

# ○ DISABILITY AND THE MARGINALISATION OF GOD IN THE PARABLE OF THE SNUBBED HOST (LUKE 14.15-24)

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The parable, rendered by the interpretive tradition in glowing terms, is often enlisted to underwrite theologies of liberation and radical inclusion grounded in God's indiscriminate love as well as social programs that advance the interests of the poor and disabled. It is argued here, however, that for disabled people the story may offer little if any 'good news' at all. Although it appears that the Lukan Jesus wishes to communicate God's preferential option for the poor and disabled, the parable fails rhetorically to achieve this objective, undermining in part his project of bringing 'good news' to Roman Palestine's 'poor ... captives ... blind ... [and] oppressed' while disclosing a latent frustration of his own with the deity. While the parable may fail to convince that God is favorably disposed toward the disabled, Jesus' own attitude is much more ambivalent, one that couples paternalism and an ideology of similitude with profound empathy for disabled persons in pain.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent academic interpretations of the Parable of the Snubbed Host<sup>1</sup> view the story and its message(s) in glowing terms. Most often, it is invoked as representative of God's all-inclusive love, mediated through Jesus' ministry to the poor and marginalised (Crossan 2002; Dunn 1992; Hendrickx 1986; Johnson 1991; Lemcio 1986; Snodgrass 1998; Swartley 1997; Tannehill 1992). Such readings generally take the householder, who fills his banquet hall with the poor and disabled after learning that all those whom he originally invited have declined to attend, as a metaphor either for God or Jesus and the banquet as a symbol for God's reign (whether on earth or in heaven). The parable is therefore emblematic of the 'good news' that Jesus proposes to bring to 'the poor ... captives ... blind ... [and] oppressed' while visiting the synagogue in Nazareth (4.18-19). Several interpreters, however, are uncomfortable allowing the householder to stand for God, primarily because of his initial exclusion of the poor and disabled from the banquet (Green 1997; Schottroff 2006), and therefore prefer to see him as no more than an ordinary human being whose personal transformation (wealthy) readers might emulate (Braun 1995; Green 1997; Tannehill 1992). By divesting himself of elite values and customs, even if not for the most noble intentions (e.g., Scott 1989), he unites in solidarity with the poor, embodying Jesus' instruction to the religious authorities moments earlier (14.12-14). The parable thereby becomes a natural candidate for underwriting theologies of liberation and radical inclusion grounded in a God of indiscriminate love and/or social programs that advance the interests of the poor and disabled. John Dominic Crossan (2002), in fact, identifies it as the parable *par excellence* for illustrating a 'shared egalitarianism' at the heart of the original Jesus movement.

Not only is the parable viewed favorably without exception, but interpreters tend to collapse the four categories of people summoned at the end of the story – 'the poor, disabled, blind, and lame' (14.21) – into one, signified variously by terms such as 'outcasts', 'the marginalised', 'the disenfranchised', 'the oppressed', or even simply by the first category in the list, 'the poor'. Dis-

cussions of these second and third invitees generally focus on social class, even though three of the four terms (*anapeirous, typhlous, cholous*) refer explicitly to the disabled. One principal objective of this essay, therefore, is to explore how this parable might be received by disabled persons, who make up a significant number (the majority?) of those who actually attend the meal, and whether it necessarily communicates ‘good news’, as the interpretative tradition suggests. To do this, I will draw upon literature in the emerging field of Disability Studies as well as upon several recent volumes that engage the biblical writings with a disability optic.<sup>2</sup> The hermeneutical lens to be deployed will be defined below. A second aim will involve taking seriously the negative characterization of God implied by Jesus’ analogy. Indeed, as a majority of commentators have (sometimes reluctantly) observed, *in its narrative context* the householder represents God, which understandably may create discomfiture for some. For those who concede that the householder does represent God, a wholly unflattering portrait is often circumvented by claiming that not all features of a parable are to be ‘metaphorized’. But the decision to focus exclusively on appealing qualities and actions of the householder while suppressing those that are unappealing (see, e.g., Snodgrass 1998, 195; Hendrickx 1986, 133–34) is likely a consequence of the interpreter’s personal commitments to a good and just deity rather than a hermeneutical move required by the parable itself. Given the surfeit of unsavory representations of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, a primary anthology of intertexts for anyone constructing God in the New Testament writings, it is neither surprising nor problematic to find an unbecoming portrait of the deity here. This reading will not elide unflattering qualities ascribed to God by Jesus’ analogy (an interpretive strategy that has variously been called ‘redemptionist’ [Avalos 2007, 91–92, 99–100] or ‘prostheticizing’ [Raphael 2008, 141–43]); rather, it will explore the implications of this unappealing portrait for a reception of the parable by disabled people.

Briefly, I will argue that although it appears that Jesus wishes to communicate God’s preferential option for the poor and disabled (e.g., Luke 1.52–53; 4.16–44; 6.20–21; 16.19–31), the parable fails rhetorically to achieve this objective, undermining in part his project of bringing ‘good news’ to Roman Palestine’s ‘poor ... captives ... blind ... [and] oppressed’ while disclosing a latent frustration of his own with the deity – a frustration possibly born of regular, intimate relations with those who suffer, and perhaps even of a personal struggle with disability and/or pain as well (see 4.23).<sup>3</sup> Even more, the parable announces in Žižekian fashion the irrelevance of the big Other for all invitees, both the elite and the non-elite. Finally, although the parable may fail to convince that God is favorably disposed toward the disabled or provide them with sufficient justification to sustain a relationship with the deity, I will suggest that Jesus’ own attitude toward the disabled is much more ambivalent, one that couples deprecatory paternalism and an ideology of similitude with profound empathy for disabled persons in pain.

## DELINEATING A HERMENEUTICAL LENS

I assume a social or minority-group model of disability chastened by what Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) has called ‘strategic essentialism’, which insists on real physical difference, on the singularity or particularity of the flesh (23–25). Simply put, the social model asserts that ‘all bodies are socially constructed – that social attitudes and institutions determine far greater than biological fact the representation of the body’s reality’ (Siebers 2006, 173). The primary advantage of this model is to lay bare the *constructedness* of all bodily representations, to denaturalize in

particular the disabled figure, constituted in opposition to the ‘ideal’ or ‘normal’ body by historically and culturally specific discursive practices. The problem, then, lies not with disabled persons themselves, whose diseased or defective bodies must be rehabilitated in accordance with the ‘norm’, but with social structures, policies, and attitudes. What is required, according to this model, is accommodation rather than compensation (Thomson 1997, 49–51), access and justice rather than cure or erasure.<sup>4</sup>

Strong social constructionism, however, has its difficulties. Thomson (1997), for instance, writes:

Although the constructionist perspective does the vital cultural work of destigmatizing the differences we call gender, race, or disability, the logic of constructionism threatens nevertheless to obscure the material and historical effects of those differences and to erase the very social categories we analyze and claim as significant. Thus, the poststructuralist logic that destabilizes identity can free marginalised people from the narrative of essential inadequacy, but at the same time it risks denying the particularity of their experiences. The theoretical bind is that deconstructing oppressive categories can neutralize the effects of real differences. (22–23)

This ‘theoretical bind’ is perhaps most acute when impairment is accompanied by pain. The general tendency of body and disability theorists, including Thomson herself, has been to celebrate physical difference as distinction, to re-mark the pathological or abnormal body as extraordinary, even wondrous and awe-inspiring (131–34, 137). However, many disabled people who deal with chronic pain maintain an ambivalent or even negative relationship with their bodies, which makes such transvaluation difficult, if not impossible (Creamer 2009, 27, 89–90, 109–111). For many, the body may be experienced as an enemy, an unruly, fiendish Other (Siebers 2006, 176–81; Cassell 1991, 56–58). Indeed, as Simon Williams has said, ‘... endorsement of disability solely as social oppression is really only an option, and an erroneous one at that, for those spared the ravages of chronic illness’ (quoted in Shakespeare 2006, 200). Moreover, others have pointed out that even if society should find a way to remove all social and physical barriers, discard hierarchized, punitive oppositions such as ‘normal/abnormal’ and ‘able-bodied/disabled’, and check its technologies of normalization, many disabled people still will find life more difficult than persons without impairments (French 1993, 17–25; Shakespeare 2006, 201–03). Or, as Tom Shakespeare (2006) has said, even in a barrier-free utopia ‘there remains disadvantage associated with having many impairments which no amount of environmental change could entirely eliminate’ (202). For some, then, the disabled body is experienced as having ‘*intrinsic* limitations’ that no amount of social engineering can overcome (Shakespeare 2006, 202; italics mine).<sup>5</sup> The social model, therefore, while indispensable for demonstrating the constructedness of all bodily representations and creating possibilities for justice and greater access, is best tempered by a commitment to the hard-kerneled particularity of embodied experience and its frequent recalcitrance to linguistic manipulation.

The stubborn intractability of the body, I have suggested, is perhaps no more apparent than when it is subjected to pain. Indeed, ‘[pain] is’, writes Elaine Scarry (1985), ‘to the individual experiencing it overwhelmingly present, more emphatically real than any other human experience’

(51). This is especially important in view of the two healing narratives that immediately precede the Parable of the Snubbed Host in 13.10-17 and 14.1-6, which constitute the most recent addition to the reader's ever-shifting (Iserian) horizon of past perceptions of disability when constructing an image of 'the poor, disabled, blind, and lame' (14.21), those to whom the householder opens his banquet hall after the first group of invitees has declined to attend. Both healing stories suggest disability accompanied by chronic pain. Today, one might describe the woman's illness in 13.10-17 as a form of spondylitis, a rheumatic disease of the spine and peripheral joint(s), or perhaps an advanced case of osteoarthritis (see also Fitzmyer 1981-1985 II, 1012; cf. Wilkinson 1977, 195-205). Without the assistance of modern pharmaceuticals, both conditions would certainly involve chronic pain. In 14.1-6, the excessive accumulation of serous fluid in connective tissues or serous cavities associated with 'dropsy' (i.e., edema) might today suggest kidney disease, congestive heart failure, or cirrhosis of the liver (see also Fitzmyer 1981-1985 II, 1041; Green 1997, 546). The sometimes severe swelling of edema would cause pain and stiffness and put one at increased risk for ulceration and infection. Moreover, during the first century, 'dropsy' was associated in the popular mind with an unquenchable thirst: the more one drinks, the thirstier one grows (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1993, 284-85). Again, chronic pain (or chronic discomfort at a minimum) is assumed. It is difficult to imagine either character celebrating their extraordinary bodies; more likely, their bodies were experienced as foe rather than friend, an additional source of anguish on top of the stigmatization to which they would have been subjected in a culture that so highly prized the unblemished body.

Chronic pain is not only part of the reader's horizon of past perceptions of disability when figuring the disabled body in 14.15-24; its presence in the two antecedent healing stories may also help explain why Jesus treats both conditions with a sense of urgency (13.15-16; 14.5).<sup>6</sup> What, then, might we say about the nature of pain and its effects on the individual? On the one hand, pain is essential for survival: it teaches us which objects, activities, or situations are potentially injurious and enforces rest when our tissues have been damaged or we are ill (Melzack and Wall 1983, 11-12). On the other hand, many (perhaps most) pains are excessive or useless, serving no pedagogical or therapeutic function whatsoever. It is when subject to this second kind of pain that we experience our bodies as adversaries that assault us without sufficient cause (Cassell 1991, 56-58). Its sheer aversiveness, notes Scarry (1985), divides the subject, who suddenly discovers an alien, inimical companion at war with one's 'true self' – a 'not me' that one earnestly wishes to subdue or expel; its fundamental unshareability isolates and, though 'indisputably real to the sufferer', often appears unreal to others, only compounding one's suffering. Resistant to verbal expression, it becomes 'the single broad and omnipresent fact of existence', obliterating 'the contents of consciousness' and destroying the capacity for speech (51-56). Scarry finds a fitting (and compelling) comparison in torture: 'Perhaps only in the prolonged and searing pain caused by accident or by disease or by the breakdown of the pain pathway itself is there the same brutal senselessness as in torture' (35). For one who does experience the body as a mindless, sadistic torturer, 'transformed so thoroughly into flesh', she may, like Jean Améry (1980), lose her sense of 'trust in the world' – a trust that often cannot be regained (40). For Améry,

... torture has an indelible character. Whoever was tortured, stays tortured.  
Torture is ineradicably burned into him ... That one's fellow man was experi-

enced as the antiman remains in the tortured person as an accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules ... It is *fear* that henceforth reigns over him. Fear – and also what is called resentments. (34, 40)

For certain persons subject to pain, the body becomes the ‘antiman’, leaving in its wake not only deep resentment but an abiding distrust in materiality as such, an irreparable breach in one’s relation to the very ground of one’s being, which for some may even take root as a fundamental religious affection (see, e.g., Blumenthal 1993, 249–64).

## READING THE PARABLE OF THE SNUBBED HOST (LUKE 14.15-24)

About midway through the Travel Narrative, Jesus is invited by ‘a leader of the Pharisees’ (14.1) to his home for a Sabbath meal, where, after healing a man who had been suffering from ‘dropsy’, he proceeds in fine symposium fashion to offer the guests a bit of utterly banal wisdom on elite meal etiquette: be careful not to assume a position at the table that exceeds your social rank lest you be asked to relinquish it when someone (whom the host deems) of higher rank arrives (vv.7-11). Jesus then turns to the host and advises him as well. When preparing a banquet, he says, invite not family members or persons of your own social class but the poor and disabled, since it is they who cannot return the favor. A wealthy host who takes his advice may rest assured that she ‘will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous’ (vv.12-14). Interestingly, Jesus here suggests that the rich, if generous, may remain wealthy and still be numbered among ‘the righteous’, a position that later will be overturned (e.g., 14.33; 16.13, 19-31; 18.25).

A guest, presumably concerned that Jesus is stipulating habitual preparation<sup>7</sup> of meals for the poor and disabled as a requirement for entering God’s kingdom, offers a subtle criticism in the form of a marcarism that broadens the parameters for inclusion: ‘Blessed is *anyone* who will eat bread in the kingdom of God’ (v.15). Unwilling to grant this anonymous guest the final word, Jesus seizes the opportunity to define, by means of a parable, precisely whom he believes will have a share in the kingdom. In its narrative context, then, the parable will function analogically: the householder will represent God and the banquet his kingdom (see also Scott 1989, 164–65, 169, 172–73; Fitzmyer 1981-1985 II, 1049, 1054, 1057; Hendrickx 1986, 114, 132–33; Tannehill 1992, 1608–1610; Snodgrass 1998, 190, 192; Swartley 1997, 189).

A wealthy householder, the parabler tells us, has invited to ‘a great banquet’ a selection of people from his own social class, the urban elite. The three invitees who later decline his invitation are representative; many more, it is assumed, were asked to come (*ekalesen pollous*; v.16). The first, who has just purchased a field and gives as his excuse that he must now ‘go out to inspect it’ (v.18), is probably an absentee landlord (Rohrbaugh 1991, 143), one of many in first century Roman Palestine who were snatching up family plots from peasants in default and annexing them to their already vast estates. The second has purchased five yoke of oxen and wishes ‘to try them out’ (v.19); given that ten oxen could plow over 110 acres (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1993, 286) and that the average peasant holding consisted of only 1.5 acres (Oakman 1986, 61), it is clear that he is rich as well. Although the social class of the final invitee, who may decline because of existing reciprocal obligations stemming from a recent wedding or because he too wishes to ‘try out’ his recent acquisition (Longenecker 2008, 187–89), is not clearly identified,

readers likely will assume that he is of comparable rank. Indeed, the urban elite habitually dined only with members of their own social class; meals served to reinforce the sharply defined boundaries demarcating elites from non-elites, and few were those who dared transgress them.

Between the issuing of the first and second invitations, the invitees have concluded either that this particular householder and/or his guests are not persons with whom they wish to be associated or that they are unable (or unwilling) to assume further reciprocal obligations (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1993, 285–86). Given the unlikelihood that so many would decide independently not to attend, it has even been suggested that the householder is the target of a conspiracy (Rohrbaugh 1991, 141–43; Scott 1989, 171). It is difficult to imagine that *everyone* would decline because of existing reciprocal obligations or dissatisfaction with the guest list; more probably, there is widespread dislike in this community for the host. Naturally, the invitees show little interest in cultivating relations with him, as evidenced by their last minute (and perhaps flimsy) excuses.

Shamed, the householder becomes angry (*orgistheis*; v.21). It is precisely *this* emotion that governs his next move: he commands his slave to ‘go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the city and bring in (*eisage*) the poor, disabled,<sup>8</sup> blind, and lame<sup>9</sup>’ (v.21). Significantly, the language of invitation that predominated up to this point is suddenly dropped; this second group is to be ‘brought in,’ not asked. The slave, it appears, is only able to round up a handful of the urban poor and disabled since he reports that ‘there is still space’ (v.22),<sup>10</sup> so the householder then enjoins him to go out to ‘the roads and hedges’ on the outskirts of town and ‘compel (*anankason*) them to come in, so that [his] house might be filled’ (v.23). The householder’s rhetoric intensifies with this second command: they are now to be ‘compelled’. Already snubbed by his peers, he shall not be humiliated by these people as well. Consequently, the poor and disabled are stripped of agency and autonomy, an experience not unfamiliar to them. Also of significance is the rationale supplied by the householder for the slave’s second outing: the host, it seems, is not eager for social commerce with the community’s most despised citizens but simply to see his banquet hall ‘filled’. The gesture is neither indicative of a personal transformation<sup>11</sup> in which he roundly rejects elite values (Tannehill 1992, 612–15; Green 1997, 557–563; Braun 1995, 98–131) nor of altruism; as the recipient of a social insult, he now must *avenge his honor* by ‘rebuffing those who rebuffed him’ (Scott 1989, 168). In effect, the decision to compel the poor and disabled into his hall is reckless and impulsive, rooted in anger and a profound sense of shame, and those whom he rounds up last minute are mere pawns in a scheme for revenge. The householder’s final statement, seething with the wounded pride and histrionic bravado of someone clamoring for the last word, cannot be trusted: ‘For I tell you that not one of those men who were invited shall taste of my banquet!’ (v.24). Uttered in a fit of rage, might we assume that when his temper has cooled, he will reach out once again to those who offended him, and life will go on much as before?

On the one hand, the householder’s sudden abandonment of a language of invitation (*ekalesen*; *keklemenois*) for authoritarian, paternalistic rhetoric (*eisage*; *anankason*) is consistent with the dismissive attitude of many urban elite toward society’s lowest classes and therefore simply to be expected. However, the householder may also have sensed that the poor and disabled would strenuously resist passing through the guarded internal walls that demarcated the elite area of the city into a world in which they were not welcome, thereby transgressing socially loaded space

(Rohrbaugh 1991, 134–36, 144–45). Beyond the rather obvious (yet significant) discrepancy in social class, what other reasons might the disabled in particular have for staying away? Why might they mistrust the householder’s motives? On occasion, the elite of the early Roman Empire would ‘acquire’ (at, for instance a ‘monster market’ [Plutarch *Moralia* 520c]) or invite disabled people to banquets to serve as entertainment (Kelley 2007, 39–40). Moreover, eugenicist ideals espoused by authorities like Plato and Aristotle that promoted exposure/infanticide or euthanasia for the disabled still circulated in the first century (Kelley 2007, 36–39), most notably among the elite. Ubiquitous too were the beliefs that disability was the consequence of divine punishment, either for one’s own infraction(s) against a deity or those of one’s kin (Walls 2007, 23–26; Avalos 1999, 62–66; Kelley 2007, 41–43), and that a person’s character could be ascertained on the basis of physical traits (physiognomy). Furthermore, assuming that Hector Avalos (1999) is correct in maintaining that ableist discursive practices rooted chiefly in Leviticus (what he calls the ‘Levitical health care system’) predominated in early Roman Palestine (66-71), disabled Jews would have been heavily stigmatized and marginalised, perhaps even barred access to the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, given the various stigmata attached to the disabled body and the often nefarious, self-serving uses to which it was subjected by the able-bodied, it is not at all surprising that the disabled would be reluctant to attend the householder’s banquet. Exhibiting profound yet justified mistrust of society’s dominant discourses as well as its guarantors and primary beneficiaries (of which the householder was one), the householder reasoned that he probably had no choice but to ‘compel’ them – if, that is, he had any hope of ‘filling his house’.

I stated above that the parable functions as an allegory in its narrative context: the householder represents God and the ‘great banquet’ his kingdom. A majority of interpreters have proposed (or conceded) such a reading, even if with qualifications or discomfiture (see esp. Hendrickx 1986, 133–35; Tannehill 1992, 1608–11, 1615; Snodgrass 1998, 195). How, then, might the parable, if read in narrative context, be received by persons who foreground a hermeneutical lens grounded in an experience of disability? First, the story reflects their daily experience: unlike the elite, who are ‘invited’, they are often ‘led’ or ‘compelled’; unlike the elite, all of whom emerge as distinct characters and are given a voice (vv.18-20), they are defined as a group by a single trait and awarded no voice whatsoever. Furthermore, Jesus’ portrayal of the householder, who treats the disabled as second class citizens, is consistent with the ableist deity that pervades much of the Hebrew Bible. God, the parable says, has really favored the elite and able-bodied all along, a conclusion many disabled persons may have reached on their own given the Hebrew Bible’s tendency to represent the deity as superlatively Normal in every way (often via his absolute opposite – the disabled individual [Raphael 2008, esp. 31–50, 132–37]), their acute stigmatization and marginalisation under a discriminatory health care system authorized by him, and their (possible) exclusion from certain rituals performed at his Temple in Jerusalem (see Olyan 2008, esp. 26–46).

Jesus, however, wishes to argue for a change of heart in God; once aligned with society’s powerbrokers, he now exhibits a preferential option for the poor and disabled. In fact, his former ‘friends’, the householder claims, are to be definitively excluded from the meal (v.24), a statement that further fortifies the theme of eschatological reversal so pervasive in Luke (e.g., 1.52-53; 6.20-21, 24-25; 16.19-31 ). One wonders, however: Is a statement uttered impulsively in a fit of rage (*orgistheis*; v.21) to be trusted? Jesus wants to believe that God favors the poor and disabled (e.g., 4.16-44), but the parable unwittingly exposes that he himself has been unsuccessful

excising the ableist, capricious deity who haunts the pages of the Hebrew Bible – a portrait possibly confirmed by his own experience of disability in a profoundly ableist culture (4.23).<sup>12</sup> So, the parable fails to convince: as astute hearers of the parable likely will not want anything to do with this mercurial, ableist figure, it inadvertently undermines his proclamation that the poor and disabled are recipients of God's special favor. One might even go so far as to claim that the parable announces the irrelevance of the deity as such *for all* – both for the elite, who themselves now have even more reason to distrust this unstable character and clearly would rather attend to more immediate 'earthly' affairs anyhow, and the non-elite, naturally put off by his transparent favoritism and palpably (yet understandably) suspicious of his true motives.

Although the parable fails to persuade hearers that *God* is favorably disposed toward the disabled and worthy of their loyalty, what might we say about the parabler? Does Jesus' perspective merely mirror that of his father's, or are the two characters demonstrably at odds?

### **EXPLORING THE READER'S PROXIMATE HORIZON: DISABILITY IN LUKE 13.10-17 AND 14.1-6**

There are several remarkable similarities between the healing narratives of the woman 'unable to stand up straight at all' (13.11) and the man with 'dropsy' (14.2): 1) both healings take place on the Sabbath; 2) the issue of whether healing is appropriate on the Sabbath is raised; 3) neither disabled person requests to be healed; 4) in his response to the religious authorities ('leader of the synagogue' [13.14]; 'lawyers and Pharisees' [14.3]), Jesus likens the experience of an individual with a chronic illness to that of a domestic animal and/or child in immediate need of assistance or relief; and 5) Jesus' remarks have the effect of shaming (13.17) or silencing (14.6) his opponents (see also O'Toole 1992, 104 n.43; Green 1997, 543–44). Among academic interpreters, both narratives are generally read symbolically: the disabled woman is variously taken as a metaphor for God's emerging kingdom (O'Toole 1992), the restoration of Israel embodied in the early Christian *ecclesia* (Hamm 1987), women's oppression in patriarchal societies (Kinukawa 2000), or as a sign of the final and decisive shift in the eschatological battle (May 1997; Green 1989); the man with 'dropsy' typically embodies an insatiable thirst for money, becoming for readers 'a vivid parable of Jesus' socially elite, Pharisaical table companions' (Green 1997, 547; cf. Malina and Rohrbaugh 1993, 284–85). In effect, the particularity of the disabled experience is relegated to the margins, subsumed beneath a 'higher' literary purpose. It might also be added that a majority of commentators view both episodes principally as conflict stories occasioned by healings.<sup>13</sup> It is, therefore, the figure of Jesus and what *he* says (or, alternatively, what is said about him) that stands in the foreground; the disabled person, anonymous and voiceless, quickly recedes from view, and the reader is left pondering the protagonist's unmatched rhetorical skill (see, e.g., O'Toole 1992, 105; Fitzmyer 1981–1985 II, 1038–39; Bultmann 1968, 12).

On the one hand, the sense of urgency Jesus conveys for two chronically ill individuals struggling with pain is striking and suggests that he himself may have intimate, firsthand knowledge of such an experience (4.23; see n.12). The pain-free, able-bodied perspective is represented well by the 'leader of the synagogue' (13.10–17), who maintains that because the woman's illness is chronic rather than acute or life-threatening, waiting one more day should be of little consequence. For Jesus, however, the chronicity of both illnesses evokes an entirely different response: precisely because these two individuals have suffered so long, healing cannot be postponed an-



other day. He likens their experience of chronic illness to that of an animal/child trapped in a well (14.5) or an animal in need of water (13.15), both aversive situations in which the distressed or deprived subject longs for relief. Persons who have struggled with chronic illness accompanied by pain are much more likely to construct these two individuals' experience of disability as aversive states from which one longs to be 'set free' (*apolelyesai* [13.12]; *apelysen*[14.4]), precisely as Jesus does. Represented also by the religious authorities is the prevailing discourse on how one is to conduct oneself on the Sabbath: because God 'rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done' (Gen. 2.2; NRSV), so should his people (Exod. 20.8-11). During the first century, it is likely that a majority of religious leaders held that healing qualified as a form of work and therefore was prohibited (see, e.g., Johnson 1991, 212).<sup>14</sup> Jesus' refusal to comply with 'official' Sabbath policy may be interpreted as a disavowal of the Priestly Writer's idealized construction of the genesis of the cosmos as an entirely successful affair in which '*everything* that [God] had made ... was *very good*' (Gen. 1.31). While God rests, admiring the chaotic and destructive in the natural world, indifferent to the cries of a single suffering species (see Job 24.12; 30.20; 38-41),<sup>15</sup> Jesus works to tame these unruly forces, to push back 'the dreadful violence of the divine world' (Bataille 1992, 55) and create a pocket of habitable space free of pain. In effect, one may read Jesus not as working in concert with the deity but as working against him. One whose experience of disability is shaped primarily by chronic illness and pain, exemplified by the two disabled figures in 13.10-17 and 14.1-6, may find these aspects of Jesus' character and work attractive.<sup>16</sup>

There are, however, a number of features to both episodes that disabled persons may find troublesome. By comparing disabled people to animals/children (13.15; 14.5) and presuming that both individuals wish to be healed by him (without a specific request), Jesus replicates able-bodied infantilization of the disabled, thus mirroring the ableist householder in 14.15-24. Although it is likely that both characters wish for relief from chronic pain (there are few true masochists, I assume), it is unclear whether either one trusts the abilities of this particular folk healer or has granted him the authority to alter their present social or somatic conditions.<sup>17</sup> Jesus' reflex to rehabilitate the disabled body (exhibited not only here but throughout the Gospel) may also serve to reinscribe 'dreams of similitude' so prevalent in the Levitical health care system and in the utopian visions of Israel's prophets (Olyan 2008, 78-91) and early Jewish apocalypticists. Rather than enabling communities to accommodate human variation, Jesus habitually works to eradicate difference, or at least to revise extraordinary bodies 'into less cumbersome experiences' (Mitchell and Snyder 2007, 179). This literary motif, present in all four Gospels, 'cheapen[s] commitments to the value of bodily life in general' and has served to underwrite eugenicist discourses aimed at expunging somatic 'deviance' from the gene pool (Mitchell and Snyder 2007, 180, 182).<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, for one who experiences these two episodes primarily as controversy stories occasioned by healings (as I do), the focus is not on the complexity of disabled experience but on the unsurpassed ethos of the protagonist, whose rhetorical triumph at the end of each encounter is what lingers on in readers' minds (13.17; 14.6). Indeed, both stories are structured so that once healing is complete, the woman unable to straighten her back and the man with edema vanish and cease to be relevant at all. Significant too is that Jesus does not engage either character directly in a dialogue; he does so only with the elite. Consequently, neither disabled character is

given voice (such is the case in 14.15-24 as well). When all is said and done, the reader's gaze is squarely on the rhetorical brilliance of the protagonist, who deftly shames (13.17) or silences (14.6) his opponents with ease.<sup>19</sup> Finally, both episodes unrealistically suggest that healing is total and permanent. Readers are informed that both individuals have been 'set free' from their ailments (13.12; 14.4), evoking the seductive though problematic fantasy of cure. Most disabled persons suffering from chronic illness will not be 'cured'. Even in the event that the underlying causes of chronic disease are checked or reversed entirely, complete healing is still improbable, especially for someone who, like the woman in 13.10-17, has been disabled for many years. For anyone who has experienced chronic disease as a form of torture, one's relationship to materiality as such may be forever shattered, one's 'trust in the world' forever lost, perhaps even awakening distrust as a core religious affection.

Jesus' own perspective, then, evokes both approbation and censure. While the sense of urgency he brings to disabled persons in pain is laudable and even suggestive of a personal struggle with a similar illness (4.23), his infantilization of the disabled subject as well as his reflex to revise the disabled body along the lines of Levitical health care and the utopian dreams of similitude propagated in some prophetic and apocalyptic literature is not. Both stories, moreover, are structured to shift the reader's gaze away from the disabled figure toward the protagonist, whose unparalleled rhetorical skill ultimately overshadows all else. However, Jesus is found to be working against a deity who is sublimely satisfied with things just as they are (Gen. 2.2); while God nourishes the chaotic and destructive forces in the world (Job 38-41), Jesus battles back these forces, even repairing what the deity botched or completing what he left undone.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although the interpretative tradition on Luke 14.15-24 suggests that the parable may be deployed to underwrite theologies of liberation and radical inclusion grounded in God's indiscriminate love, for disabled persons it may afford little if any 'good news' at all. The disabled cannot trust and likely would not wish to cultivate relations with the ableist, capricious, paternalistic God who surfaces in this parable; from an ethical standpoint, such a deity is to be resisted, or simply ignored, reactions exemplified by both elite and non-elite invitees.

How might one account for the genesis of a divine image seemingly so incongruent with Jesus' message of God's preferential option for the poor and disabled? Jesus' construction of God in 14.15-24, I have suggested, may reflect a latent frustration of his own with a deity who, at least according to elite traditions prevailing in the first century, has authorized discursive practices that stigmatize and marginalise the disabled and who has fashioned a world that leaves so many in pain (including, perhaps, himself [4.23]). While Jesus generally aligns himself with Israel's theodist tradition in presenting God as good, just, and merciful (e.g., 6:35-36; 12:6-7, 24, 27-28, 30-31), an unauthorized, unsavory representation of the deity awakened by reflection on the sheer variety and magnitude of gratuitous suffering all around him emerges from the depths of his unconscious here and elsewhere in his parables. In 11.5-8, for instance, readers meet a deity who is reluctant to assist someone in need; likewise, in 18.1-8, readers encounter a God who refuses to respond to insistent cries for justice. If gods are constructed in part from the raw material of everyday life, the deity that emerges in these parables should hardly come as a surprise: Jesus and those with whom he feels the most intimate bond, Roman Palestine's 'poor ... captives

... blind ... [and] oppressed' (4.18-19), may have *experienced* God as withholding sustenance (11.5-8), favoring the able-bodied elite (14.15-24), and refusing to respond to their importunate cries for justice (18.1-8). Briefly, the deity conceived here may have resonated quite well with some of those in early Roman Palestine who suffered most, including the woman unable to straighten her back (13.10-17) and the man with edema (14.1-6), both of whom were subjected to chronic pain. Perhaps they are able to see, even if only faintly or at the level of the unconscious, what the able-bodied elite cannot: if there is a god at all, this deity is not as the theodicians have constructed him, but he is at best indifferent and amoral (Job 1-2; 38-41), even 'abusive' (Blumenthal 1993, esp. 237-64) or sadistic (Wiesel 1995), artificer of a world that at once nurtures and slays her children without pity (Rubenstein 1992, 243-44). If the repressed Joban insight of a 'dark and malefic sacred' (Bataille 1992, 72-73) that asserts itself in these parables strikes a chord, God is effectively declared *religiously* irrelevant – one to fear, perhaps, but certainly not one to whom human beings in confidence might pray or whose character they might emulate.

But Jesus' will is not fully aligned with his father's. On the one hand, he does infantilize disabled persons, and by habitually revising extraordinary bodies 'into less cumbersome experiences', he reinscribes a pernicious ideology of similitude that pervades prophetic and apocalyptic utopianism and undergirds Levitical health care. Moreover, he perpetuates the illusion that healing is comprehensive and lasting (e.g., *apolelytai* [13.12]). Nevertheless, while God rests after creating the cosmos and insists that all of his work is 'very good' (Gen. 2.2), Jesus embraces in earnest the task of pushing back the destructive forces nourished by the father (Job 40-41) that cause so much suffering (13.10-17; 14.1-6). If, then, there is any 'good news' here, it is in both the disclosure of a repressed though more compelling portrait of the father that effectively announces his irrelevance and the emergence of a character who, deeply moved by the spectacle of illness *aversively experienced*, contests his father's easy satisfaction with things as they are by laboring to diminish gratuitous suffering.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 I have borrowed the parable's title from Luise Schottroff (2006, 49-56).
- 2 Three books have proven especially helpful: *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities and Biblical Studies* (2007); *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (2008); and *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (2008).
- 3 I should add by way of clarification that when referring to Jesus (or any other individual in Luke, for that matter), I am speaking about a character in a narrative rather than the historical figure as such.
- 4 The model traditionally has been predicated on a distinction between impairment, a bodily defect or deficit/limitation, and disability, the disadvantage imposed on top of impairment by exclusionary, oppressive social arrangements (Shakespeare 2006, 198-99). Recent theorists, however, who hold that no materiality exists independently of our language games, have begun to challenge this distinction. Impairment, it is argued, is not an essential biological characteristic, a 'value-neutral' or "merely descriptive" term, but an historically contingent effect of modern biopower (Tremain 2002, 32-34, 42). Impairment, like disability, does not precede discourse but is its effect.
- 5 See also Mark Jeffreys (2002), who summarizes concisely the problem posed by the stubborn intractability of the body: 'Bodies and culture, organisms and ideologies interact in complex ways, but no theoretical construction of the body as textual object or any autobiographical construction of the self

as mythic subject can set out to completely rewrite the body and ignore those “biological bases” without quickly running up against the body’s surprisingly stubborn resistance to reinvention’ (33).

6 By contrast, in the Travel Narrative’s final two healing stories, disabled men petition Jesus before he addresses their illnesses (17.11-19; 18.35-43). Neither skin disease (17.11-19) nor blindness (18.35-43) necessarily implies chronic pain.

7 Jesus uses a present imperative verb (*kalei*; v.13), which suggests ongoing or repeated action.

8 James Dunn (1992) observes that *anapeiros*, a variant of *anaperos*, is used outside the New Testament with reference to impairments other than those associated exclusively with the legs (Tob. 14.2; 2 Macc. 8.24) and therefore better translated as ‘disabled’ (266) rather than ‘crippled’ (BDAG, 70; cf. NRSV). It might be noted as well that in the disabled community ‘crippled’ is largely obsolete.

9 *Cholos* may be used to signify an impairment of the hand(s) as well (LS [Abridged], 793).

10 It seems unlikely that the original invitees would outnumber the city’s poor and disabled, even those only visible in the streets and byways; many must have refused to accompany the slave back to the banquet hall.

11 The absence of a personal transformation where one might otherwise be expected is found in other parables unique to the Gospel as well (e.g., 15.11-32; 16.1-8).

12 The initial statement of Jesus’ presumably unprovoked rant at the synagogue in Nazareth (‘Perhaps you will quote me this parable: “Physician, heal yourself!”’) is indeed curious. Of what, exactly, might Jesus need to be healed? The term *iatros* was commonly used with reference to traditional ‘physicians of the body’ like Hippocrates or Galen as well as to ‘physicians of the soul’ (both Plato and Socrates, for instance, were called ‘physicians of the soul’). It is difficult to determine which of the two valences to apply here, but the former (‘physician of the body’) cannot be ruled out. Moreover, it is interesting that several early Christian communities found the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ of Isaiah such a fitting lens with which to interpret the meaning of Jesus’ death. The figure portrayed by the prophet is not merely a person of ‘no form or majesty’; of ‘marred’ appearance, he was ‘a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity’, crushed ‘with pain/disease’ (52.14; 53.2-3, 10; NRSV).

13 With respect to 13.10-17, Green (1989) argues that the healing and subsequent apothegm are of equal importance and would therefore constitute an exception.

14 As evidence, Johnson lists *bT Shab.* 18a; 53b; 75b; 108b; 111a; 128a; 140a; 147a-148a.

15 Carol Newsom (2003) argues that this is precisely what Job sees during the divine speeches at the end of the book (esp. 243-58). Having become aware of ‘the nonmoral and nonrational aspects of deity’ and that ‘God’s identification with the chaotic is as strong as with the symbols of order’ through an experience of the sublime, Job is forced to acknowledge ‘the tragic structure of existence’ (252, 256).

16 It should be noted that persons of the Circum Mediterranean during the first century generally did not expect physicians or folk healers like Jesus to cure them (i.e., to reverse or to eradicate the underlying causes of a disordered biological process) but rather to assist them in finding meaning in socially disvalued conditions or to restore them ‘to a wholesome and integral state of being’ (Pilch 2000, 93, 113). The latter is properly related to illness rather than disease and appears to be what the Gospels envision by ‘healing’ (*therapeuo / iaomai*).

17 Indeed, physicians and folk healers did not always enhance the quality of life; in certain cases, they only exacerbated the difficulties associated with illness (see, e.g., Mk. 5.26).

18 I am not arguing that the historical figure actually revised disabled bodies, only that he is often portrayed in the Gospels as doing so. Unfortunately, it is this narrative representation that has influenced modern eugenicist discourses and movements. Jesus did not, in fact, significantly revise disabled bodies (neither did any other folk healer of his day); rather, as Pilch (2000) has argued, he may have

- helped reintegrate them into their communities and find meaning in the experience of disability (96, 113).
- 19 Interestingly, the pattern here is consistent with a prostheticizing tendency in contemporary fiction that enlists a disabled character as a catalyst to mobilize the plot who is later rehabilitated or forgotten (Mitchell 2002, 15-30).
- 20 I wish to be absolutely clear on this point: I am not arguing that the extraordinary body represents a ‘botching’ (such a statement I would find utterly abhorrent); rather, the reference here is only to chronic illness *accompanied by pain*, exemplified in the two healing narratives addressed above. Very few who experience this kind of pain are able to reframe it somehow as ‘good’; it is something to be fought, not celebrated. As noted above, one of my misgivings about some of the literature on disability is its proclivity to celebrate almost any somatic (or psychic) variation. When somatic variation results in suffering that cannot be alleviated by environmental, policy, and/or attitudinal changes, perhaps it is something that we ought to contest and not merely ‘accommodate’.

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