galatians 4:13 – 14 (2007: 152 – 154) in which he points out that Paul was not scorned by the Galatians despite his condition, but was received as “an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.” By way of contrast, some of the Corinthians argued that his weakness (whatever that might mean) was a disqualifying factor.

²⁵ In Tobit, Sarah’s “disability” was also caused by a demon (Asmodeus, who killed each of her husbands before they could consummate the marriage), yet she was portrayed as righteous (3:13 – 14).

reference, a few verses earlier (13:1 – 4), denying that the Galileans killed by Pilate or the eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam had fallen were worse sinners than anybody else. The emphasis is rather on the way in which Jesus' healing ministry "is equated with the victory over the reign of demonic powers in the end time" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992:199).²⁶ People get to experience the liberating power of God.

Furthermore, the woman's encounter with Jesus is set on the Sabbath in a synagogue to which, presumably, she had gone to worship and perhaps to seek healing from Jesus. She seems to have arrived suddenly after Jesus had already started teaching (kai\ i)dou\ gunh/, v. 11). Luke gives no indication that this had been pre-arranged by the Jewish authorities.²⁷ In 13:14, after the healing, the ruler of the synagogue addressed not Jesus but the crowd. Speaking to all of them (the verb forms are in the plural), he said that they should not come on the Sabbath, but on the other six days and be cured. He may have been warning them for the future (Fitzmyer 1985:1013), but the implication seems to be that at least some people in the synagogue, including the woman, had come specifically to seek healing. Her actions can therefore be seen as a challenge to a system that distorted God's intention for the Sabbath by setting time limits to healing. Although Jesus seems to take the initiative by addressing her and laying hands on her (12–13), he may actually have been responding to her prior initiative in going to the synagogue. If so she is a subject, an agent, with a more active role. As a woman and as a person with disabilities, she refused to accept the barriers erected by her religious tradition.

In 13:16 Jesus is said to have referred to the woman as "a daughter of Abraham," thereby indicating that the "Jewish religious heritage is not restricted to the healthy or to males. This woman belongs to reconstituted Israel" (Karris 2001:705). Jesus, by his words, perhaps presented the woman in a new light to those witnessing the encounter and who had perhaps marginalised her. The fact that she had had a disability for eighteen years had not affected her status as a member of the community, as a "daughter of Abraham." This description was also applied to the mother who endured the torture and death of her seven sons at the hand of Antiochus and yet remained true to her faith: "as the daughter of God-fearing Abraham she remembered his fortitude" (4 Maccabees 15:28, NRSV).²⁸ This mother was a woman of exemplary faith and perhaps the reader is meant to make the connection between the two texts. In both texts women suffered oppression at the hands of more powerful men who tried to bring them into line with their own religious convictions.

On the other hand, it is interesting that Luke used similar language in 19:9 ("a son of Abraham") to refer to Zacchaeus, who, as a tax-collector, was an outcast.²⁹ Perhaps the woman in Luke 13, because of her illness, had also been viewed as an outcast and a sinner (Marshall 1978:559), although the text does not state this explicitly. Hendrickx (2000:276–277) writes, "Her illness does not only prevent her from moving around normally, but makes her also socially inferior. People who cannot stand up straight are easily pushed to the fringes of society by their fellow-creatures." Certainly Jesus implied that the ruler of the synagogue and others who agreed with him (Marshall 1978:558), and whom he addressed as "hypocrites,"

²⁶ For Schüssler Fiorenza (1992:202) the powers from which the woman was set free represent patriarchy.

²⁷ Contrast the situation in Mark 3:1 – 6.

²⁸ The Greek text of this verse reads th=j qeosebou=j)Abraa\m karteri/aj h(quga/thr e)mnh/sqh (lit. "the daughter remembered the fortitude of God-fearing Abraham"). The phrase therefore was not coined by Luke, as Jervell suggested (cited by Schüssler Fiorenza 1992:208).

²⁹ A similar phrase, "You sons of Abraham's family," occurs in Acts 13:26. Paul addresses the Jews in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in this way. The phrase seems to be used rhetorically to align the audience with Paul's views and to contrast them with the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders who had not understood the words of the prophets and so had condemned Jesus. Again the phrase is used against a background of a dominant discourse.

disabilities and the insights that they bring. The biblical texts are “living traditions that are challenged and renewed by lived experience of ongoing generations of Christians” (Toensing 2007:133). While any section of the body of Christ is excluded I believe that we are not being true to the message of Jesus.

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