

Anna Rebecca Solevåg. *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts*. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018. 191 pages. \$29.95.

In many cultures, people project what they consider to be the “perfect body” and enforce this notion on others to adore and imitate. This perfect body is presented as young, able, light-skinned, and athletic. While many would find it difficult to fit such an ideal, one group of people falls short more obviously than others—people with disabilities. While disabled bodies often appear to challenge or even pose a threat to prevailing religious and social concepts of normalcy, Solevåg argues that “insights from this interdisciplinary field can be helpful for understanding more fully how the disabled body is negotiated in early Christian texts” (1). Through her research, she attempts to show how discourse on disability is closely connected with other discourses on otherness, and ideas concerning beauty, gender, race, class, and sexual renunciation (3). Disability, therefore, works as a representation that often reflects the power displayed in hierarchies and structures of discrimination.

From chapter 2 to chapter 7, Solevåg introduces theories of disability that have been used to analyze cases of disabled bodies, which are selected from early Christian texts, including the apocrypha: narrative prosthesis, illness as metaphor, disability and the male gaze, stigma and the normate, monster theory, and crip theory. Three key points emerge from Solevåg’s biblical and historical research. First, disabled bodies are often utilized for their usefulness in presenting a problem in a literary narrative (narrative prosthesis). They not only disappear once the problem is solved but also serve only to highlight the divinity of Jesus as the ultimate healer. For example, when Jesus and his disciples encounter a man born blind in John 9, they ask, “Rabbi, who sinned?” Solevåg argues that disability, therefore, is employed as the “crutch that the narrative needs in order to show that God is great” (52).

Second, a disabled body is often probed for its moral traits, moving from the outer to the inner. In John 5:1-15, Jesus meets a paralyzed man at Bethesda pool who has been lying there for thirty-eight years. When Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” the man seems neither enthusiastic for healing nor grateful about being healed. While many commentators have criticized him for his passive attitude, Solevåg points out that such an interpretation is based on an ableist assumption that people want to be healed medically from their disability (64). Similarly, Judas, who betrayed Jesus, is presented as a monster by Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, who connects Judas’s hideous features of swollen body, eye, and genitals with his moral character. Solevåg asserts that when one is described as a disabled, monster, or “other,” that person is often feminized and presented as lacking self-restraint, seeking overindulgence, and being sexually immoral.

Third, a disabled body is closely associated with gender, class, and ethnicity. In chapter 4, Solevåg discusses how women in the Acts of Peter are not only healed temporarily but also intentionally *unhealed*, as in the case of Peter’s daughter, in order to avoid sexual defilement. In the vision of Marcellus, the demon character is shown as female, Ethiopian, and poor. Solevåg quotes Garland-Thompson who has argued that, “Female, disabled, and dark bodies are supposed to be dependent, incomplete, vulnerable, and incompetent bodies” (91). For the purpose of homiletics, it is remarkable to observe that in many pulpits preachers who are female, dark-skinned, or foreign are likewise considered “disabled,” because their pitch, accent, or bodily figure do not match the traditional view of a preacher—white, male, athletic.

Homileticians and preachers would find Solevåg's research helpful in identifying the complexity of presentations of disabled characters in early Christian texts. For example, in contrast to the popular notion that disabled persons are poor, the paralyzed man in Mark 2:1-12 might not be poor in terms of his social status but a person of means who moves with the aid of four slaves. Solevåg's study is also insightful in negotiating the identity of a preacher who is considered to be "disabled" due to race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or sexual orientation. It would be helpful to reflect how the disabled characters such as the Syrophoenician woman, Paul, and the Ethiopian eunuch overturned the structures of discrimination and ableism by claiming rights, boasting in weakness, and being included in the family of God.

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