

The “impaired” or “disabled”: their intrinsic importance in (Christian) society

June F. Dickie

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
junedickie@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5226-5874>

Abstract

This paper considers the difference between impairment and disability (with the response of others often delineating the difference) and examples of how God often enabled those impaired. The question of somatic healing in prophetic texts (particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah) is discussed in relation to descriptions representing the people’s joy at returning to Zion. The question of whether the texts refer to actual healings or simply metaphors is considered.

Attention is also given to how impairment and disability are viewed in the light of growing secular trends. The influence of Darwinism, the rise of “strong men” in society, and some unhelpful theological trends are noted, along with the notion recently broached that God is impaired. This latter concept is shown to be theologically invalid, and it is noted that God does not need to be impaired to care for the impaired.

Keywords

impaired; disabled; prophets; healing; metaphors

1. Introduction

Brueggemann (1985a) notes that covenantal theology (which has dominated the Old Testament) is challenged by the “question of suffering”, which many servants of God experienced (and continue to experience). Along with other scholars (e.g., Moltmann and Sobrino¹) he notes that God’s power to transform difficult conditions (such as physical “impairment”)

1 See Sharbaugh 2009, iv, v.

becomes evident as followers of God *enter the difficulty with hope*, rather than being “saved” from experiencing the challenge.

Brueggemann (1985a, 1985b) and Sharbaugh (2009: 6–7) assert that the Old Testament gives both the “majority voice” in Israel’s theology and a counter-testimony expressing the minority voice. According to Brueggemann (1992:92), “The primary critical function of the Bible is to keep the voice of hurt present in the public process. That voice, so cherished and honoured in the Bible, is the voice of the marginal, whose testimony is oddly transmitted to us in the canonical process, as the voice of God.” Moreover, Brueggemann notes in particular (Ibid):

Faith is against voicelessness, against a society in which speech about power and powerlessness is banished and in which social power is so concentrated that it needs no longer listen and is no longer capable of hearing ...”

Common theology today seems to have minimised the role of the marginalised (or “the weak”). Thus, this paper seeks to contribute to Brueggemann’s (1985a) assertion that “methodological pluralism” is necessary for a good reading of the Old Testament.² In his two articles of 1985 (especially 1985b, 398–399), he argues for both “structure legitimation” (“the majority voice”) and “the embrace of pain” (the “minority voice”), the latter challenging the theological claims of the former. Unlike the theologies of surrounding cultures, Israel’s faith conversation with God included an embrace and articulation of pain, and an expectation (with hope) for God’s response (Brueggemann 1985b, 398). Indeed, embracing pain is a substantive part of Israel’s faith-conversation with its God (Ibid). Moreover, Brueggemann (1985b:399) argues that where there is the legitimation of structure without the voice of pain embraced, there will be oppression without compassion. This is what we see in the rise of “powerful” or “strong” men (as described in section 4.2).

This paper gives a focus to those considered by some to be “weak” or “not able” but who are enabled to fulfil God’s purposes.³ The Old Testament includes testimony to several people who appear “impaired”, to highlight

2 See also Sharbaugh 2009, 16.

3 See Chavel 2014, 42–45.

that being an effective messenger for the LORD does not depend on human capability. Some classic examples are Ezekiel, Elisha, and Job.⁴

This study is based on the social model of Disability Studies, which distinguishes between physical impairment (a matter of the body) and the status of disability (a socially defined evaluation). Further, it is noted that impairments may result from malfunction (e.g., lameness, blindness, deafness, muteness, cognitive and emotional infirmity) and/or malformation (e.g. failure of muscles/nerves/etc to develop properly). All these impairments can be socially devalued in ways that deny the person the dignity of selfhood and full membership in society (Chavel 2014:22–23).

2. Impairment and disability

2.1 Disability is socially defined by the responses of others

Impaired is defined as “being weakened or damaged” or “having a disability of a particular kind” (Oxford Languages). This seems to equate “impaired” and “disabled”. But for many with an impairment, they would not consider themselves disabled. This is particularly the case for those who have been impaired from birth or a young age – they know no other way. Often, it is from the way *others treat them* that they come to realise that they are “different”. Some who are impaired might be in the opposite situation: they may live with a very painful (but unseen) condition. Onlookers may thus be unaware of the struggle they experience and would not consider them impaired or disabled.

Regardless, for the sufferer, both impairment and disability are closely tied to the sense of feeling vulnerable. Feeling unsafe (physical vulnerability) or regarded as “less” (social vulnerability) are common experiences for those who are impaired. But impairment only becomes disability when others respond negatively to the one impaired. Perhaps the obvious disability of another reminds an “able” person (even sub-consciously) of his own vulnerabilities. In this regard, Jean Vanier (2004:166) asks: “Who are those we refuse to look at, listen to and accept because they make us see *our own*

4 See section 2.3 (Ezekiel and Elisha) and Job 2:7; 7:5.

brokenness in such a way that we would be forced to change our ways?” (my italics).

It is indeed true that the main burden of impairment results from the social response of others. An interesting example of a positive response to impairment is reflected in the work of Pearson (2017). She describes a devotional cabinet from the 16th-century Netherlands, which had a beautiful painting on its cover. It had been commissioned by the parents of a blind nun, so that she could fully participate in the (visual) worship of the community of which she was a part (Brock 2022:298). The fact that she could not see did not determine that she was not able to be “with the community” in their worship. Although impaired, she was not disabled.

2.2 “Impaired” in contrast with “disabled”

Chavel (2014:15–17) contends that, among human beings, there are three groups: those who are unimpaired but disabled (most persons), those who are impaired but supernaturally enabled, and those who are impaired and disabled, but will be repaired and enabled. These three groups are highlighted in Isaiah 40:1–6.

One who is highly impaired but enabled is the herald in Isaiah 40. His impairment is emphasised by the minimal personification and identity given to him.⁵ He stands in stark contrast to the able-bodied, conquering king (Chavel 2014:37). However, it is the herald who hears YHWH correctly and communicates YHWH’s message, and it is the king who misreads historical events and fails to identify YHWH as the one behind them. The king malfunctions cognitively, and thus (in YHWH’s view), although unimpaired, is disabled.

The impaired herald also contrasts strongly with the temple personnel attending deities, persons who were required to be physically perfect⁶. The latter were fully able to care for themselves, but lacked true understanding, as is apparent in their treating their own creations (pieces of wood) as

5 See Isa 29:18; 35:5; 56:10; Jer 31:8.

6 See Lev 21:16–24.

“gods” to be worshipped.⁷ Like the king, they malfunctioned cognitively (Chavel 2014:22–23),⁸ and were thus in fact “disabled”.⁹

Isaiah also gives an example in these verses of one who is impaired and disabled, but who will be repaired and enabled. This is Jacob-Israel.¹⁰ Jacob is complaining that God does not see him or regard his rights/needs (40:27, ESV). The prophet responds that the LORD “gives power to the faint” (v.29, ESV) so that they can “walk and not faint” (v.31, ESV).

Beyond humans, there are idols, who are fully impaired, not able to do anything. However, although they are seen to be thoroughly disabled (Raphael 2008), they are “absurdly valued as able” (Chavel 2014:41). And then there is YHWH, the only one unimpaired and fully able.¹¹ Moreover, YHWH is the One who enables others (as is apparent in Isa 40:29, 31, quoted above).

Although most people would consider themselves to be unimpaired and able, Cross (2011, 647ff) asserts that “normatively, human persons are intrinsically disabled or impaired”. Brock (2022:142–143) agrees, citing the biblical evaluation that “all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (Rom 3:23, NLT). Indeed, most would agree that we do fall “short”, but they would still consider themselves to be fundamentally “able”, and not in need of “being enabled”.

Part of the problem is that most Westerners do not see themselves in relation to the wider community, and thus they view impairment as an *individual’s* “lack”, of no import to them. As society fails “to recognise our universal human brokenness” (Basselin 2011:54), the impaired person is left alone to deal with her problems, viz., lack of agency and control. And yet vulnerability and weakness are part of the human condition (Basselin 2011:47). We are not meant to be autonomous and independent. Everyone is subject to vulnerabilities, and those of the disabled are not distinct from

7 E.g. Isa 41:6–7, 21–24, 28–29.

8 See Ps 115:4–8 for very similar thoughts.

9 See further examples of ‘unimpaired but unable’ in Isa 40:19–20; 41:6–7; 46:6–7; and above all 44:6–20.

10 See Isaiah 40:17–31.

11 In Isaiah 50:2, God very emphatically declares God’s ability with the rhetorical question: “Is my hand shortened that it cannot redeem?”

those common to all human life (Scully 2014). Perhaps this is why we turn aside from the impaired – we cannot cope with our own weaknesses, and so “look away” when their weakness reminds us of our own. But being open to our own vulnerability and recognising that we all are weak in different ways, enables us to reach out and help others.

An important area of need for a disabled person concerns identity formation¹² and a sense of belonging. This requires taking time to build relationships, for as Basselin (2011, 50) reminds us, “Relating to others is of primary importance in discovering who we are.” The community, particularly the church, has a vital role to play in contributing positively to an impaired person’s sense of identity. Sadly, this responsibility is often overlooked (Basselin 2011:50). But if the Christian community can recognise that we are “members of one another” (Rom 12:4–5), and called to offer a radical alternative to society, then those who are often excluded can find a place of belonging. The church can become a community of *mutual inter-dependence* (Cross 2011:653, my italics), allowing each one to share their unique gift and to receive support in their areas of weakness.

Some impaired persons might find that their identity is to be “a sign” to the rest of the community. One who felt this was Helen Betenbaugh, a priest. She describes her long struggle to follow her calling, the problems resulting not from her impairment but from negative social factors within the community (Basselin 2011: 51).¹³ She came to see her role as “to present the symbol of an Easter faith, being lived in a Good Friday body” (which she described as “an authentic sign”). Through her impairment, she was able to remind the community of their vulnerability and dependence upon one another (Basselin 2011:52).

There are many examples in the biblical text which reveal similar “signs”. We have already examined the impaired herald in Isaiah 40:1–6, and below follow some other examples of “impaired but enabled” messengers of YHWH.

12 Scully (2008:154) urges that greater attention be given to how “disabled” people understand, report, and live with “an impaired embodiment”. In particular, she questions what forms of “impairment” an individual might consider part of their identity and desirable.

13 See also Betenbaugh 2000.

2.3 Impairment in messengers of YHWH

The motif of impairment for messengers of the Lord (whether in form or function) is common in the Old Testament. For example, Ezekiel is so (visually) impaired that a spirit must hold him up (Ez 2:2), and a hand must literally feed him (Ez 2:8–3:4). He behaves in bizarre ways (seemingly mentally deficient), and has his senses impacted (e.g. his ability to speak, Ez 3:26). Another prophet who suffered a deficient and at times powerless body was Elisha.

However, for both Ezekiel and Elisha, divine enablement often follows such incapacity (e.g. Ez 3:27). Concerning Elisha’s weakness, Graybill (2019:32) contends, “It is in these moments that Elisha’s body is most effective and even powerful.” For example, she argues that Elisha’s divinely enabled capacity is seen most magnificently when Elisha’s *dead* body restores life to a corpse touching him (2 Kgs 13:20–21). However, Elisha’s body is also weak, deficient, and the object of ridicule. Strikingly, these two seemingly opposed representations of his body (as weak and as powerful) often occur together, in the same narrative moment (Graybill 2019:32–33). Indeed, Elisha’s embodiment in 2 Kgs calls upon the reader to consider the tensions in its representations, and how these show forth divine power operating through human weakness. Moreover, how Elisha’s body is represented in the biblical text to serve to provide “an opposition to norms” (Halperin 1995:62) or as “queer” (Graybill 2019:33) which Ahmed (2006) defines as “an orientation that breaks with culturally reinforced trajectories” (or Brueggemann’s “structure legitimization”), thereby giving space to “the minority voice” and contributing to a balanced understanding of the biblical text.

Despite many prophets of God being impaired in significant ways, some people cite Leviticus 21 as a text which seems to bar “disabled” persons from ministry.¹⁴ Although the text does forbid “blemished priests” from offering sacrifices at the altar, the list of malformations and malfunctions which are unacceptable is not as one might expect. For example, it does not include certain conditions that ancient writers clearly considered “disabling”

14 Olyan (2008:92) points out that it was not just certain people who were considered insufficiently holy to serve in the temple. Even objects (such as stones) had to be “whole” if they were to be regarded as sufficiently holy to be used in the temple.

(such as deafness). And yet the list in Lev 21 includes “a broken arm” as a permanent source of disqualification (Belser 2019:357). Nevertheless, even those excluded from the most sacred functions still had access to “more of the sacred” than ordinary Israelites (Belser 2019:357). But in terms of the list of excluded malfunctions/malformations in Lev 21, Belser (2019:361, n13) asks if the human value of “visual acceptability” is determinative, and if this has been projected onto God? So often, as Connor (2020:141) notes, “disability” appears to be “a *socially constructed* category for labelling differences.”

Biblical characters with impairments are usually described in ways which suggest they are basically able-bodied and just experiencing the effects of old age (e.g. blindness of Isaac or Eli) or temporary injury (e.g. Jacob). But the experience of *living with a disability* is discounted or removed (Schipper 2011:8). Thus, seeing as “impairment imagery” in the text (e.g. “blind”, “deaf”, “mute”, “lame”) is usually not used to describe the *real experiences* of impaired people, it gives a reduced understanding of how God uses, and responds to those with actual impairments. Thus, seeing 'impairment imagery' in the text (e.g. “blind”, “deaf”, “mute”, “lame”) as not describing the real experiences of impaired people, gives a reduced understanding of how God uses, and responds to those with actual impairments.

2.4 Physical healing (or not) in prophetic texts

Prophetic oracles in the text of First Isaiah often use imagery which could suggest the healing of physical ailments.¹⁵ Precise terms for the disabilities are used (Jones 2019:164), usually indicating malfunctions (e.g. “deaf”, “blind”).¹⁶ Jeremiah also refers to people with impairment but does not label them as such, rather referring to them as “having faulty sight” or “failing to hear”. Indeed, these two prophets present sensory disabilities in a very different manner (Jones 2019:161–162).

An interesting example of this is to compare Isaiah 35:5–8 and Jeremiah 31:7–9, two texts which are very similar, although they have very different

15 However, such physical healing is largely restricted to First Isaiah (chapters 1–39) and is not seen in Second Isaiah (e.g. 43:5–8).

16 Malfunctions are frequent in Isaiah 40–48, and thereafter, YHWH makes frequent reference to malformations.

emphases and messages.¹⁷ “In Isaiah, people are healed to come home¹⁸, whereas in Jeremiah, people come home but are not healed” (Jones 2019:166). However, the similarity of theme does suggest a degree of dependency, and Jones (2019:163) contends that “Jeremiah clearly borrowed from Isaiah”.

The issue at stake is whether the prophet (in each case) is implying physical (somatic) healing, or using imagery of healing to represent the joy and freedom associated with the exiles returning to Zion. The difference in understanding could arise from the different ways in which the prophecies were communicated. Isaiah’s testimony comes from a vision that he saw, whereas that of Jeremiah results from words that he heard from YHWH. Isaiah sees pictures, which can often be understood as metaphors. In contrast, Jeremiah’s record is simply plain speech. For example, Isaiah refers to the lame leaping like a gazelle (Is 35:6), whereas Jeremiah simply states: “I will bring them ... among them the lame” (Jer 31:8).

It is difficult to say with certainty if the prophets vary in their understanding of whether impairment is healed with the return to Zion. Clements (1980:28) argues that, at the time of Jeremiah’s prophecy, “healing of the lame was not yet understood as a sign of Israel’s eschatological renewal”. Goldingay (1995:63–64) seems to agree, contending that “events, acts and people” to which a text refers “have a literal reference when they first appear but come to have an increasingly metaphorical significance as they reappear.” Thus, Isaiah’s prophecy might have indeed referred to somatic healing initially. Jones (2019:166) agrees, noting that sensory metaphors have clear roots in *somatic* processes; thus, it is a false dichotomy to place figurative over against somatic.

This suggests, then, that Isaiah saw somatic healing as part of the restoration of the people to Zion, whereas Jeremiah did not. Further support for the notion of possible physical healing in Is 35 comes from the usage of the term “lame” in the Hebrew Bible. Jones (2019) argues that the term occurs fourteen times, and a somatic sense is almost always implied in all of these. Thus, the possibility of somatic healing cannot be excluded.

17 I applied literary-poetic analysis to the texts in question.

18 “Come home” for Jones (2019) refers to returning to Zion, after exile.

One further observation regarding the physical healing of the impaired in First Isaiah is that it seems to be accompanied by healing of the physical environment (Schipper 2015:327–328). For example, the healing of the deaf and blind is concurrent with the healing of the land (Is 29:17–18). Similarly, the healing of the blind, deaf, lame, and mute is accompanied by refreshing water to bring life to the wilderness (Is 35:3–7). This suggests that something other than “simple healing of physical impairments” is being referenced. However, that does not imply that it excludes physical healing.

Further, the extremity of the healing of “the lame” in Isaiah (35:6), such that the abilities of the previously impaired now exceed those of non-impaired (being able to “leap like a gazelle”), raises the question of whether the hyperbolic language is to emphasise the amazing bodily healing, or to suggest it is a metaphor, or both. Schipper (2015:333) concludes that it seems clear that this type of idealisation reflects exilic restoration, and not physical healing.

Indeed, Schipper (2015:320) argues that physical healings are the exception to the general rule regarding the use of disability imagery in biblical prophetic literature. This is also the case in Micah and Zephaniah. For example, Micah 4:6–7 and Zephaniah 3:16–20 mention “the lame” (still with their impairment) as being among those whom YHWH brings back to Zion. Thus, most biblical prophets use healing as a *metaphor* for being returned to Zion, but the impairment remains.

However, Zephaniah (3:18–19) does note that the impaired will “no longer suffer reproach” and their shame will be changed into praise and worldwide renown. They will be enabled to be part of God’s people returning to Zion. That is, there will be social healing. Moreover, there will be “emotional healing”: although there might be weeping (Jer 31:9), the time will come when they languish no more (Jer 31:12) and will have gladness for sorrow (Jer 31:13). Thus, although they are not physically healed, there is transformation and facilitation: *participation becomes possible. Moreover, they are enabled beyond their own capacity. Although still impaired, they are enabled to plunder the spoil* (Isa 33:23). Impairment does not imply disability.

Other examples of impairment, and YHWH’s enabling, arise in Isaiah 40–48. These chapters are of particular interest as the writer uses impairment

as YHWH's means of speaking to the community (Chavel 2014:43–45). This was a deliberate strategy, countering the (misleading) typical mode of persuasion seen in the ANE, which elevated human excellence, based on human senses and faculties. One example of such reversal is seen in Isa 44:24, 25 (ESV): “the LORD ... turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish.” The weak become strong when they rely on the One who is strong. Even with Cyrus, his enabling comes not from himself but from YHWH, as is evident in Isaiah 45:5 (“I equip you”).

Given that most impaired people are not physically healed in their earthly lives, how can they find their unique identity and function within the people of God? This is discussed next.

3. Physical impairment: a powerful divine message, and a “sign” of God’s enabling

In the lives of some prophets (e.g. Jeremiah, Elisha), we often see “an enacted parable”, in the experiences that they go through. The message they are communicating is closely linked to their person. Cox (2011:248) reads Leviticus 21, the restrictions on physically blemished priests, as an enacted parable. In this regard, Hartley (1992:349–351) contends: “To serve at the altar, a priest must be whole in body. His bodily perfection is an external expression of the idea of holiness ... [which] corresponds to, and bears witness to the holiness of the sanctuary and the holiness of God.” As Melcher (1998:56) concludes, “The goal of preserving the divine presence in the sanctuary ... [is] fulfilled by means that are chiefly physical.”

Thus, the priest with an impairment did not approach the most holy place, to highlight (in his body) the holiness of YHWH. His person served as “a sign”, not representing a judgment against him, but showing forth, in his physical body, the holiness of YHWH. He had a function different to that of other priests, a calling from God that was no doubt painful, but important (Cox 2011:250). This notion was made clear back in Exodus 4:11, that God calls some to reveal through their bodies a divine purpose. There we read:

The *LORD* said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the *LORD*?”

Cox (2011:251–252) notes, too, that suffering and difficulty are included amongst the gifts of the Spirit (2 Cor 4:7ff). Moltmann (1998:120) agrees: “Having a disability is also a gift of the Holy Spirit, if through and in the disability, one is called to be God’s image and glory on earth.” Thus, some, even today, are called to deliver a message to God’s world through their impaired bodies. This does not reflect that they are less valued or have a lesser message than those who are unimpaired. Rather, they are participating in a divine purpose, living out an enacted parable that can speak God’s message more powerfully than words.

Jones (2023) picks up this theme in her study of disabled body-minds in Judges 13–16. She exposes strategies of exegesis which focus on the removal of disability from the text and shows instead the “potential and potency” of those who live with impairment and yet are enabled to do glorious things. For example, Samson becomes impaired (Jdg 16:21) and yet is able (by God’s strength, v.28) to achieve greater things (v.30) than he was able to do previously. As an impaired person, he was *divinely enabled*.

Schipper (2011) gives another biblical example of a person “impaired” and yet enabled by YHWH to do extraordinary things. He refers to the Servant in Is 53. Although this figure is usually understood to be an able-bodied person who suffers, Schipper (2011:6) argues that the language and imagery used is that of one who is disabled. There are indeed words in this passage that could speak of impairment,¹⁹ although such could be temporary: “marred appearance” (52:14), “wounded” (53:5), and perhaps “anguish of soul” (53:11). Despite such impairment, temporary or not, there is the notion that the Servant would be enabled to bless others, as in verse 5, “with his stripes we are healed”. Earlier, in Isaiah 42:7, it was said that the Servant would “open the eyes of the blind”, and again in 42:18, “Look, you blind, that you may see.” Thus, despite his weakness and pain (Is 53:3, 5), God *enabled* His servant to bless others.

19 Isa 53 also has words that speak of social disregard against the Servant: no beauty (53:2), despised and rejected (53:3), oppressed and afflicted (53:7).

4. Impairment and disability in the light of growing secular trends

To understand the wider social context of the importance of “impairment” and “disability” as a sign to those “unimpaired”, it is helpful to consider significant shifts in thinking over the past 150 years. Three movements or trends are important. The first is the impact of Darwinist ideas (“survival of the fittest”); the second is the focus on “strength” and self-interest, as seen in politics around the world; and the third concerns trends in theology.

4.1 Influence of Darwinism

First, the promotion of Darwin’s (1959) ideas led to a critical movement stemming from the late 19th century until today. This reconfigured the generally accepted (Christian) idea that the rich have a duty to care for the poor and that the weak have value. Instead, in the general population, a disdain for weakness began to ascend, along with the notion that competition with others is necessary to prove one’s superior “strength”, if one wants to succeed (Holland and Sandbrook 2024).

Many have implicated Darwinism as playing a major part in the growth of Naziism (e.g., Hickman 1983;²⁰ Weikart 2022). Wertham (1966) had even claimed that the problem in Germany was seen to be the result of “infected blood” stemming not only from the Jewish community but also “less healthy older people, epileptics, both severe and mild mental defectives, deaf-mutes, and even some persons with certain terminal illnesses”. However, Wollmuth (2017) asserts that although the influence of Darwin’s evolutionary theory on eugenic policies in Nazi Germany is evident, close examination of *Origin* shows that Darwin’s theories were often inaccurately applied. Nevertheless, they had a very severe impact on the thinking of many people.

This notion, of one group being considered “contaminated”, continues today under various guises. It is perhaps necessary for us in the church to also question if we treat some differently, or consider them to be “less”, on biological grounds. Are the same opportunities afforded to those with

20 Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*, emphasized the *survival of the fittest and the extermination of the weak to produce a better society* (Hickman, 1983:51–52).

mobility problems if they cannot walk up the stairs to the meeting room? Would a blind person, or one deaf, be able to participate in decision-making afforded to those who can follow a committee meeting more easily?

But beyond leadership and training opportunities for those “impaired”, do we in the church recognise how valuable such persons are to us, reminding us of our own vulnerability and dependence on the LORD, when we would easily fall back on our own supposed strengths?

4.2 “The strong” and “the weak”

In recent years, there has been a growing rise of “strong men” political leaders, who make decisions from a wholly self-centred view. This week (as I write), a byline came up on television announcing: “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”²¹ The notion stems from an account of Thucydides, a Greek historian in the 5th century BC, describing a conversation between the strong Athenians and the weak Melians. (See Johnson 2022.) During the dialogue, the Melians remind the Athenians that “the gods are just” and thus will support the Melians (the side of justice). The Melians also remind the Athenians that the strong may not always be so, and thus preserving values of justice and fairness is in everyone’s interest.

The Athenians’ quotation above (of “the strong” and “the weak”) was used by the Trump campaign in the days following Biden’s apparent “weakness”,²² and points again to the fallen state of “the world” that ethics has no place in the minds of “the strong”. The Melians look to “the gods”, and in our day, Christians look to God, particularly in their time of weakness. They are encouraged and assured by the many biblical texts (especially in the Psalms²³) that speak of YHWH’s commitment to “the poor”, “the weak”, “the bowed down”, and “the oppressed”.

This ancient example reminds us that biblical values are in direct opposition to those of “the world”, those who do not seek to follow God’s way. But that

21 The “Athenian thesis” was that they were compelled to use their strength in whatever way they could, for their benefit, and they should not be responsible morally for their actions.

22 CNN, 21 July 2024.

23 E.g. Ps 5:11; 9:9; 10:14, 17–18; 12:5; etc.

is why “the weak” play such a vital role in reminding us of all that we are of another Kingdom. The “weak” can help us “reset our dial” and evaluate life matters in the light of truth and eternity.

Further, the apostle Paul twice reminds the Corinthians that human weakness allows divine enablement to shine. He gives the word of the LORD in 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 “my power is made perfect in weakness”. Does that imply that without our weakness, and us embracing our disability, His enabling power is not so evident? Does that give some value to our “impairment”? Further, Paul writes that “*God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty*” (1 Cor 1:27). That sounds like a similar argument to that of the Melians, reminding the Athenians that “the gods are just”. Weakness is not a curse from divinity, or an accident of biology, but is in the purposes of God.

4.3 Theological trends

Nancy Eiesland (1994:73–74) identifies three theological themes that have created obstacles for those with impairments. First, some people in the church still consider disability to be a punishment for sin. Second, some view those with impairments as “cases to exercise their good works” rather than looking for ways to empower such persons to be able to participate more fully in society. And third, some see disability as “virtuous suffering”.

The first “error” can be quickly dismissed. The Gospels have countless examples of people with physical impairment being healed by Jesus, and sin is never indicated to be the cause of the illness. Rather, Jesus makes it very clear that disability is not the result of sin, “but that the works of God might be displayed in [that person]” (Jn 9:2–4). The anecdote ends with the statement of Jesus: “We must work the works of him who sent me”. Only later was the man healed, when he played his part (washing in the pool of Siloam). The main teaching of this pericope is that those with impairments are called to display God’s “work”; the healing is secondary and may be delayed. What was in focus (in terms of the blind man) was his obedience to “show the works of God”.

The second “error” can be put aside by considering the godly example of David in 2 Samuel, restoring Mephibosheth. Rather than show pity, David

raises the lame man's self-esteem, confirms his identity, and elevates his place in society (Rayan 1991:28).

The third "error", that of seeing those with "impairment" as examples of "virtue" cannot be upheld by the biblical text. Rather, a case can be made that the impaired may serve as a "sign" to remind us of our vulnerability and inadequacy, and our need to be dependent on the LORD. Such a "sign" is one that the world greatly needs to hear.

4.4 Is God "impaired"?

To challenge contemporary thought, Eiesland (1994) developed a Christology in which she presented God-in-Christ (post-Resurrection) as "impaired", with marred hands and feet (Lk 24:36–39).²⁴ Her conclusion (1994: 207) was that "disability indicates not a flawed humanity but a full humanity".²⁵ This view has been supported by some, e.g. Block (2002); Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (2003); and Basselin (2007), but challenged more recently by other theologians, e.g. Reinders (2008) and Clark (2015).

Reinders (2008, 176) criticises Eiesland's theology for conflating the attributes of the three persons of the Trinity. He asserts that Eiesland thereby erases the communal image of God (and the Church), which reveals diversity among the members. Clark (2015:51) recognises Eiesland's concern to present God as "inclusive" rather than "exclusive" but also points out that Eiesland's "disabled God" model suffers from a deficient Trinitarian grounding. Further, declaring God as disabled removes the distinction between the Creator and creature.²⁶

The major problem of this view is to remove God's "altogether other" characteristics, in particular God's simplicity and God's self-sufficiency (Clark 2015:55). God's simplicity means that God is seen as "undivided" (contra Eiesland). That is, God is wholly perfect, which implies that God is without impairment. This does not mean that God cannot be our companion

24 Contrary to the popular view that the image of God in the Bible is that of a perfect body (Hull 2000).

25 Seeing disability as an element of a full humanity "tends towards diminishing the struggle and pain that often come with disability" (Palmer 2013:100).

26 The distinctness of God from creation is essential for love and grace (Molnar 2015:30).

in pain (Hart 2003:165–166) but prevents God from being “implicated in our mess” (Clark 2015:58). Moreover, God being perfect and self-sufficient means that God does not *have* to redeem us from our suffering *to* show love (Clark 2015:58). Rather, God’s love is free and unconditioned (Hart 2003:157). As Weinandy (2001:41) states, “God is perfectly compassionate not because he suffers with those who suffer, but because His love fully and freely embraces those who suffer ... something a suffering God could not do.” Clark (2015:59) notes that this is the kind of love we would want to see reflected in the Church in relation to disability – not patronising but freely given.

Clark (2015:59–60) accepts that for Eiesland seeing impairment in Christ’s body helped her to see God’s acceptance. But she asks:

“What happens if other disabilities are imputed into God? Do we end up with a depressed God? ... A deaf or mute God? ... Do we really want a God that suffers with us, or do we actually want a God who loves us unconditionally?”

Her response (p.60) is “God does not need to be the “disabled God” to be for the disabled.”

The comment of an anonymous reviewer is also pertinent in this regard:

“A social model of disabilities studies offers value beyond notions of “the disabled God”. Those who have philosophical and theological reservations still need the core insights that disability studies contribute toward a more accurate theological approach to human dignity and social and ecclesial practice.”

5. Conclusion

The Christian community needs those who remind us of our vulnerability, weakness, and dependency (Basselin 2011:47). Only then are we able to recognise that salvation comes through Christ’s *vulnerability*, not through autonomous strength (Basselin 2011:57). Indeed, “Jesus on the cross is God disabled, made weak and vulnerable” (Cooper 1992:176), and in such vulnerability lies our strength.

Moreover, “impairment” of various kinds is part of the human condition. For some, this is a lifelong challenge, particularly difficult when it includes social exclusion. However, the benefit to the “impaired” person is that one is constantly conscious of one’s limitations, and thus dependency on God is more easily recognised, making room for divine enablement. Further, impairment can also serve as a “sign” to others, helping them also to recognise their human weakness, and allow it to be transformed through divine strength. In these ways, those parts of the Body most despised can become the most essential of all.

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