

SRTD

STUDIES IN RELIGION, THEOLOGY, AND DISABILITY

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SERIES EDITORS

*Sarah J. Melcher*

Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio

and

*Amos Yong*

Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California

**The Bible and Disability**

*A Commentary*

Sarah J. Melcher

Mikeal C. Parsons

Amos Yong

*Editors*

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## John, First–Third John, and Revelation

Jaime Clark-Soles

The Johannine Literature consists of the Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation.<sup>1</sup> Different genres of literature are represented by each. The Gospel is a literary narrative that intentionally aims, through story, to persuade the reader of its thesis statement: "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). First–Third John are epistolary and hortatory. Revelation is an apocalypse, replete with visionary experiences; fantastic imagery; highly symbolic, allegorical language; an interest in numerology; and an urgent sense of the eschaton. Apocalyptic literature is written for and tends to appeal to those who find themselves oppressed politically and socially and on the verge of losing faith and hope. The author encourages the readers by insisting that, despite all appearances, God's justice will finally inhere in the world and the great reversal will occur: the lowly will be exalted and the haughty will be brought low. The author exhorts the readers to remain faithful through the struggle, even unto death.

Though all this literature is considered "Johannine," only Revelation names its author as John but does not say which John (a name as common then as it is now). Unlike 2 and 3 John, the author of 1 John remains entirely unnamed but claims to be an eyewitness to the earthly Jesus (1 John 1:1–4). Due to apparent knowledge of and dependence upon

<sup>1</sup> I must thank Rev. Helen Betenbaugh and Dr. Sang Soo Hyun for engaging this chapter seriously and offering important critiques and suggestions.

the traditions evinced by the Fourth Gospel, some assume that the same author penned both texts. Based upon differences in theology and style, however, others attribute 1 John to a different author, perhaps the “elder” referred to in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1. The composition history of the Fourth Gospel itself is quite complex and probably reflects various stages of the Johannine community and more than one authorial or editorial hand. As a result, theories concerning the authorship and dating of the Gospel and each epistle abound.

Also unlike 2 and 3 John, 1 John is more a hortatory address or essay than an epistle. It lacks the conventional features of a letter, including the names of the sender and recipient, opening and closing greetings, or a thanksgiving. Second John is written to “the elect lady and her children” and 3 John to Gaius. First John does not designate its audience, but its rhetoric, allusions, and assumptions indicate that the audience is part of the “Johannine community.” In each case, the author is concerned with both the theology and ethics of the community.

In disability studies it is customary to distinguish between impairment (a physiological, medical phenomenon) and disability (a social phenomenon). A society disables people with impairments when it refuses to take steps to ensure that all members of society have equal access to the benefits of that society (including education, transportation, employment, architecture that can be navigated, political power, etc.—all entitlements that people with normative bodies usually take for granted). Another crucial matter of definition relates to the language of “cure” and “healing.” In this essay “cure” refers to the elimination of impairment and is experienced at the individual level. “Healing” refers to a person who has experienced integration and reconciliation to self, God, and the community. “Healing” may or may not involve a “cure.” Just as impairment is experienced on an individual basis, so is a “cure.” Just as a disability is a communally imposed limitation, so also “healing” is a communally based liberation.

The differences in genre (and therefore purpose) of the material necessitate an eclectic methodology. Drawing upon insights from different models and methods to illuminate or interrogate different aspects of the texts, we will explore them with a view to answering this question: From a disability perspective, what are the promises and pitfalls of these texts with respect to ancient audiences and later interpreters? That is, in what ways does the text have liberative potential and in what ways does it present obstacles for those seeking abundant life (John 10:10)?

#### FOURTH GOSPEL

The Fourth Gospel is a narrative. Its rhetoric depends, therefore, upon literary techniques including plot, characters, setting, and point of view (omniscient narration, in this case). To interpret the Fourth Gospel from a disability perspective, one must attend not only to obvious texts, such as the healing/cure narratives and passion and resurrection stories, but also to the Gospel’s emphasis on creation, incarnation, and the peace of Christ. Comparatively speaking, few healing/cure stories appear: one at Cana (4:46-54), one at Bethesda (5:1-15), and one at Siloam (ch. 9). Only those in chapters 5 and 9 involve a disability.

#### THE PROLOGUE: JOHN 1:1-18

##### *Diversity in Creation: And God Said, “It Is Good”*

Using the same opening phrase as Genesis, “In the beginning” (Ἐν ἀρχῇ, *en archē*), the Gospel commences its narrative about the incarnation, the Word (λόγος, *logos*) made flesh. Christians typically equate the Word with Jesus of Nazareth. Striking is the author’s insistence that “Everything came into being through him and without him not even one thing (οὐδὲ ἓν, *oude hen*) came into being” (1:3; my trans.), since it implies that the diversity of creation is by God’s design. Is this diversity to be celebrated or overcome? Immediately, then, we are drawn into some of the most difficult questions debated in disability studies.

Are disabilities the mark of the demonic, the divine, both, or neither? The ancients commonly ascribed physical or mental disabilities to demonic forces. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ opponents, who seek to disable him throughout the narrative, routinely accuse him of having a demon (ἔχει δαιμόνιον, *echei daimonion*), which is equated with being mentally insane (μαίνεται, *mainetai*) (7:20, 8:48-52, 10:20-21). Diane Devries, a disabilities activist, was born with arm stumps and no lower limbs. Her grandmother ascribed her deformities to a tryst between her mother and the devil. The delivering physician considered her impairments a tragedy, which is common for those operating from a medical model of disability: “The medicalization of disability casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy” (Linton 1998, 11). For Devries, “It seems no more necessary to ask why she was born with her body, than it does to pose the same question of her able-bodied younger sister. In refusing to define her own birth as a tragedy, Devries rejects dominant conceptions and reconceives it as the natural beginning of an ordinary life” (Eiesland 1994, 34).

Verse 3 implies that “good bodies” come in a variety of forms. Rather than “fixing” bodies that deviate from the “norm,” the concern should be to fix society to make it inclusive of all bodies. Rather than eradicating difference, society should accommodate, even celebrate it. To denigrate differently abled bodies is to denigrate creation and, by extension, its creator.

Some would find the notion that disability is a part of God’s creative design to be oppressive rather than liberating. Part of the problem with the conversation is that, for the sake of sustaining a dialogue and debate, a vast variety of experiences are placed under the label “disability.” The experience of a congenital impairment is almost always quite different from one that develops later in life. In the latter case, people often experience a deep sense of loss and grief that does not characterize the experience of the former. The difference between intellectual disabilities and physical disabilities causes immense tensions and problems in the disability community. In their own struggle for justice, some people with physical disabilities fight very hard to distinguish themselves from those with intellectual disabilities in the eyes of temporarily able-bodied (TAB) people. People who are blind or are in wheelchairs often have the experience of people speaking to them more loudly or slowly or simply, as if they were cognitively impaired. Next, a chronic impairment is vastly different from an illness. While some impairments cause inconvenience, others cause unmitigated, debilitating pain. Some impairments are obvious to the onlooker, while others are hidden such that the person with a disability (PWD) can “pass” as “normal.” This immense variety and complexity makes any analysis of the scriptural texts from “a” disability perspective a bit unwieldy and susceptible to critique and demands for further nuance than a brief chapter can provide, but the matter is important enough to risk making some suggestions anyway.

There is a vigorous debate in the disability literature about whether those with impairments should seek a cure if possible or whether to do so is to acquiesce to, rather than resist, the oppressive, narrow values of normate society. For instance, many in the Deaf community do not find deafness to be a disability. Just as Spanish and German are languages, so is American Sign Language. If others are ignorant of a language, they should not look down on those who know it. Many in the Deaf community criticize the insertion of cochlear implants as a means to join the “normate” community. Christopher Reeve serves as a lightning rod; many in the disability community have a negative view of him insofar as he sought a cure until his death rather than embracing his differently abled body. He is contrasted to a person like Nancy Mairs, who has multiple sclerosis. Mairs declares, “I’d take a cure; I just don’t need one” (Wynn 2007, 66).

When my daughter was in fifth grade, the science teacher was covering genetics. As she explained that males have an XY chromosome and females an XX, my daughter raised her hand to ask about hermaphrodites. The teacher responded, “They are a genetic mistake.” How does this cohere with John 1:3? Theologian Amos Yong has a brother with Down syndrome, which can be described in terms of physical or cognitive features, or genetically: a trisomic mutation of the twenty-first chromosome. As Yong indicates, “Mark has all of these ‘normal’ features for a person with trisomy 21” (2011, 3). Is he a “genetic mistake” who needs to be rehabilitated to resemble more closely the normate ideal, or is he part of God’s intentional creation just as he is, gifted to testify to the gospel and serve as one member of the body of Christ? Furthermore, what would it mean to cure Mark of his cognitive or physical disabilities; would that not erase Mark himself? Does erasure of difference honor God as the potter who makes the clay and who shapes the pot?

Verses 1-5 insist that God is in the business of *life* (ζωή, *zōē*, and its cognates occur frequently, fifty-six times). At all times when reading the Johannine texts through the lens of disability, Christians are to ask: What gives life and what hinders life? Once they discern the answer, they are to work the works of God and thereby serve life.

### *Children of God*

John 1:11-13 adumbrates the plot of the Gospel. Jesus will be rejected by some and accepted by others. All who receive him become children of God, born “not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of a husband, but of God” (v. 13; my trans.). People with disabilities sometimes find themselves cast as children of a lesser God. Do people with disabilities have to be cured or healed to be considered fully children of God? Are people with disabilities farther from the grace of God: “There but for the grace of God, go I”? This is an expression that many PWDs have heard, and it is deeply problematic in its implications. It implies that the PWD is outside the grace of God; it implies that the reason one is TAB is because one is especially favored or blessed by God. It entirely misses the meaning of grace and blessing, not to mention the cross. It makes God appear capricious or malevolent. And the list goes on.

Too often readers move from the occasional miracle story that connects faith and cure to a generalized notion that cure depends upon faith or forgiveness of sin. This is not a defensible move, as one discovers upon further study. In chapters 5 and 9, Jesus takes the initiative to cure the two

men; one becomes a follower, the other does not. In the only other story of a cure in John, faith comes as a *result* of the cure; this continually frustrates Jesus, who expresses impatience with “signs faith”: “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe” (4:48). A mature faith requires no magic tricks. When someone advises a disabled person simply to pray harder or have more faith in order to be cured, the adviser operates against the grain of the Fourth Gospel and burdens the disabled person with blame and judgment. Where the health and wealth “gospel” reigns, Christ does not.

### *Incarnation*

John 1:14 is central for the consideration of the intersection of disability studies and the Bible, the intersection of bodies and theology: “And the Word became flesh (σάρξ, *sarx*) and tabernacled (σκηνώω, *skēnoō*) among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (my trans.). Many implications derive from this statement.

First, the embodiment of the divine undergirds the whole Gospel. Plato emphasized the distance between the material order (the phenomenal world) and the higher realm (the noumenal world), which is summarized by his memorable phrase *soma sēma* (“the body is a tomb”). In contrast, John finds the body to be a locus and instrument of the divine (hence the use of the word σκηνώω [*skēnoō*, “tabernacle”]) and the reference to Jesus’ body as a temple [ναός, *naos*] in 2:21). In fact, the whole created order reflects and symbolizes God’s nature and activity (1:3). Bread is no longer just bread (6:35); water is no longer just water (4:14); flesh is no longer just flesh (6:51).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “If the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us—i.e., if the Word of God came out of the birth canal of a woman’s body, grew, ate, went to the bathroom, bathed, struggled against demons, sweated, wept, exulted, was transfigured, was physically violated, and rotted away in a tomb just before being gloriously resurrected—then the Bible must have flesh on it. If a valley of dry bones can live again, then bones and blood and bread and flesh and bodies should never be left behind when we are trying to understand the grime and glory of Scripture. Any interpretation that denounces the material, created order, including our own bodies, should be suspect. From birth to death our bodies swell and shrink; they are wet with milk and sweat and urine and vomit and sex and blood and water, and wounds that fester and stink and are healed and saved and redeemed and die and are resurrected. If you can’t glory in or at least talk about these basic realities in church while reading Scripture, then how can Scripture truly intersect with or impact life? We might as well just go read a Jane Austen novel—though I doubt we’ll ever be transformed or made whole or saved by it” (Clark-Soles 2010, 32).

Second, this Gospel is particularly intimate both physically and emotionally. Bodies touch. Jesus is in God’s bosom (κόλπος, *kolpos*; 1:18) just as the Beloved Disciple reclines upon Jesus’ bosom (ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ, *en tō kolpō*; 13:23). Jesus rubs mud on the eyes of the man in chapter 9. Mary, the sister of Martha, wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair (11:2). Jesus washes the disciples’ feet and wipes them (13:5). Joseph and Nicodemus wrap and bury Jesus’ dead body (19:39–42). Mary Magdalene holds on to Jesus (20:17). Thomas is invited to touch Jesus’ wounded hands and side (20:27). Those who perpetrate violence against another’s body in the Gospel always do so with an object such that the bodies do not, in fact, touch (Peter chops off the ear with a sword (18:10); Pilate’s lackeys flog Jesus with a whip (19:1); the soldier’s jam the crown of thorns onto Jesus’ head and spear Jesus’ side (19:2, 38)). They use objects to objectify the body of the other.

Third, the Gospel is highly sensual: seeing, hearing, smelling (11:39), touching, and tasting (2:9) all figure into the narrative.

Fourth, bodies do not need to be “overcome.” They are sites of vulnerability, connection, shame and glory. Jesus’ body experiences a range of states and experiences—God is in them all (note that this Gospel never finds Jesus feeling forsaken by God as he does in Mark 15:34 and Matt 27:46). He does not try to escape his ordeal and does not feel abandoned. He knows that it is not God but society that attempts to disable him. Notably, when he appears in his resurrection, his body is not repaired but continues to bear the wounds in his hands and side.

Is it any wonder that the Gospel that focuses most overtly on incarnation is also the Gospel that uses the language of love (φιλέω, *phileō*; ἀγαπάω, *agapaō*) more than any other Gospel? Furthermore, when one considers those relationships that are usually deemed most intimate, they all appear in John (mother, father, child, sibling, friend, spouse, partner).

### JOHN 5:1–18: WILLING TO BE HEALED?

Along with chapter 9, 5:1–18 is a *crux interpretum* for those interested in disability and the Bible. The Fourth Evangelist typically relies upon inter-characterization; that is, characters can only be fully understood by comparing them with other characters in the narrative.

The man provides a negative example for readers in at least two ways. First, he represents failed discipleship. He encounters Jesus, but by the end of the narrative he not only does not follow Jesus, but he also works against Jesus by implicating him to the religious authorities. Second, he appears to represent those who suffer impairment as a result of their own sinful behavior.

*An Interpretation*

This cure story immediately follows the one in chapter 4 where the father, a “royal official” (βασιλικός, *basilikos*) exemplifies a faithful response to Jesus’ curing of his son’s illness. In chapter 5 we find the man who was ill for thirty-eight years in Jerusalem at the “hospital” called Bethesda. Since it served as a hospital of sorts, it is not surprising that “a multitude of invalids” (πλήθος τῶν ἀσθενούντων, *plēthos tōn asthenountōn*) were there. The word translated as “invalid” here comes from the verb ἀσθενέω (*astheneō*), meaning to be sick or weak. It is a generic term covering a variety of impairments. In this case the author further modifies *astheneō* with the tripartite phrase blind (τυφλῶν, *tuphlōn*; 5:3; 9:1-2, 13, 17-20 24-25, 32, 39-41; 10:21; 11:37), lame (χωλῶν, *chōlōn*; only occurrence), and paralyzed (ξηρῶν, *xērōn*; only occurrence). The word *astheneō* occurs eight times in the Fourth Gospel (4:46; 5:3, 7; 6:2; 11:1-3, 6). Of course, the heteronyms *invalid* and *invalid* should not be lost on the modern reader concerned about disability issues.

At verse 6 Jesus asks the unnamed man if he wills or wishes (θέλω, *thelō*) to be healthy (ὑγιής, *hygiēs*; 5:6, 9, 11, 14-15; 7:23). On the face of it, it is a stupid or insensitive question: Who does *not* wish to be healthy? Notice, however, that the man does not actually answer the question; he says neither yes nor no. Many readers of this Gospel understand this to be the question of all questions—unless one has the will (1:43; 3:8; 5:6, 21, 35, 40; 6:11, 21, 67; 7:1, 17, 44; 8:44; 9:27; 12:21; 15:7; 16:19; 17:24; 21:18, 22-23) to be well, the likelihood of wellness remains slim. What one wills or wishes matters. In fact, it would appear that some people find their equilibrium precisely in misery. Sometimes our sense of identity is based upon our impairment. If one does not actually wish or will to become healthy, it might be difficult for anyone, including Jesus, to help one to do so. Does the man in chapter 5 wish to be made well? The evidence is not in his favor. First, he produces an impressive litany of excuses: (1) I have no one to help me when the time is right, and (2) when I do try, I get trumped by someone more able. Second, he clearly has not made any connections or built any community in thirty-eight years. Third, he never declares that he wants to be made well (though he readily follows Jesus’ orders). Finally, though Jesus grants him healing, he shows no sign of gratitude, transformation, or understanding. One may imagine that he ended up right back by the pool, drowning in his self-chosen illness, totally unlike the blind man in chapter 9. He takes no risks for the gospel but protects his own interests at the expense of Jesus.

Are there benefits to remaining ill? Might it alleviate responsibility? What is the cost of becoming well? Perhaps it would involve radical change and the adoption of a new persona to some degree. If one is in a family or a web of relationships, it might mean potential rupture of those relationships as one steps out into health and refuses to play or matures past an assigned role in the family drama.

Though the man never overtly agrees to the cure, Jesus assumes center stage in the drama and effects it. He commands the man to stand up and walk (which obviously further defines the author’s meaning of healthy [ὑγιής, *hygiēs*; 5:9]). The fact that the whole event occurred on a Sabbath (a recurring theme in John: 5:9-10, 16, 18; 7:22-23; 9:14, 16; 19:31; 20:1, 19) antagonizes the religious authorities (gatekeepers of said Sabbath), who accost the man who had been therapeutized (θεραπεύω, *therapeuō*). Just as the man took no responsibility for his illness, he takes no responsibility for his healing. He immediately blames the incident on the man (ἄνθρωπος, *anthrōpos*) who directed him, a man whom he does not know. These are apparently damning facts. First, those who do not grasp Jesus’ full identity refer to him merely as an *anthrōpos*, culminating in Pilate’s famous dictum: “Behold, the *anthrōpos*” (19:5). Second, the verb “to know” (γινώσκω, *ginōskō*) serves to mark insiders and outsiders in the Fourth Gospel. Insiders know; outsiders do not. The fact that the man confesses that he does not know Jesus implies that he does not become a disciple of Jesus and, in fact, serves as a failed example of discipleship.

Once again, Jesus takes it upon himself to approach the man in verse 14. He finds the man in the temple, of all places, and declares, “Behold you have become healthy (ὑγιής, *hygiēs*). No longer keep sinning, in order that nothing worse happens to you” (my trans.). The command occurs in the second-person present imperative. The present implies ongoing, habitual action. As controversial and problematic as Jesus’ command might be here for modern readers, there is no question that Jesus assumes this man to be an ongoing sinner of some sort. Note that the man’s reaction to his cure is not one of gratitude or discipleship; rather, he tattles to the antagonistic religious authorities with whom Jesus has already clashed in the temple (2:13-20). As a direct causal result of the man’s actions (διὰ τοῦτο, *dia touto*), the religious authorities persecuted Jesus for curing on the Sabbath. At this point the narrative morphs into a Sabbath controversy story focused upon Jesus’ identity and authority vis-à-vis God.

In 1:11 we were informed that Jesus came unto his own and his own did not receive him. This seems to be the case with this Jewish man and the religious authorities in chapter 5, especially when juxtaposed with the

Samaritan (non-Jewish) woman in 4:1-42, who engages Jesus deeply and becomes the first evangelist in the Gospel, or the royal official (gentile) in 4:46-54 who rounds out the Cana-to-Cana cycle with his own belief and that of his whole household.

Is there any way that chapter 5 might be useful or suggestive for those who seek justice for people with disabilities?

### *Questions Raised*

From a disability perspective, this text evinces problems. First, both the person and the disability are *erased* in a number of ways. He has no name, and no specific details are given about his impairment or how he became impaired. In a sense, he does not figure as a person but as a pawn in a normate narrative about Jesus revealing his own identity, power, authority, and ability as God's agent. He is useful to the "normate" interpreter only insofar as he has a disability. The encounter functions primarily as an episode in Jesus' escalating controversy with the religious authorities. In fact, the text launches into a christological monologue from 5:19 to 47. The man himself is a cipher. As Kathy Black notes,

We tend to use them [the people in the biblical stories who are disabled or differently abled] as objects to make some other point. The problem with this is that persons with disabilities today likewise find themselves treated as objects. Health care, education, employment, social services—all the basic institutions of our society often view persons with disabilities as objects to be dealt with, rather than as subjects that have something to contribute. (1996, 13)

This is an example of what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have termed "narrative prosthesis." They explain, "Our thesis centers not simply upon the fact that people with disabilities have been the object of representational treatments but rather that their function in literary discourse is primarily twofold: disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (2013, 274). Such narratives expose and explain differences as deviances before providing some sort of remedy that often eliminates difference or reinterprets it in a manner that is acceptable for the social context: "Narratives turn signs of cultural deviance into textually marked bodies" (279).

This leads to a second issue: For whose sake was the man "cured" in this story? Jesus asks if the man "wills" the cure; the man never says that he wills the cure, but Jesus cures him anyway. Is this an opportunistic move

on Jesus' part? A normate hermeneutic assumes that "cure" is the goal of all who have impairments of various sorts so that the disabled person's body will resemble more closely the normate body that the society deems as ideal. But some people with impairments are not, in fact, obsessed with achieving a normate body. Rather, they maintain that creation radiates diversity—that bodies come in all different shapes, sizes, colors, forms, and configurations—and that there is no reason to value one more than the other. What if, instead of focusing upon "curing" differently abled bodies to bring them in line with a cultural ideal, a society began to honor the true diversity of embodied existence and valued that diversity, resulting in creating societies whose architecture (literal and metaphorical) accommodated—no, celebrated—that wide variety as testifying to the full image of God, rather than valuing only one type of body (so-called "able")? In a society driven by the medical model, which sees impairment as a problem to be eradicated, judgment looms large upon those who do not cooperate in the effort to "overcome" their difference. This is one of the places where vigorous debate ensues in the disability community about issues of "passing" and the place of "Otherness."

Third, both ancient and modern interpreters reflect what Warren Carter cites as a "physiognomic consciousness" that "posits a correlation between physical appearance and moral character and shifts attention to matters of character. Thus it focuses on physical ugliness and somatic deformity in that they represent evil, vice, stupidity and low status" (2011a, 130). Jesus makes this move, according to Carter, when he insists that the man's illness is connected to poor moral character. Some illnesses are. Carter's review of commentaries on this passage demonstrates that this is a common approach. Such interpretive moves are made by the likes of B. F. Westcott, who opines that

the paralyzed man *acquiesces* in his condition by failing to get into the "stirred up" waters in time to be healed. Marked by apathy, he lacks willingness to "make any vigorous effort to gain relief." Raymond Brown describes him as marked by "obtuseness," an "unimaginative approach to the curative waters," "a chronic inability to seize opportunity," "real dullness," and "persistent naiveté." C. H. Dodd thinks that the man "refused to make use of [Torah's] means of grace;" he "has not the will" to live, and offers a "feeble excuse" for not getting into the water. (Carter 2011a, 131; emphasis added)

One of the chief problems with this physiognomic approach is, again, erasure of actual physical disability. That is to say, the focus becomes centered on the man's (supposed) character or (speculative) psychological motivations; the fact of the man's actual physical disability and the

social, spiritual, political, and economic realities or consequences of that fact are rendered invisible. This is a problematic hermeneutical approach that erases the importance of those realities for contemporary individuals, communities, and societies. But the problem is generated by the Johannine text itself.

Fourth, linking sin with impairment can be a dangerous, destructive habit. A connection may be possible in particular cases, but such is not inevitable. Similarly, tying salvation and forgiveness of sins to a “cure” is also problematic. It can imply that disabled persons who remain “uncured” remain unsaved or unforgiven or lacking in faith or, in fact, unhealed. This can victimize the victim, falsely identify disabled persons as “victims,” and make TAB people feel superior in body and soul. Remember, “healing” and “cure” are not synonymous.

#### *Chapter 5 as a Negative Example: Individual Sin—Wynn*

Kerry Wynn admits that there is no denying Jesus’ bald connection between sin and disability in the case of the man in chapter 5. Wynn commences his essay thus: “The two most common assumptions in popular theology that marginalize people with disabilities are (1) disability is caused by sin, and (2) if one has enough faith, one will be healed” (2007, 61). In his comparative analysis between the man in chapter 5 and the man born blind in chapter 9, he argues that the relationship between sin and disability in each narrative has to do with the person’s *reaction* to his disability. In the case of the man in chapter 5, he writes,

The man who had been disabled for thirty-eight years is located in the institutional healthcare system of the normate society. It is no accident that “Bethesda” is a popular name for hospitals. This is not to say that curative pools and modern medicine do not have a vital role to play in the reality of disability in the first and the twenty-first centuries. The problem is that after thirty-eight years he is still looking for a miracle cure and life has passed him by. He has bought into the role of the helpless dependent and the normate society has affirmed him in this role. That a normate society still affirms that role today can be seen in modern interpretations of this passage. (65)

The man has acquiesced to the shallow, myopic values of the dominant culture (represented by the religious authorities) rather than adopting Jesus’ alternative way, truth, and life that incarnationally affirms the value and legitimacy of a wide variety of embodied existences.

As with numerous other stories in John, commentators reflexively associate this story with baptismal themes. The man never makes the

healing waters before Jesus arrives and never enters the baptismal waters after: “He has failed to heed Jesus’ admonition not to sin any more by remaining subject to normate society and thus ‘something worse’ has happened to him” (Wynn 2007, 70).

#### *Chapter 5 as Negative Example: Systemic, Structural Sin—Carter*

Warren Carter views the man more sympathetically than Wynn as he addresses this passage through a postcolonial lens, arguing that the man is disabled by the Roman Empire and his own society, a territory occupied intensively by Rome. As feminists and womanists know deeply, the politics of a society get mapped onto real bodies, particularly bodies considered deviant from the “normate” body of a given society: “These bodies [disabled bodies in John’s Gospel] reveal the lie of imperial claims to be a force for wholeness and healing even while they compete with and imitate this imperial vision. John constructs an alternative world that participates in, imitates, and contests Roman power” (2011a, 129–30). Carter creatively analogizes from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, whose work is set in the context of French rule in Algeria, and Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children*, whose context is British imperial rule over India and its consequences. Imperial powers, both ancient and modern, posture as providers of health and peace, whose leaders are often referred to as saviors. In truth, imperial powers disable people in multifarious ways from very basic needs such as access to nutritious food, clean water, medicine, sanitary living conditions, education, employment, and social mobility. Empires send their own people to war, where they sustain disabilities and invade other groups, inflicting further disabilities. Carter interrogates the narrative in chapter 5 to discern how the man’s disabilities relate to empire:

In Fanon and Rushdie’s psychosomatic framing, blindness and paralysis ambiguously exhibit the overwhelming power of imperializing agents along with the reticence of the subjugated. Does the inability of the paralyzed man to move in John 5 attest overwhelming paralyzing imperial power and/or does it attest the subjugated’s refusal to be moved? Does the inability of the blind man in John 9 to see attest overwhelming “shock-and-awe,” blinding, imperial power (military power and every imperial structure) and/or does it attest a means whereby the subjugated refuses to acknowledge power? (136)

While most commentators worry about the link between individual sin and disability, Carter asks the important larger question of the role of social systems in disabling people: “Who sinned? At least in part, the empire and every and any politico-economic-cultural societal system that deprives



people of adequate food resources and creates unjust living conditions that damage and disable people. Imperializing power and practices—whether ancient or modern, governments or multinationals—should come with a warning: they can be bad for people's health" (2011a, 145).

The man in chapter 5 raises questions for those in (post)modern societies. Is this man truly a whining victim, or are commentators blaming the victim? If he is repulsive to behold, is it because of his own weak character, or is it a result of what the system has done to him? Of course, all colonizing agents know that the best way to keep a people subjugated is to have them internalize messages of nonagency and weakness and worthlessness, and simultaneously to have the subalterns mimic the values of the colonizers such that to "make it" means to associate with and be what those in power most respect: strong, able-bodied people.

Where Caesar fails, Jesus can deliver. He can heal and save (and, perhaps incidentally, he also cures). He can provide true peace based on justice, and he can bring abundant, eternal life. In Jesus, not Caesar, one may find healing. The man in chapter 5 may be cured, but he is not healed. He chooses to side with the empire and its values and is not, in fact, depicted as restored to himself, to God, or to his own (Jewish) community. Whether or not one declares him a victim, he has sided with the values of the empire/normate society.

#### JOHN 9: SIGHT AND INSIGHT

Like the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, the man born blind bedazzles the reader as a paradigmatic disciple to be imitated. John's Gospel features several dramatic aspects such that its lengthy narratives can often be effectively divided into scenes.

##### *Scene 1: The Cure (vv. 1-7)*

"As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth" (v. 1). Unlike the man in chapter 5, this man is designated as having a congenital impairment. Immediately, Jesus' disciples reflect the problematic physiognomic tendency to attach disability to moral character. They assume that the blindness is a punishment for sin, either the man's or his parents. Jesus promptly extinguishes their logic and separates sin and disability. While many modern readers applaud Jesus for that, their relief is short-lived when they consider Jesus' next words, which the NRSV translates thus: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who

sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work" (vv. 3-4). Did God cause the man to be born with an impairment for the sole purpose of using him as a prop in a divine magic show? Does the God who sent Jesus into the world that he loved so much, in order to give people abundant life, cause congenital blindness so that he might show off by curing the problem God caused? If so, why does God choose to cure some congenital impairments and not others? There is certainly never an indication in this story that faith is a prerequisite for a cure. In fact, there is no indication that the man was seeking a cure.

Two comments about the ancient Greek text are in order here. First, the ancient manuscripts with which translators work are composed in *scripta continua*, continuous script. There are no spaces between words, no punctuation marks, no distinctions between capital and lowercase letters, and certainly no chapter or verse numbers. All those features are judgments made by modern translators of different English versions. Second, the phrase which the NRSV translates as "he was born blind" does not actually appear in the Greek text at all. It makes more sense, given the rest of the Gospel, to translate the passage this way: "Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; [he was born blind]. In order that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.'" Reading the text this way, we see Jesus moving away from an obsession with determining whose fault the man's impairment was, whether the man's, the parents', or God's. It is simply a fact: the man was born blind. The reality is, he continues to be blind at that moment. While the disciples busy themselves with an academic exercise in theological hair-splitting, here sits a person (a person, not a "case") with an impairment. Even if they were able to determine whose fault it is, it does not change the fact that the man cannot see. Jesus turns them away from speculating about the past, focuses their gaze on the person in front of them, and asks them to consider whether or not they are going to work for and with God or, as we see later in the story in the case of the Pharisees, whether they are going to work for themselves and against God. Jesus definitively declares and demonstrates that, for his part, he sides with God. We have already heard about light (1; 8) and works (4:34; 5:34 describes the man in ch. 9; 5:36 describes Jesus' works).

Once again (cf. 1:1), the author alludes to the creation accounts of Genesis by showing Jesus' creative act, using the earth for the sake of the earth creature. As in chapter 5, the man does not ask for a cure; Jesus acts upon him. Does this make the blind man a pawn without agency? The

man does, as in chapter 5, obey Jesus' command and, as a result, receives sight. The reference to washing in the pool of Siloam raises baptismal echoes for many. Whereas the man in chapter 5 never enters the waters, this man does.

*Scene 2: What Do the Neighbors Think? (vv. 8-12)*

The rest of the story narrates various reactions to the healing: the man's, the neighbors', the parents', and the religious authorities'. So completely have the neighbors identified the man with his impairment that they are bemused, trying to decide whether or not it is the same man. The man refuses their binary categories and claims an integrated identity with his response: "I am" (Ἐγώ εἰμι, *egō eimi*; note that the word "the man" does not appear in the text but has been inserted by the translators). That is, he is both the very man who used to sit and beg and he is something more than that, all at once. Moving into one's future story with God, for John, does not mean denying one's former life (see chs. 4 and 21). Like most normative gazers, the neighbors identify him with his disability; he does not. He is the same person blind or sighted. The "I-Am" (*egō eimi*) statements constitute one of the most famous and celebrated features of the Gospel's conveyance of its christological claims. Use of the *egō eimi* on his part associates him with Jesus and is a bold expression of identity. The fact that he had to keep saying it (ἔλεγεν, *elegen*) implies an ongoing interaction and interrogation.

The neighbors repeatedly (ἔλεγον, *elegon*) demand an explanation. Healing usually has social ramifications. When one person receives healing, others want to know whether it will disturb their own equilibrium. We will see the same fear and lack of support from the parents and the religious leaders. The man recounts the experience using Jesus' name (which implies some knowledge of Jesus) and the same words as the narrator used: the man is a reliable character.

Verse 13 again raises the question of the man's agency. Why would the neighbors "bring" the man to the Pharisees when he can see? If the language is merely figurative, by what authority do they act upon the man? The neighbors continue to treat the man as "lesser than" (implied already by their naming him a beggar) and assume that they have the right to drag him to the authorities. Those who are in wheelchairs may recognize the experience where someone may approach them and take the handles of the wheelchair and move them "out of the way" without even asking permission. No one would walk up to a TAB person and grab their shoulders without permission and move them.

*Scene 3: Pharisees (vv. 13-17)*

The reader now learns that, as in chapter 5, Jesus performed the cure/miracle on the Sabbath. On the surface the conversation appears to be about the miracle cure, as verse 14 repeats that he "opened his eyes" and verse 15 has the Pharisees continually ask him "how he had received his sight." The verb is in the imperfect tense (ἠρώτων, *ērōtōn*), stressing the ongoing ordeal to which the man is being subjected. He stands firmly confident and unabashed as he epitomizes his experience, giving his testimony and becoming an evangelist. Like the neighbors, instead of celebrating with the man and giving glory to God, the Pharisees bicker among themselves, but this time about the identity of Jesus rather than the man born blind, so that the story transitions to the question of whether Jesus is a sinner, not whether the man is a sinner. The man is now called to testify. Whereas he first identified Jesus merely as a person (ἄνθρωπος, *anthrōpos*), he now reveals a deeper understanding of who Jesus is: a prophet.<sup>3</sup> To call Jesus a prophet is to ascribe him religious authority; recall that Moses, Elijah, and Elisha all performed healing miracles.

*Scene 4: The Parent Trap (vv. 18-23)*

The religious leaders next interrogate the man's parents in order to build a case against Jesus. To say that the parents fail to support their son in any way as he attempts to negotiate the power structures of his society is an understatement. They cower, fearing the cost of defending their son, while the formerly disabled man speaks truth to power. No matter—he is probably used to standing *alone* and *against*. But who is more disabled here, the man or his parents?

*Scene 5: Pharisees, Round Two (vv. 24-34)*

This passage drips with irony based on the verb "to know" (γινώσκω, *ginōskō*). They declare to know that Jesus is a sinner and they want to bully the man into siding with them and against Jesus. The man pleads ignorance concerning their academic debate but insists on what he does know—Jesus did, in fact, open his eyes (literally and metaphorically). They continue to badger him, but he knows that they are impervious to the gospel so he has a bit of fun at their expense. He acts up.

<sup>3</sup> Old Testament prophets, such as Elisha, Elijah, and Moses, often performed miracles. The same pattern of burgeoning comprehension regarding Jesus' identity appears in 4:1-42.

As usual, acting up to the powers that be brings swift castigation, threat, and rejection. They attempt to dissociate Jesus from Moses in order to make the man choose Moses. They base this on their so-called knowledge. The irony remains thick about who knows what. They declare that they do not know where Jesus is from and base their rejection of him upon that fact. The experienced reader of John knows that the question of where Jesus is from (above), by whom he has been sent (God),<sup>4</sup> and where he is going (to God) is paramount and that the leaders condemn themselves by accidentally speaking the truth because, in fact, they do not know where Jesus is from and they do not care to learn the truth about him. Both what they know and what they do not know indict them. The man commandeers the floor and presents a logical theological argument. They try to subordinate the man with the statement: “*We . . . but you . . .*” He dismisses their move and in verses 31-33 declares, “*We*<sup>5</sup> know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will [which the leaders are patently failing to do]. . . . If this man were not *from God*, he could do nothing [let alone miraculously provide sight].” They immediately dissociate themselves once again, using categories of “you” and “us.” The plot of the entire narrative (beginning with 1:11) involves the quest of the religious leaders to disable Jesus because of his refusal to accept the unjust, death-dealing, violent terms of normative society. When this formerly blind man chooses to side with Jesus, they move to ad hominem attack that focuses on the man’s sin, just as the disciples had done at the beginning. The verb used in verse 34, ἐκβάλλω (*ekballō*), is quite violent; it is the word used for driving out demons. Demonizing those who refuse to cooperate with hegemonic systems is common, of course (recall that Jesus is accused of having a demon in the very next chapter), and is a general claim even today about PWDs.

*Scene 6: Fade to Black (vv. 35-41)*

In the final scene, Jesus once again initiates the action between the man and himself and the man’s insight about Jesus’ revelation as the Son of

<sup>4</sup> The author plays on this theme by telling the reader that Jesus sends (9:7) the man to the pool of Siloam (which means “Sent”) to wash (which amounts to doing the works of God).

<sup>5</sup> “The most stringent power we have over another is not physical coercion but the ability to have the other accept our definition of them” (Hauerwas 2004, 40). “Bodies show up in stories as *dynamic entities* that resist or refuse the cultural scripts assigned to them” (Mitchell and Snyder 2007, 276).

Man is revealed: “You have seen (ὄραω, *horaō*) him” (v. 37). Note the use of the perfect tense here, whose force is to highlight that the completed action has ongoing effect in the present. So complete is the man’s understanding and commitment that he now calls Jesus not “person” or even “prophet,” but “Lord” (Κύριε, *Kyrie*) and declares his belief. Given that the author clearly states that the purpose of the Gospel is to engender belief (20:31), the man perfectly exemplifies the call to discipleship. His willingness to engage Jesus and ask questions about his identity (reminiscent of the Samaritan woman earlier) leads him, finally, to worship (προσκυνέω, *proskuneō*) Jesus (v. 38).

Jesus then speaks for the benefit of the Pharisees when he says, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (v. 39); the reader is reminded of Jesus’ earlier statements about seeing, light, and darkness: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). Clearly the man born blind sees the kingdom of God. Further, Jesus says, “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (3:19-21). Jesus, the light, has come into the world and is shining in the faces of the religious leaders. They hate the light and want to do the evil deed of disabling Jesus through death. The man born blind sees the light and does the work of God by believing in Jesus. The Pharisees intuit that Jesus refers to them, and they find it incredible that they, given all their knowledge, status, and power, should be considered blind (which is a code word for “ignorant” here: as the saying goes, “There are none so blind as those who will not see”). Jesus disrupts the analogy by indicating that those born blind (as was the man they have just accused of being a sinner) are not sinners. Those who stand judged are the temporarily able-bodied, physically sighted who claim too much for themselves with respect to insight and commit the sin of willful ignorance, not to mention abuse of power (cf. 15:22) and the demeaning of those without physical sight.

*Promises*

John 9 houses liberative potential for persons with disabilities. First, Jesus corrects the assumption that impairment is caused by sin. Second, he calls his disciples to work on behalf of those pushed to the margins socially, religiously, and economically by impairment. Third, this nameless man born

blind gets the spotlight as one of the exemplars of the narrative; all readers should aspire to imitate him. He achieves this role not by showing that if one has great faith, one can be cured of a physical impairment. He is not a hero because he was cured (after all, the man in chapter 5 was also cured) or because he “overcame” his disability through pluck and determination. He was not even seeking a cure, as far as we know. He is a paragon because when he has a transformative encounter with Jesus, he responds by giving glory to God, becoming a disciple of Jesus, and evangelizing those around him. He himself, then, shows the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that his disciples would do greater works than Jesus himself did. Fourth, the man claims his voice and insists on the truth as he knows it, even though those with more education, power, and status try to induce doubt and “keep him in his place.” The text supports acting up on behalf of justice.

The text overtly challenges any TAB reader who views persons with disabilities physiognomically, assuming to know something about the person’s character or life by a mere gaze.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, able-bodied people who paternalistically think that they know what is best for those with disabilities should feel addressed by the text. The voices of those actually experiencing the disability should be heard and heeded. That is, the voices of the “invalids” are *valid* beyond all telling of it. At first the narrative displays able-bodied people who objectify the man. The more the man himself speaks, the more the categories of center and margins are redefined. In Colleen Grant’s view, “The typical sin/sickness metaphor is reversed so that blindness is no longer a symbol for humanity’s sinfulness, but instead representative of a state of innocence and openness to revelation” (1998, 85).

As noted in our treatment of chapter 5, Carter indicts imperial systems for the ways that persons are disabled. The fact that the man was born blind may have to do with economic and social realities such as lack of access to food, nutrition, and medicine. His disability may have made him a mendicant, as his career options would have been limited. When Jesus cures the impairment caused by poverty, he “repairs imperial damage” by raising his social class (2011a, 144).

Wynn finds a vigorous, heroic figure in the man born blind, especially in contrast to the man in chapter 5. He has a rather optimistic view of the

<sup>6</sup> Grant suggests that the punch might be that we able-bodied folks in our hubris and pride about our able-bodiedness compared to the poor disabled in need of healing may not realize we are more in need of healing because our sin of stereotyping and excluding remains (1998, 85). Referring to the diagnostic gaze of Ezra/Nehemiah, Wynn writes, “The ‘gaze’ in Ezra–Nehemiah creates a narrative based on the presuppositions of the observer which shapes the image of the object observed” (145 in this volume).

man’s begging activity, claiming that it was a legitimate job that made him a part of the religious system of his day (since giving to a beggar was a good deed). “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” as the saying goes. The man is living a meaningful life and seems to have dealt with his impairment in such a way that he did not feel a severe lack: “He has rejected the normate stereotype of one disabled as ‘victim’ but has not substituted a need to ‘overcome’ his disability or ‘pass’ as ‘normal.’ He is comfortable in his identity as ‘other’ than the normate social stereotypes. . . . It is in his ability to reject the normate perspective and to embrace Jesus in their mutual ‘otherness,’ not in the act of healing, that ‘God’s work might be revealed in him’ (9:3)” (2007, 68).

### *Pitfalls*

While the text clearly stands as one of the most liberative in the Bible with respect to disability, a few concerns should be noted. First is the use of blindness as a metaphor for sin and ignorance. On the positive side, the person who is literally blind in the story is good, and those who are only metaphorically blind are bad. On the negative side, the association between sin and ignorance, if only metaphorical, remains unhelpful to actual blind persons trying to function in normate society (cf. 12:40 esp.). In his treatment of John 9 in *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person’s Conversation with the Bible*, John M. Hull explains that the Gospel of John is problematic:

Although blindness is symbolic of sin and unbelief in the three earlier Gospels, it is in the Fourth Gospel that this connection reaches its climax. John’s Gospel was the first book in Braille that I read after I had become blind in my adult life. As I read it, rather laboriously, I was delighted to have access once again to so many familiar and greatly loved passages. However, the symbolism made me feel uneasy and I soon came to realize that this book was not written for people like me, but for sighted people. No other book of the Bible is so dominated by the contrast between light and darkness, and blindness is the symbol of darkness.<sup>7</sup> (2002, 49–50)

Second, readers should be careful about the tendency to erase disability by interpreting the narrative metaphorically, as the text pushes the reader to do. It lulls the reader away from “the real world” and interrogating hegemonic systems that disable real people. It also reduces persons

<sup>7</sup> African American interpreters routinely draw attention to the association of darkness with negative characteristics.

with disabilities to a mere “moral lesson” of one sort or another for able-bodied persons.

#### JOHN 11: I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

The language of illness or weakness occurs five times in the first six verses of chapter 11:

- v. 1: Now a certain man was ill (Ἦν ἀσθενῶν, *ēn asthenōn*).
- v. 2: Her brother was ill (ἠσθέθει, *ēsthenei*).
- v. 3: Lord, he whom you love is ill (ἀσθενεῖ, *asthenei*).
- v. 4: This illness (ἀσθένεια, *astheneia*) does not lead to death.
- v. 6: having heard that Lazarus was ill (ἀσθενεῖ, *asthenei*).

The use of the imperfect tense in verse 1 might imply a chronic illness or disability. Jesus heads back to Bethany near Jerusalem, the center of opposition to him. Thomas (the Eeyore of the Gospel), expecting the worst violence to be perpetrated against them, resignedly declares, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (v. 16).

What follows is a story less about Lazarus and more about Mary and Martha, the siblings of the utterly disabled man. They are grief-stricken. Like the disciples in chapter 9, they focus on the past rather than the present: “If only the past had been different, this tragedy would not have materialized” (v. 21; my paraphrase); they both indicate that “if only” Jesus had been there, Lazarus would not have died. They subtly, if bitterly, accuse Jesus for allowing tragedy. As in chapter 9, Jesus tries to draw their attention to the only time that they have any control over—the present: “Your brother will rise again” (v. 23). At this point Martha is in danger of whiplash as she jerks her gaze from the useless past to the distant future: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (v. 24). But Jesus wants her to turn her face and train her eyes on the very full, abundant present that is available here and now in his presence, so he declares, “I am the resurrection (ἀνάστασις, *anastasis*) and the life (ζωή, *zōē*). Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (vv. 25-26). Martha then makes a full confession of Jesus by nearly quoting the author’s thesis statement from 20:31: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (v. 27). “The one coming into the world” (ὁ εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐρχόμενος, *ho eis ton kosmon erchomenos*) is a christological title in John and is tied directly to the incarnation (cf. 1:9). The point is not to escape the world but to transform it such that it promotes the flourishing of all creation, the creation that God carefully

orchestrated. God is always at work in the world, in embodied lives. For John, verses 25-27 constitute the primary point to be made in 11:1-44. The story serves to reveal Jesus’ identity and invite the reader into relationship with the Johannine Jesus and community. The healing story that follows simply fleshes out this main point.

Jesus weeps. This matters. Those who see it and understand his deep love for his friend ask the poignant perennial question that arises for persons with disabilities and those who love them: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (v. 37). The reader already knows that the simple answer to that is yes, based on the healing story in chapter 4. But this is not that story. Jesus comes to the tomb (μνημεῖον, *mnēmeion*) in verse 38. The word first appears at 5:28 where Jesus says, “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves (μνημεῖον, *mnēmeion*) will hear his voice.” The next time we see the word, Jesus is calling out to Lazarus in a loud voice to “come out.” The next occurrence after that is Jesus’ own tomb, where another stone (λίθος, *lithos*) appears, and is taken away, as in verse 39 (cf. 20:1). Clearly, the author ties our suffering to that of Jesus, infusing it with meaning and hope.

Verse 44 tells us that the “dead man (ὁ τεθνηκώς, *ho tethnēkōs*) came out.” Notice that the verb is in the perfect tense, the tense used to indicate an action in the past that has continuing effect in the present. This is a crucial point, especially from the social model of disability. Jesus has raised him up, but the man is still described as dead. He is also still bound. Notice what Jesus does. He does not zap away the bindings; rather, he calls the community to unbind the man who had been held captive by the rancid stench of death. Communities disable and enable. Throughout the chapter the whole community has gathered around to fret and mourn dramatically for a few days; but does the community have the will to enable Lazarus, and not just in those first dramatic moments, but for the rest of his life? The miraculous healing symbolically makes the christological point that Jesus, like God, is in the glorious business of life. But the physical cure itself is evanescent since Lazarus will die again at some point. The story is about Jesus, but the story is, more important, about what kind of communities we create: Are they disabling or enabling? Jesus cured the impairment, but the community has the power to remove the disability/bindings.

It is worth noting that scholars do not at all agree about how to interpret the statements referring to Jesus’ emotional state in verses 33, 35, and 38. Most people simply associate Jesus’ emotions with grief over loss. But the verbs express anger and frustration, and it is not unreasonable to

assume that Jesus is upset because, while flamboyant theatrics and concern arise once the disabled Lazarus is dead, one wonders whether the level of energy and concern were there before he died, and will it be there once he is among them again?

This is a story about God's glory insofar as it displays God's character as one coming into the world to make a way out of no way. Notice that Jesus never promises that believers will not suffer or die (in fact, quite the opposite; cf. the Farewell Discourse in chs. 14–17). Jesus relativizes suffering and death; it is no longer ultimate. Eternal life, which is a certain quality of life marked by abundance, joy, peace, and love, is available now and will continue forever. Death does not and cannot interfere with any of that ultimately, because Jesus has cast out that power through his exaltation on the cross whereby he accomplished his promise declared at 12:32: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." *All* people, not just some. On the other hand, there are people walking around us all the time who might as well be dead—they have not seized the abundant life readily available to them. This is what John is saying: there is living and then there is *living*. Or, using Irenaeus' terms, there is *existing* and there is *flourishing* (*Haer.* 4.34.5–7).

As in chapters 5 and 9, the healing of Lazarus does not cause the authorities to celebrate or give glory to God; rather "the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus" (12:10–11). Certain social, political, economic, and religious systems benefit from keeping some people disabled or dead. The raising of Lazarus serves to foreshadow Jesus' own death and resurrection. Jesus dies only once, of course. Lazarus will eventually die again, but that will not be ultimately devastating. John assures us that once one grasps the ultimate eternal power of the resurrection and the life available through Jesus and the fact that both start here and now, the grave can offer no real threat. Only three chapters later Jesus will reiterate the point by announcing: "I am the way; that is, the truth and the life" (14:6; my trans.).

#### *Promises and Pitfalls*

From a disability perspective, the story has liberative potential. It calls readers to stop playing the "if only" game, to embrace abundant life in the present, and to enjoy the peace that Christ brings even in the face of suffering and death. It challenges society to understand that both disability and liberation are a communal project, not an individual's problem that the person should figure out how to solve. Many would like to take the

approach of Pontius Pilate, whereby they wash their hands of the whole matter. Alas, Pontius Pilate is not a strong role model.

But the text may leave us unsatisfied in other ways. First, Lazarus never gets to speak anywhere in the Gospel. He has no agency but appears only as an object to be discussed and acted upon. It is another example of narrative prosthesis in which Lazarus is more of a device to convey the Gospel's Christology than a character in his own right. Second, the theodicy question (the defense of God's love and justice in light of evil, suffering, and death) will still burn in the hearts of many: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (11:37). And further, why are some cured and others not? Third, the notion that Jesus intentionally allowed Lazarus to die in order to allow God to perform a publicity stunt to get more adherents (as the text seems to indicate in vv. 4, 15, and 40–42) remains problematic at best.

#### THE PASSION

In the passion we see the full unleashing of the power of both the religious establishment and imperial authorities brought to bear upon Jesus' body. The high priest's police hit Jesus in the face (18:22). After Pilate has Jesus whipped, the soldiers mock and abuse him. Pilate has Jesus (and two other deviants) crucified. Their brutal, exterminatory lust still unsatiated, the soldiers not only break the legs of the other two but also spear Jesus in the side, whence blood and water issue forth.

Rome dominates the native government, and both map their power onto Jesus' body. Rome symbolically whips Israel; the religious leaders oppress those less powerful and collude in Jesus' death through scapegoating and stigmatizing.<sup>8</sup> Recall Caiaphas' (ironic) words: "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (11:50). Some people with disabilities will relate to society's habit of stigmatizing and scapegoating.

#### *Promises*

The Passion has liberative potential because it is tied to the incarnation. Jesus himself truly experienced disdain, shame, humiliation, and even

<sup>8</sup> "The convention of metaphoricalizing disability invisibilizes the somatic impact of collisions between colonizers and colonized. Such encounters literally disable bodies as both sides pursue and contest the imperial agenda of subjugating people and seizing resources and land" (Carter 2011a, 137).

physical violence. In this way he has intimately assumed the experience of many people with disabilities.

By his own estimation, his suffering has a redemptive quality to it as seen by his analogy between his crucifixion and Moses' lifting upon the serpent in the wilderness (3:14) for the healing of his people. Others throughout Christian history have understood their own suffering to have a redemptive quality (cf. 12:24). How do we honor suffering without glorifying and sensationalizing it? Suffering does not guarantee wisdom, but no great wisdom comes without suffering. Only the sufferer has the right to discern whether her own suffering is of the redemptive sort; no one should ever attempt to coerce or even suggest to one suffering that this must be so in her case.

At the very least, the disabled body of Jesus on the cross serves as an indictment of the ways societies disable some of their members. It may demand soul-searching, renew our commitment to justice, and bring healing and freedom for those on both ends of the whip.

#### RESURRECTION AND ETERNAL LIFE

The Gospel of John narrates four different resurrection appearances. First, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene in the garden. Like other passages in John that point to God's creative power, this scene in the garden undoes the fall in Eden. Creation is reconciled and restored to wholeness. Jesus then appears to his disciples. In keeping with the Gospel's insistence on the incarnation and the goodness of somatic existence, Jesus appears in bodily form. But this body is both like and unlike his preresurrection body. On the one hand, it penetrates locked doors; on the other, it retains the marks (which Paul refers to as stigmata in Gal 6:17) of his disabling experience. The disciple Thomas was not present at this appearance and, famously, declares, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). Jesus appears a third time and invites Thomas to touch his wounds. It is the sight of Jesus' marks of disability that cause Thomas to ejaculate confessionally, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).

The fourth appearance occurs on the shore of Galilee where Jesus materializes in recognizable bodily form. He reconciles with Peter, releases him from the debilitating effects of his guilt and shame, and commissions him to ministry, with a warning: "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go"

(21:18). Clearly this is a reference to Peter's impending martyrdom. It may also be suggestive for those who have developed a disability in adulthood or even old age. Moving from able-bodiedness to disability may involve some loss of autonomy, but it need not entail a loss of meaning or mission.<sup>9</sup> It may, however, require assistance.

#### Promises

For Christians, resurrection and eternal life are somatic experiences. Images of feasting (chs. 6, 13, 21) point to a messianic feast where none will be disabled through hunger. Jesus' own body bears the marks of his specific lived experience, but his body transcends all finite limits. Wynn asks, "If disability is to be affirmed as a meaningful and valid life experience, what are we to say about disability in the resurrection?" (2007, 75). He proceeds to note of the man in chapter 9 that even though the man moves into a normate body, the important point is that he retains the lessons from his disabled experience. Regardless of what the resurrected body entails, those lessons will be retained.

Like Paul, John presents both the disabled ("crucified in weakness"; 2 Cor 13:4) Christ and "the glorified, powerful Christ—the Christ beyond all disabilities and limitations. . . . It is the paradoxical connection between the two that is the center of Paul's message" (Albl 2007, 147). Paul used his disability to manifest God's power and anticipated a day when his limitations would be overcome. He called others to use their circumstances the same way and to stand firm in the hope of finally overcoming all limitations.

In John, Jesus repeatedly refers to his cross as his exaltation (*ὑψώω*, *hypsoō*). What the ignorant world takes to be his moment of deepest shame, the expert reader understands to be his moment of victory: "And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself" (12:32). That moment is not separable from the resurrection for John. Disability does not have the last word either for Jesus or for us. By sharing in Jesus' disability (Jesus warns the disciples that the world will hate them as it hated him and informs Peter that he will be martyred), Christians can "overcome all disability" by sharing Christ's resurrection and glorification.

#### Pitfalls

Mitchell and Snyder raise important concerns about what they term "the limits of redemption narratives" (2007, 178). Miraculous healings and

<sup>9</sup> Read Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, 2003.

resurrections are problematic insofar as they rely on the eradication of disability as a resolution to human-made exclusion. The social constructions that propagate the exclusion and oppression of people with disabilities remain intact. Take note of Zacchaeus. He was a little person (μικρὸς, *mikros*; Luke 19:3). He was “healed” by Jesus insofar as he was restored to the community with a sense of honor and validation, without Jesus “curing” him by adding inches to his physical height.

With this in mind, it would be more impressive and hope inducing in some ways if, instead of curing the disabled body to fit normate society, normate society were healed so that the society would accommodate all types of bodies. As noted, “The acceptance of disabled people can no longer be predicated on the perverse interests that underwrite fantasies of erasure, cure, or elimination of bodily difference. Such longings for human similitude ultimately avoid rather than engage the necessity of providing provisions for our meaningful inclusion in social life” (Mitchell and Snyder 2007, 183).

#### SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

With respect to persons with disabilities, the Gospel of John has both liberative and problematic potential. The emphasis on diversity in creation, the incarnation, a blind man as a hero, the role of the community in healing, and the ability to seize life, joy, and peace in the present even in the midst of difficulty are a welcome balm. The texts also sound warnings. Empires and societies tend to disable some people. TABs assume a normate view that disables people with certain impairments. This happens in the way that they narrate stories and the way that they interpret stories. In the process, people with disabilities are often presented as a morality lesson and remain objects rather than agents in the plot. Erasure occurs. Finally, by insisting upon material creation as the locus of God’s attention and activity, the Fourth Evangelist emboldens the reader to interpret in ways that promote the flourishing of all, even when that entails resisting some of the Evangelist’s own moves.

#### THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

Reading the Johannine Epistles from a disability perspective invites attention to (1) the role of the senses, (2) ethics and incarnation as expressed in embodied love, (3) hospitality, (4) the role of prayer, and (5) the “prosperity” gospel.

#### FIRST JOHN

##### *The Senses*

Like the Gospel, 1 John begins at the beginning (ἀρχῆ, *archē*). The prologue anticipates a major theme of the Epistle—namely, the incarnation, the embodiedness of the Messiah, such that he could be perceived by the senses: he was seen, heard, and touched. In addition, the transmission of the gospel involves the embodiedness of one’s brothers and sisters (3:16–18) and abiding with another in love; as the text demonstrates, this ideal can be elusive. The author claims epistemological authority based on sensory experiences. Their testimony is to be trusted because they were able to see and hear. Hearing (ἀκούω, *akouō*) language occurs fourteen times in the Epistles and fifty-nine times in John. Seeing language (ὁράω, *horaō*; βλέπω, *blepō*; and θεωρέω, *theōreō*) appears often as well: 121 times in John and 12 times in the Epistles. What might this mean for people who are blind or deaf? Can they know God as well and authoritatively transmit the tradition? Hector Avalos’ work on sensory criticism aims, in part, to “examine how the valuation of the senses is intimately related to the differential valuation of persons that lies at the core of defining disabilities” (2007, 47). In antiquity a blind person was not necessarily disabled in terms of valuation of knowledge, as the trope of the blind prophet proves (both in biblical and pagan literature). Prophets hear the word of the Lord. Job, on the other hand, depends upon vision. Avalos argues, “Sensory criticism can render us more sensitive to how the gathering and processing of information has been a continuing theme in the differential treatment of human beings that underlies all notions of disability, whether in the medical or social models” (59).

In 1 John sighted people have no advantage over unsighted people in apprehending God: God is not visible to the human eye at this point in history but only through acts of love (4:20); until the eschaton (and the full unveiling of God’s face), the only way to surely connect to God is to practice loving with the expectation that practice will make perfect, eventually.

##### *Love Embodied in Action—Ethics and Incarnation*

The author enjoins the audience to “walk” (περιπατέω, *peripateō*) in the light, the truth, and the commandments (1 John 1:6–7; 2:6, 11; 2 John 1:4, 6; 3 John 1:3–4). The language of “walking” as a metaphor for ethical behavior is common in the Hebrew Bible and stems from the verb *הלך* (*hālak*,



“to walk”). Hence, even today the collection of rabbinical ethical teachings is called the halakah. The language is, of course, metaphorical here.

The leitmotif of 1 John is love. To behave ethically in the Epistles is to love as Jesus has loved—to the extent of laying down his life. This love commandment dominates as it has “from the beginning.” The latter is a favorite phrase of the author and is multivalent. Surely it means at least: from the beginning of everything, since it defines God’s character (4:16); from the beginning of creation; from the beginning of humanity’s story (Cain and Abel are representative of the fruits of love and hate); from the beginning of Jesus’ particular work in the incarnation (cf. the Gospel of John); and from the beginning of the Johannine community in Palestine to the later stages in Ephesus. Love is foundational.

Love and incarnation are inseparable. Those who have left the community are antichrists and liars and do not love God. What makes these apostates antichrists? Their Christology does. They not only deny the Father and the Son and that Jesus is the Messiah (2:22) but also deny the flesh of Jesus. For the author it appears to be a short step from denying the importance of Christ’s fleshly embodiedness to denying the importance of a neighbor’s bodily needs. When one does this, one walks in the footsteps of Cain, who is associated with the evil one and traffics in fratricide (3:12-15). The author makes the ethical demand clear: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (3:16-18).

The emphasis on care and justice for those in need draws attention to disability concerns. Who is poor and why? Certainly disability is more prominent where poverty prevails. Faith and love belong together and coalesce in a concern for justice. Beutler declares,

Christians living in affluence must share their material goods with their brothers and sisters beyond the boundaries of their Christian communities on a worldwide scale and challenge unjust social structures. . . . For the nations of the northern hemisphere, this responsibility means sharing their wealth with the nations of the south. But this commandment also applies to the developing nations that are characterized by vast inequality in material wealth. A rich ruling class often exploits the masses of the poor. (2004, 556, 558)

For this author, having the right Christology is not merely an academic exercise but is essential for acting justly, which is to say, loving in the way that God loves (*ἀγάπη*, *agapē*, language occurs forty-eight times in 1 John). The denial of Jesus’ fleshly existence along with the overwhelming use of

“knowing” language (*γινώσκω*, *ginōskō*, twenty-five times; *οἶδα*, *oīda*, fifteen times) immediately raises the specter of docetic or gnostic Christology. It is no accident that the noun “knowledge” never appears in 1 John; the emphasis is on action. Knowing is doing, and knowing rightly is tied to acting rightly. Those who disembodied Jesus easily disembodied their neighbor. Certain ways of “knowing” cause arrogance and disdain for others in the community. Readers should be reminded of the Pharisees in John 9 and their treatment of the blind man and ask whether they, like those Pharisees, operate from a normate standard that oppresses persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, 1 John’s focus on the incarnation implies that Christians ought to be concerned with ecological matters. The prologue to John proclaims, “The Word became flesh (*σάρξ*, *sarx*) and tabernacled among us” (1:14). Though Jesus is the unique Son of God, he is related to us insofar as we have become children of God through his blood. As the Son, he has authority over all flesh (*πᾶς σάρξ*, *pas sarx*; John 17:2). Since the prologue narrates the Word’s participation in the creation of everything (John 1:3), “all flesh” presumably includes the whole created order, not just human beings (cf. Rom 8). First John eschews docetist theologies that denigrate the material order. Do we? Should human beings relate to the earth in a hierarchical, dominating fashion by which the earth exists merely as an object to be used in the gratification of human greed and gluttony as described in 1 John 2:16?

Ecofeminists argue that denigration of creation is usually connected to denigration of female bodies. The power dynamic of patriarchy involves a system of hierarchy where the male rules as lord (Latin *dominus*, tied to the word “dominate”) and the female (and children) are subjects (objects, really) to be used as the male sees fit. Genesis 1:28 is often brought to bear on such a discussion: “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and lord over (*κατακυριεύσατε*, *katakuriēusate*) it; and rule over (*ἄρχετε*, *archete*) the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (my trans. of the LXX) followed by Gen 3:16: “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall lord over (*κυριεύσει*, *kuriēusei*) you’” (my trans. of the LXX). Rape, of the earth or of people, is inherent in such a system. As discussed above in relation to the man who was paralyzed (John 5), postcolonialism extends the conversation to other bodies, colonized bodies, including disabled bodies.

As discussed in the treatment of the passion narrative in John, Jesus’ body was disabled by the religious and political structures of his society.

He was physically violated, beaten, stabbed, and crucified. First John 5:6-7 may refer to John 19:34, where Jesus is stabbed in his side with the spear and water and blood come out. Even apart from that possible allusion, the language fits well in 1 John where the “begetting” language implies birth language, which involves both blood and water (cf. the woman in labor in John 16:21 and the womb [κοιλία, *koilia*] and water language in John 7:38 and 3:4). Furthermore, the blood of Jesus has already been mentioned in chapter 1 in relation to his salvific death. By insisting upon this earthy, earthly, wet, and bloody reality that Jesus experienced, the author may be emphasizing his actual death, thus countering once again a docetic Christology that insists that Jesus only “seemed” human.

### *The Power of Prayer*

First John 5:14-15 raises the important issue of the place of prayer with respect to disability: “And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.” For some people with disabilities or those who love them, these verses may feel like a mockery as they lift continual prayers for healing but healing does not come. Or they are accosted and victimized by other Christians who assure them that if they just pray harder, or have more faith, they will be healed. That is too vast a subject to treat here, but the text does insist that prayer is an essential aspect of Christian faith. The author proceeds to draw particular attention to intercessory prayer. He indicates that all injustice (*ἀδικία, adikia*) is sin. When Christians do not “do justice,” do not love a brother or sister, they are not acting in accordance with God’s will or loving the way God loves. They need to recognize that they are out of step with God and the community and are thereby affecting the whole group negatively. They need to recognize their sin, rely on Christ’s advocacy (2:2), and move back into harmonious relationship with God and neighbor. The result will be, as usual, life.

Perhaps those with disabilities are called by this text both to point out ableist injustice and to pray for those who are in its grip, either by ignorance or malevolence. In “Disabling the Lie: Prayers of Truth and Transformation,” Helen Betenbaugh and Marjorie Procter-Smith write,

Prayer is encounter and discourse with the Holy One, and as such it demands honesty and authenticity. How then are persons with disabilities to pray? In what ways does their embodied knowledge of difference, suffering, exclusion, and rejection shape their prayers before God in the midst of the community?

How have the conventions of traditional Christian public prayer enabled or inhibited the full participation of persons with disabilities in public worship? (1998, 281)

### *Eschewing Idolatry*

The author concludes his message to his flock on an urgent hortatory note, one that is particularly relevant for our own study: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21). What constitute idols in our contemporary context? Do wealth, status, power, ego, vanity, and nationalism qualify? What is more idolatrous than ableism?

Just as racism is a set of cultural attitudes and sociopolitical structures that privilege the dominant race over ethnic minorities, and just as sexism is a similar set of cultural presuppositions and sociopolitical structures that perpetuate male domination over women, so ableism names the discriminatory attitudes, negative stereotypes, and sociopolitical and economic structures and institutions that together function to exclude people with disabilities from full participation in society. Ableism thus identifies the normative bigotry, evaluative chauvinism, and structural injustice that people with disabilities have to endure at the hands of the dominant (read: nondisabled) culture (Yong 2011, 11).

### SECOND JOHN

Second John contains many of the same themes and uses similar language as 1 John. The ethical life is metaphorized with walking language (vv. 4, 6). The incarnation is emphasized through the author’s concern about the many antichrists, former members of the community who “do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (v. 7; cf. 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3). While disability per se does not overtly appear, the author’s command to deny physical hospitality to those who hold differing views might deserve further attention. Their holding a different view is equated with evil deeds, and the author has a sense of “contagion” whereby welcoming someone with different views is not only to condone evil but to participate in it. Upon what basis should hospitality be extended or denied to the “other”? Most certainly, many people with disabilities have experienced inhospitality and the fear of “contagion.” What is the relationship between hospitality and justice?

### THIRD JOHN

As in 1 and 2 John, the language of “walking” appears. As in all the Epistles (and the Gospel of John), concern for truth predominates (vv. 1, 3, 4,

8, and 12). Like 2 John, the author raises the issue of hospitality in two ways. First, the elder sends Demetrius with a letter to Gaius, instructing him to prepare to offer hospitality to the missionaries that the elder will send. Second, the elder derogates Diotrephes, because Diotrephes not only refuses hospitality to the elder's people but also punishes anyone else who welcomes them. The same questions posed above apply to this situation.

What 3 John adds to the topic of disability and the Bible is a consideration of the relationship between one's physical health and one's spiritual health. Heather Landrus' essay canvasses interpretations of 3 John 2 over time. At issue is whether verse 2a finds Gaius in poor physical health. Lord Bishop Sumner takes him to be in poor physical health but vigorous spiritual health (Landrus, 2002, 78). Much of the interpretive history deemphasizes the importance of physical (or financial) health and draws attention to spiritual health as far more crucial. According to Landrus, having made a sharp distinction between the prosperity of the body and the prosperity of the soul, some quickly move to asceticism (Tertullian and Augustine), while others like the Benedictine Bede see prosperity as a communal category such that prosperity was a way to gift others in need. More recently, one finds figures such as Carol Judd Montgomery, Oral Roberts, and Kenneth Hagin. All experienced poor physical health, all considered this biblical verse important for their own theology, and all saw attending to the physical health of people important. In fact, Montgomery opened places of rest and healing. Hospital and hospitality are etymologically related terms, not accidentally. Oral Roberts' physical illness was combined with poverty, as was the case with Kenneth Hagin.

The interpretation of verse 2 raises questions about the relationship between faith and physical well-being as well as faith and financial well-being. Those committed to the "prosperity gospel" (also known as "the health and wealth gospel") suggest that faithful believers should expect physical and financial deliverance. Others link holiness with poverty. Are Christians free to or even obligated to succeed financially? Does wealth necessarily cause spiritual injury? Is poverty a sign of a lack of faith or a sign of blessedness? Disability studies has taught us to ask these questions about physical health as well. Should those who are physically or mentally disabled seek physical healing to conform to "normal" bodies, or can physical suffering lead to holiness (cf. 2 Cor 12)? These thorny questions beg to be addressed in community.

## APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

### THE IMPORTANCE OF GENRE

The Apocalypse falls into three different genres, all of which are pertinent to reading through the lens of disability. First, John considers himself a prophet and his book to be prophecy (1:3). Prophets share their message from God with God's people; the message routinely entails a call away from idolatry and the adoption of the world's values, attention to the well-being of the particularly vulnerable or marginalized, and promises of reward or punishment depending upon whether the group acts in accordance with God's sense of justice. God's people were called to repent of their sin, whether individual, communal, institutional, or national. The prophets always judged Israel by their care for those on the margins: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the land. This could easily include persons with disabilities. God always sides with the marginalized and takes the wealthy or privileged to task for creating religious, economic, and political systems that benefit the few at the expense of the many.

Second, the unveiling of the vision is conveyed through letters directed to the angels of seven churches in Asia Minor. John shares the vision with an eye to embodied praxis. He patently wants them to do certain things and avoid others. Some of them may complain that they should not be held responsible for faithful action because they are so powerless, but John would dismiss the complaint immediately (3:8). The importance of embodied agency for those facing difficulty or exclusion may also be empowering for people living with disabilities. Each of the seven letters follows a pattern. First, the particular church is tied to symbolism that was first presented in the vision of Christ in 1:9-20. Second, the church is praised for what it is doing well. Third, it is rebuked for what it is doing wrong. Fourth, it is given a challenge relevant to its particular situation. Finally, it is promised reward or punishment based upon whether or not it conquers (*νικάω, νικᾷ*). The fact that Revelation was written to seven real, specific human communities (as opposed to a random, disembodied vision) undergoing suffering and trials of various sorts by a specific person who finds himself in exile, along with John's coalescing of the language of embodied agency and conquering, may be liberative for disabled persons. The conquering is not tied to becoming or remaining able-bodied but rather is related to patient endurance (*ὑπομονή, hypomonē*; used seven times in Rev, accounting for one-quarter of all New Testament uses) and faithfulness, even if that leads to death. On the other hand, the language may oppress insofar as PWDs are expected to become exemplary paragons

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of “overcoming” adversity, and if they choose *not* to adopt this role, they may find themselves maligned or unworthy of attention.

Third, the Apocalypse is an apocalypse (1:1). While there are many extracanonical examples of the genre (*1 En.*; *4 Ezra*; *2 Bar.*), this is the only one included in the Christian canon. Apocalyptic is literature of protest and, most importantly, hope. It emerges from communities that perceive themselves to be under severe stress and perhaps even physical danger. It is written for and by people on the margins who do not have access to political power, and it asks hard questions: Is there any justice for the powerless and oppressed? Does God have the goodwill (benevolence) to act or the power (omnipotence)? Negatively put, is God malévolent or impotent? Apocalyptic, then, takes up the question of God’s love, justice, and power. Revelation insists that God is just and powerful and, imminently, will set everything aright. The innocent who suffer will be vindicated, and the supercilious wicked will be harshly punished. Apocalyptic is literature of hope that sustains the downtrodden and exhorts them to remain faithful even under the worst of circumstances. Such literature inherently has the potential to inspire people with disabilities who presently see no light at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

Typically the members of such communities do not have political power and cannot leverage the social or economic systems of their host culture. In this case the host culture is the Roman Empire. John has been exiled to Patmos; the fact that he was not summarily executed implies that he might have enjoyed some level of social status. John sees Rome as irrevocably satanic. It cannot be overthrown by grassroots organizing and democratic vote. The only hope for its overthrow and the restoration of a just system lies in a dramatic, decisive, imminent act of God. John graphically and resolutely names the rottenness of the political, social, economic system that is Rome (see esp. ch. 18) and demands that Christians avoid participating in the system. He calls them to patient endurance (*ὑπομονή*, *hypomonē*) and faithfulness, even unto death. Apocalyptic, like Christian hope itself, depends upon irony. Reality is far different than it appears. On the surface it may appear that God has abdicated or lost interest in God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. The wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. But in reality God sees it all and judges it all and will, in fact, set things right sooner rather than later. Justice will prevail. Certainly, many PWDs, like other groups before them who have wondered “How long, O God?” can relate to this scenario. The liberative potential of apocalyptic is strong because it teaches all of us, including PWDs, to name evil structures for what they are, resist their evil, and rest assured that they

oppose God’s own vision (that is, that the suffering stems from a problem with “the system,” not the PWD) and that they stand under God’s just judgment. The potential pitfall lies in encouraging passivity when it is unnecessary. That is to say, while in Rome it was impossible for Christians to “act up” politically in a way that would effect real systemic change in the government, in modern America it is possible (hence the Americans with Disabilities Act). All such avenues should be pursued actively. As with the strategies of Martin Luther King Jr.’s groups, Revelation’s model of nonviolent resistance to the power structures of its society coheres well with the efforts of organizations such as ADAPT, whose mission statement reads, “ADAPT is a national grass-roots community that organizes disability rights activists to engage in nonviolent direct action, including civil disobedience, to assure the civil and human rights of people with disabilities to live in freedom.”<sup>10</sup>

#### SENSORY OVERLOAD

Immediately one is struck by the sensory language that infuses this text (1:1, 2, 3). Revelation is a particularly noisy book. One hears loud voices (6:1), singing (5:9), and instruments (harp, trumpet). Hearing (*ἀκούω*, *akouō*) language occurs seventeen times. Voice or sound (*φωνή*, *phōnē*), fifty-five times.

Often hearing is accompanied by seeing. “Eyes” (*ὄφθαλμός*, *ophthalmos*) occurs ten times. At 5:6, John, drawing upon Zech 4:10, presents the lamb as having seven eyes: “Eyes represent divine omnipresence and omniscience” (Meeks 1997, 2316). Verbs of seeing loom large in the text.

As noted by Greg Carey (2009), John employs rhetography, “the rhetoric of the senses.” Carey attends to language of seeing, touching, tasting, hearing, and smelling in Revelation. How might a person with one sensory impairment or another experience the book of Revelation? On the one hand, one might argue that in a book that reiterates the statement “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (2:11) or that equates blindness with wretchedness (3:17), the effect is detrimental to PWDs and implies that they may not be able to know God as well as TABs, who can perceive God in multiple ways. On the other hand, the fact that all the senses are highlighted and employed implies that God can be known in a variety of ways, such that a person with a particular impairment is not epistemologically disadvantaged: “The entire

<sup>10</sup> ADAPT’s mission statement can be found at <http://www.adapt.org>.

discussions about the value of hearing and seeing . . . may be considered part of a larger struggle with epistemological questions that continue today—namely, what are the best instruments available to human beings to perceive the world and the divine?” (Avalos 2007, 58).

#### POWER AND/IN WEAKNESS

Theologian Marva Dawn contends with multiple disabilities. In her book *Joy in Our Weakness: A Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation*, she explores a theology of weakness. How does such a theology cohere with Revelation’s emphasis on overcoming? Seventeen times, from start (2:7) to finish, the verb “to conquer” (νικάω, *nikāō*) appears, culminating with 21:7: “Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” Dawn writes,

Because I am weak and not weak enough, this book is written from two sides. As one who is handicapped, I plead for all of us to learn better to care for and listen to each other, and especially those who struggle with particular physical, emotional, and mental challenges. On the other hand, my calls to repentance are written by one who needs this prodding. . . . [A] theology of weakness also realizes that those who accept their weakness and acknowledge their dependence can teach us best about the grace that invades all our lives. Therefore, this theology challenges our churches to encourage the gifts and teaching potential of those who suffer and to become more truly a Christian community that cares deeply about each person. (2002, xi)

The mutuality and interdependence that inhere in such a model serve as a radical antidote to the hierarchical binary categories with which modern American society (and, for that matter, the imperial framework of Revelation) operates (rich/poor, educated/uneducated, documented/undocumented, TAB/PWD, white/black, young/old, etc.). Even the notion that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” propagates such top-down categories. Those in power get the hubris-building experience of handing something down to those in need. Those in need are taught to fantasize about being in power. But a theology of weakness understands that all have need and all have something to give. We would do well to learn not only how to be better givers but, perhaps more important, to become better at receiving.

#### A CALL TO PATIENT ENDURANCE

The conquering that John has in mind is ironic: it involves no violence and no show of force. Rather, in the face of uncertainty, persecution, and suffering, John emphasizes patient endurance (ὑπομονή, *hypomonē*;

1:9; 2:2-3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) as the primary strategy of victory. Dawn wisely notes that people with disabilities often develop patient endurance and discipline due to their lived reality: “The value of our weakness is that it teaches us to wait for God’s timing” (2006, 16). Closely tied to this patient endurance is faithfulness in spite of powerlessness, as evidenced by the church at Philadelphia: “I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name” (Rev 3:8). And yet. Everything depends upon that “and yet” (καὶ, *kai*). Suffering with patient endurance has evangelistic potential. Indeed, Revelation is the first instance of the word “martyr” in the sense of one who dies for the faith. The word is a transliteration of the Greek word meaning “witness.”

Of course, John is not the only New Testament witness to highlight a theology of weakness. Recall Paul’s words from 2 Cor 12:10: “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” One would think that a tradition based upon a crucified Messiah who is depicted as a slain lamb would (1) not value power unduly and (2) readily intuit the potential power of the “weak” among us. But the values of empire remain seductive.

There is a potential danger that the call to patient endurance might be confused with living in a passive manner and settling for oppression. Or it might manifest itself in not taking care of oneself by getting what medical help one can. Other critiques arise from feminist and postcolonial interpreters who note that Revelation itself, despite its elevation of weakness, buys into the empire’s power structures when it depicts God as uber-masculine (and violent; Moore 2009) and denigrates women, the “weaker sex” in the minds of the ancients. Revelation is notorious for its problematic portrayal of females (see, e.g., the work of Tina Pippin 2012). Concomitantly, I would argue that God is, therefore, also depicted as uber able-bodied. Whatever power Caesar is said to yield, God wields more with eternal, not temporary, effects. This would appear to have negative ramifications for those who are physically weak. But is the focus on the mighty tempered by the image of the Slain Lamb and the blood of the martyrs? As Carter notes, while the envisioned fantasy thrives on violent imagery, at no point are actual Christians enjoined to actual physical violence. Rather, they are to endure. If anything, there is a danger that Revelation trains readers to become too passive and not to consider it their duty to actively oppose oppressive structures and regimes (Carter 2011b).

## DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY

At 4:11 John echoes John 1:3 in declaring that everything has been created by God. Recall Amos Yong's contention that perhaps those with Down syndrome were created that way and do not need a medical cure. The passage in 3:15-22 raises issues, however. In addition to the association between blindness and wretchedness, Jesus tells the church at Laodicea, "I reprove and discipline those whom I love" (v. 19). Are disabilities a sign of God's special love or are they a sign of wretchedness? Furthermore, given Revelation's constant reference to names being inscribed in the book of life before the foundation of the world (3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:15, 21:27), were they predestined to have their particular disability? If so, how does this cohere with notions of illness and impairment as a sign of the demonic?

Revelation harbors within itself an irony: on the one hand, the author demands complete adherence to his construal of Christianity such that anyone who disagrees is labeled a Jezebel or Balaam; on the other hand, the same author envisions "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'" (Rev 5:13). Every creature. Does this sectarian book contain within it the seeds of radical inclusivity?

## OVERCOMING FEAR

Often, suffering is exacerbated by fear or ameliorated by confident faith. John faces this fact directly in his letter to the church at Smyrna: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (2:10). John is not Pollyanna and does not infantilize his people. I am reminded of a word from Tobias Wolff. He is referring to short stories, but it applies to Scripture as well:

As it happens, many of the stories in this book confront difficult material: violence, sickness, alcoholism, sexual exploitation, marital breakup. Well, so do we. I have never been able to understand the complaint that a story is "depressing" because of its subject matter. What depresses me are stories that don't seem to know these things go on, or hide them in resolute chippiness; "witty" stories, in which every problem is an occasion for a joke, "upbeat" stories that flog you with transcendence. Please. We're grown-ups now, we get to stay in the kitchen when the other grown-ups talk.

Far from being depressed, my own reaction to stories like these is exhilaration, both at the honesty and the art. The art gives shape to what the

honesty discovers, allows us to face what in truth we were already afraid of anyway. It lets us know we're not alone. (1994, xiv-xv)

Like John, Wolff understands that almost anything is bearable as long as it is not borne alone. The real problem for many PWDs is the excruciating experience of being alone and Other.

Fear increases both physical pain and psychosomatic agony. Most of the things we spend time dreading turn out to be harder because of our panic. At first when I shattered my foot, alarm about the probability of amputation prevented me from thinking of ways to cope with the daily difficulties. Only after ten days of traveling and teaching did I begin to trust that other people and ingenuity would help me get around all right and that Christ could use me for his work anyway. When I panic about the unknowns of the future, I need to remember those lessons in trust (Dawn 2002, 59).

## SALVATION (AND DAMNATION) IS COMMUNAL

Like the Fourth Gospel, Revelation is incarnational and relational. Jesus, the Word made flesh, declares at 2:9, "I know (*οἶδα, oida*) your affliction (*θλίψιν, thlipsin*; cf. 1:9, 2:10, 2:22, 7:14) and your poverty." The use of the perfect tense, whose force denotes action completed in the past with ongoing effect in the present, speaks a word to those currently struggling. Jesus knew it then; he knows it still. All the letters are addressed to churches, not individuals. As the vision of God's justice being brought to bear upon earth unfolds, it is clear that God's salvation is worked out communally. God does not simply judge individual emperors but Rome as a nation, an empire, a social, political entity that causes the oppression of whole groups of people. From Genesis to Revelation, we are saved together or we are damned together. As Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed, "Justice is indivisible, and injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."<sup>11</sup> The Johannine material urges TABs to see the experience of PWDs as part of their own experience. Disability and healing are communal experiences, by definition.

## IMPERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The language of war, power, violence, and conquering permeates Revelation. Postcolonial scholars routinely note that the oppressed mimic the

<sup>11</sup> In a speech delivered at an antiwar rally the University of Minnesota, April 27, 1967. At the twenty-minute mark in the following video of King's speech: [http://www.mnvideovault.org/index.php?id=17397&select\\_index=3&popup=yes#3](http://www.mnvideovault.org/index.php?id=17397&select_index=3&popup=yes#3).

oppressor. John envisions God's justice ousting Caesar at some point, but ironically God adopts the very techniques employed by Caesar himself. The dynamics remain the same; the only difference is who gets to stick it to whom. Instead of Caesar's misogynistic, sexually perverted, murderous rage, we find John exulting in Jesus murdering Jezebel's children (2:22-23) and "the whore [Rome], being stripped naked, gang raped (by the kings, merchants, and sailors), cannibalized, and burned forever (17:16)" (Pippin 2012, 630). This is a crucial issue for our analysis. Part of the disabling dynamic has to do with the constant fixation on binary categories: able-bodied/disabled, sick/healthy, ruler/ruled, powerful/impotent, conqueror/conquered. The modern world gave us the categories of *either/or*; post-modernism has given us the life-saving gift of *both/and*. Unfortunately, just as John contests Rome's behavior, he himself adopts it, valuing some bodies far more than others (note that the "144,000" are all males who have not "defiled" themselves with women [14:1-5]). We can, with John, protest the ways that empires oppress many of their members, but we must simultaneously critique John wherever he propagates the same destructive ideology.

In the end, Jesus' way of nonviolent resistance defeats Rome's arrogant, oppressive violence against bodies of all kinds. Carter explicates the significance of the phrase "slain but standing" in 5:6 to describe Christ, showing the violent nature of his death while maintaining his resistance to powers that be. He states, "It reveals that the world to which some or many of the Jesus-believers in the seven cities were happily accommodated violently rejected Jesus, the agent of God's purposes. But it also reveals that God sided with Jesus, not Rome, in raising Jesus from the dead. Roman power and violence are not ultimate; they do not have the last word. God's life-giving actions prevail" (2011b, 57). This is good news not only for PWDs but for everyone.

#### THE HOPE OF HEAVEN (REV 21:1-5)

The hope of heaven articulated at the close of the Christian canon has sustained sufferers of all kinds for centuries. Revelation is nothing if not a manifesto of hope. Writing to seven churches in Asia Minor who, by all appearances, had little reason to believe that God had the interest, the will, or the power to rectify rampant injustice and chaos, John conveys the contents of his singular "revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1).

This vision of ultimate restoration does **not** countenance escapist fantasies or flight from earthly reality and its attendant problems; quite the

opposite. In fact, it insists that God's home, as usual, is among mortals. Death (and its comrades Sin and Suffering) does not hold ultimate sway, for the Son of Man declares, "I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades" (1:18). Thus, Revelation provides hope for all people, including PWDs. Dwight Peterson, himself a PWD, finds in Revelation a twofold call: "First, we ought to *wait in hope*; second, we ought to *act in hope*" (2005, 166; emphasis in original). He defines acting in hope as visiting those who are sick, accompanying them to appointments, and working on policy initiatives: "This is no laundry list, of course. Instead, practicing the presence of Christ calls for thoughtful and collaborative creativity" (168).

One should be careful not to assume, however, that all people with disabilities imagine themselves as having normative bodies at this time of restoration. Instead, some people who have lived their entire lives in a wheelchair imagine heaven as a place with no stairs and fully accessible. This may be especially interesting to consider in Revelation because standing and mobility play a large role (ascending to the throne, one foot in the river, one on land, etc.). For them, the hope is not to become someone or something else but to become one's self fully without obstacles, to inhabit a world where impairments are not necessarily disabling.

As in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus' stigmata remain, so in Revelation we have the image of the Slain Lamb. Helen Betenbaugh<sup>12</sup> wonders about the "stigmata" on the bodies of those who sustained them by doing good works. Might there be a positive link between them and the Lamb, especially in chapter 5 since the Lamb was outcast, disabled, wounded, and is suddenly at the center as the major actor? Might this function in the same way as the vision of the eschatological banquet where "the right people" are too busy to attend, and so the PWDs, the outcasts, and the poor become the feted guests? Certainly the theme of the great reversal, wherein the last shall be first, predominates all apocalyptic literature.

#### PROMISES AND PITFALLS

Most religions attempt to account for suffering. Typically, pain may be viewed as punishment, as an opportunity for transcendence or "overcoming," or as redemptive and salvific (Conwill 1986). One might argue that the latter two are represented in Revelation (and all apocalyptic literature) as John relativizes the suffering of his audience by pointing them to the

<sup>12</sup> Personal correspondence, October 1, 2013.



rewards that accrue for endurance. Certainly Jesus' death is considered redemptive, and perhaps those of the prognosticated martyrs as well. This fact might help those with disabilities discern or create meaning out of their experiences of pain and suffering. Clearly this is the approach taken by Marva Dawn. She would fully resonate with Betenbaugh's notion of "an Easter faith in a Good Friday body" (2000, 208).

But a warning is in order. In his article "Why Do the Innocent Suffer?," Thomas Tracy cautions against the facile explanation of suffering as a tool for character formation. The question of proportion immediately arises. If one posits that suffering is useful for character formation, one has to ask, "How much suffering?" Too much suffering destroys. Also, logically speaking, if we believe this, we might argue that it is incumbent upon us to *cause* suffering for others for their own moral formation. This is logically absurd reasoning, but it is implicit when people try a "one-size-fits-all" approach to accounting for the experience of suffering and God's place in it. As Tracy so eloquently states, if one is not careful, one subscribes to a notion of "a vast pedagogy of pain" where life is a "cosmic nursery school" (1998, 49–50). This notion that God never gives a greater burden than one can bear has been deployed with devastating results. Anyone paying attention in the least can discern that such is not the case in a general way, else one would not find people in a catatonic state, suffering a nervous breakdown or severe depression, ulcers, high blood pressure, or, in the case of my son's seventh-grade peer, hanging oneself to death.

#### CONCLUSION

The word "healing" (θεραπεία, *therapeia*) occurs only once in Revelation, in the final chapter: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing [not *curing!*] of the nations" (22:1–2). This is a stunning image of universal luxurious abundance for the flourishing of all creation. May those presently deprived draw hope from it; may those disproportionately privileged feel convicted by it; may it be on earth as it is in heaven; and may the new Jerusalem arrive sooner rather than later.

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## 11

## Paul

Arthur J. Dewey and Anna C. Miller

The Pauline corpus in the New Testament comprises thirteen letters attributed to the apostle Paul. However, through a comparative analysis of the letters, the majority of contemporary New Testament scholars consider seven letters (1 Thess, Gal, 1 and 2 Cor, Phlm, Phil, and Rom) were authored by Paul in the mid-first century (48–55 CE). A follower of Paul may well have written Colossians and Ephesians in the last quarter of the first century, while Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy were written sometime before the mid-second century. Second Thessalonians may be the latest written, a second-century reworking of 1 Thessalonians dealing with the delay of the end of the world. In treating the overarching question of the Pauline corpus and disability, we therefore shall divide our treatment into two sections: the authentic Pauline letters and the later letters written in his name. We shall note how the remarkable insights included in Paul's letters were, to a great extent, frustrated, deflected, and even erased by the later letters.

Beyond the determination of the authentic letters of Paul, we need to be aware of the significant critical factors in reading this material. In raising the question of disability with regard to the Pauline corpus, we must recognize the limits and possibilities of this investigation. It should be noted right from the start that the concept of disability is a modern construction. While persons with a variety of physical or mental impairments were set within disabling social situations and institutions in the first and second centuries, the classification of people according to "disabled" or "nondisabled" categories did not exist in antiquity (Kelley 2007, 33). Such