

CONSTRUCTING A THEOLOGY OF DISABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to construct a Theology of Disability. The paper argues that disability has never been accepted by Jewish culture and many African cultures because it is associated with curses from the ancestors. The paper argues that the writing of the Old Testament (OT) and some parts of the New Testament (NT) were also influenced by the Jewish culture of the time which stigmatized disabled people. The healing of disabled people by Jesus was a way of helping them from stigmatization. Disabled people in both the OT and NT were always helped by being healed so that they should not be stigmatized. This paper argues that the healing or restoration of disabled people was a way of showing that disability was not an acceptable state of life in both the OT and NT. However, this paper argues that the acceptance of disabled people started with Jesus Christ himself when he still remained the Saviour even after his crucifixion when his body was marred by the injuries inflicted on him. The universalization of Christianity by Paul is one pointer to the inclusive nature of the Christian religion which accepts people in their condition without changing them.

1. Introduction

The Bible, both the Old and New Testaments do not condone disability. Some parts of the OT are very explicit that disabled people are not part of God's creation and God does not want them. They are stigmatized and they do not participate in many aspects of life. The NT is not very explicit in its attitude towards disabled people. Jesus, being a Jew, healed disabled people so that they should be acceptable to God and participate fully in human activities and life. Disabled people are made acceptable to God and their communities through some theological construction which this paper has done.

2. Disability in the Old Testament (OT), New Testament (NT) and Jewish Societies and communities.

The biblical view of disability has been well discussed by Githuku (2011). The present discussion is more theological than biblical. The wandering Hebrews of the pre-OT period were people who had a culture that was very similar to many African cultures on disability. The wandering Hebrew who looked after the sheep and worked hard on the land had no room for disability of any form. So the disabled were not part of the Hebrew communities as is the case in African communities. The calling of Abraham by Yahweh made the Hebrews to develop a concept of God who did not like disabled people because the nature of their life did not change. They still needed to work hard. It is for this reason that when starvation afflicted them in Canaan, they fled to Egypt where they were put into slavery until they were delivered by Moses. The story of this slavery is discussed by Bright (1980:120ff). Some scholars argue that Moses was a disabled person but God chose him to lead the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt. To me this is not an accurate reading of the historical records and narratives of the time. Moses was hidden by his mother in the River Nile. He was found by the Queen of Egypt who admired him and incidentally hired his sister Miriam to take care of him. Moses then grew up in Pharaoh's Palace where he learned diplomacy. It is then that God chose him

to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. But since Moses was disabled in speech, Yahweh who did not like disability gave Moses his brother Aaron to speak on Moses's behalf. This is a clear sign of the fact that disability was not welcomed in Jewish culture and religion. The laws that followed and were given to the children of Israel through Moses pointed out very clearly that the disabled were not acceptable because they were caused by disobedience and sin. Douglas (1974:313-318) discusses healing and lameness. Most of the passages and instances of healing which are given show that disease and disability were associated with sin in both the OT and NT. In general miracles were performed partly to show the power of God and also to reveal God. One very unique revelation of God through miracles and magic was the humanity of the OT God which we shall refer to later. This humanity in a nutshell is found in his instructions to Moses and his arguments with Moses when Moses was arguing that he had no power to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt. In spite of the appearing supreme and hidden nature of the Hebrew God, some elements of humanity are revealed in his activities with Moses, which finally led to the liberation of the children of Israel. But their major aim was to restore the ill and the disabled to what was believed to be the normal life.

The Book of Leviticus is full of laws which are beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate one by one. Some of them were very serious like Deuteronomy 23:1 which prohibited men who had sexual disabilities from attending to the Temple. The argument of this paper is that the healing of disabled people is a continuation of their stigmatization. But before we construct a theology of disability, let us examine the core of the NT teaching on disability. The NT does not have any different attitude to disability than that of the OT. The only difference is that Jesus who was a Jew had some powers to perform miracles which helped him to heal the sick and the disabled. The lame were made to walk, the blind to see and those with incurable diseases were healed. The reason for healing these people was to free them from stigmatization by making them acceptable human beings according to the conceptions of humanity of the time. The healing does not mean that the people were not stigmatized. They were healed because they were not accepted as part of the normal life as conceived by the times. But as a pointer to the role of disability in salvation, when Jesus wanted to go to Jerusalem where he knew that he was not going to be accepted, Peter became very worried and wanted to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem. Jesus uttered a word which set in a new concept of God by calling Peter Satan (Mark 8:33). Peter knew that if Jesus went to Jerusalem to face crucifixion, his body was going to be damaged and disabled to the extent that it would no longer be fit to save humanity because a disabled body was unacceptable in Jewish religion and culture. Jesus however, insisted and had his body deformed for our salvation. This marked the beginning of the Christian faith or religion which believes in salvation through a disabled body. Salvation in the OT means something different from salvation based on the resurrection of Christ. Von Rad (1970:357ff) discusses what he called: -The Old Testament saving event in the light of the New Testament fulfilment,|. In this discussion there is some fulfilment and continuity of salvation from the OT into the NT. This is a salvation traced from the liberation of the children of Israel from Egypt, the miraculous deeds of Yahweh to the miraculous deeds of Jesus which were believed to be pointers to or proofs of salvation. In actual fact in the NT some of the miracles of Jesus were taken as signs of salvation. The healing of the sick and disabled was not regarded as a sign of discrimination but a sign of salvation. However, the Pauline concept of salvation based on the resurrected Christ introduces a new concept of salvation by a disabled body of Christ. This is contradictory to the whole biblical concept of salvation and disability. It contradicts the biblical concepts of disability in that the Hebrew God who showed human signs in spite of his transcendence finally became human in Jesus Christ and was disabled for our salvation. In Christ. What some theologians had referred to as the

anthropomorphic aspects of God ultimately materialised in Jesus Christ and the transcendent God accepted disability to save humanity.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter sees a vision in which he was asked to kill all the prohibited animals and eat them. After this experience he was asked to baptize Cornelius a thing which he did without any fear. When he was asked to explain by the Jerusalem congregation, he argued as to who was he to refuse an instruction from the risen Lord. To Peter this marked his acceptance of disability as a way to salvation. Peter did not see himself as an apostle to the Jews anymore because his Jewish God had accepted disability in Jesus Christ and had become the only saviour of humanity. Let us remember that when Jesus had instructed his disciples to preach his word to all people all over the world and baptize all those who believed (Matt.28:19-20), Peter had refused to do so because he did not want to preach the word of Christ to the Gentiles. But after this new encounter with Jesus Christ and God the Father after the resurrection, he became convinced to preach the message even to the Gentiles. This is the core of the Christian religion as compared to Judaism.

The Christian martyrs in the names of Ignatius of Antioch and many other Church Fathers were mauled by beasts and disabled but they died being sure of their salvation in their disabled state. The last instruction of Jesus to his disciples came at the Last Supper where he took bread and broke it and asked his disciples to do it in memory of his body which was destroyed for our salvation. He also instructed his disciples to drink wine as a symbol of his blood which was shed for our salvation. Jesus did all these things as a pointer to the fact that he was going to be disabled but still save humanity. In a nutshell the Christian Sacrament of the Holy Communion is an acceptance of the deformed body of Christ for our salvation. After his resurrection Jesus still took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples to eat and at that time they recognized and believed that he was truly the risen Christ. On the road to Emmaus, some disciples of Jesus did not recognize him because of his deformed body. But when they had asked him to stay with them because it was late at night, he revealed himself to them by performing the sacrament of the Last Supper. His deformed and disabled body was acceptable to his disciples as the only way to salvation and eternal life. Through this sacrament there is no disabled or normal in Christ but we are all equal before God. Disability from a theological standpoint is the only way to salvation and eternal life. It is for this reason too that the Church of Christ does not comply with secularism and prefers to go into suffering for the salvation of humanity. It is for this reason that in many countries like South Africa, church leaders were prepared to be deformed for the salvation of the people of God from the old apartheid system.

It is for this reason that this paper argues that there is no justification for disability which one can find in both the OT and the NT. The recognition of disability starts with the resurrected Christ who Paul preaches about. The body of the risen Christ was a disabled one which Thomas doubted it actually rose from the dead given the manner in which it was harmed by Roman soldiers. But this disabled body is the basis of the Christian faith i.e. the risen Christ who defeated death and destroyed the sting of death. This is the gospel which Paul preached to the Gentiles thus differing with that of Peter and James who still wanted to carry on with the Jewish traditions which stigmatized disabled people. As stated above Peter changed his attitude after realising that the risen Christ was the same God of Israel who once disliked disability, but in Christ accepted disability for the salvation of humanity. This paper then argues that there is no way by which disability could be justified by simple references to both OT and NT. What can justify disability is a constructive theology which is based on denial of some biblical prejudices and stigmatizations against disabled people. This is what this paper constructs.

Constructing a Theology of Disability

The starting point for constructing a theology of disability is the theology of Moltmann (1974) on the crucified God. This is derived from Paul who continuously made it clear to his listeners that he had a disability which he referred to as the thorn in the flesh. Let us begin by briefly considering Moltmann. According to Macquarrie (1988: 394-395) the debate centres on the argument of Moltmann against the demythologization theology of Bultmann. Moltmann sees the suffering of God in the crucified Christ. In other words he does not regard the crucifixion as a myth but a historic event. This then leads us to his major thesis where he argues against the traditional belief on the impassibility of God. To put this in very simple language, the traditional belief right from the teachings of the Church Fathers is that God is impassible but at the same time passible. Ignatius of Antioch was the first to affirm that Jesus Christ was our God. He put his argument in the following words:

There is one physician:

Both flesh and spirit,

Begotten and unbegotten,

In man God, in death, true life,

Both from Mary and from God, first passible then impassible,

Jesus Christ our Lord. (Gonzalez, 1983:74-75 cited from Ignatius, letter to Smyrna).

Ignatius argues further:

Jesus Christ –is above every moment of time----eternal, invisible, for our sake visible, intangible, impassible, for our sake passible. |

The passibility of God is in Christ who is the second person of the Trinity. Before discussing Moltmann, let me provide some background information which will make us follow the argument. The passible God of Ignatius of Antioch called for some long discussions and disagreements regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. The argument of this paper will be very selective due to the limited space. To start with, this paper argues that the first person to react to the Trinitarian doctrine was Marcion (Chadwick 1985:34-40; Kelly, 1968:57f.; Walker, 1968:54-55) whose core argument is that the OT God who was a cruel God could not be the loving father of Jesus Christ. With many examples Marcion denied the link between the OT and the NT. This paper is not intending to bring back the debate once more but to create a new thought in this regard. Marcion could have been wrong but if his argument is reviewed with regards to disability, one finds a point to be considered here. It has been argued above that both the OT and NT did not like disability. But the Church Fathers of the time emphasized the disability of Christ in saving humanity through the cross and his resurrection. In other words, the OT God who according to Marcion created evil and even came down to Sodom and Gomorrah had changed his mind about humanity. For him to die on the cross and accept disability was a major break with the OT tradition and Jewish culture. This is the revolutionary step which Christians should take in their acceptance of disability as a mode of life.

One theology which feared the disabled God is Modalism. Modalism argues that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are modes through which God reveals himself. It does not want to accept the fact that in Jesus God became disabled in order to save humanity. However, the orthodox teaching and belief of the Christian church is that salvation is in the resurrected Christ and his disabled body which is also the body of God. The West labelled this great sacrifice Patripassianism which means that God suffered on the cross. The other argument on the trinity which this paper selects as the final example is the Arian controversy. Arius challenged the teaching that Jesus Christ and God the Father were one and the same person. He argued that Jesus Christ was created by God the Father and he was a

creature. He could not believe the fact that God could die on the cross and accept disability. This debate which went through the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon made the Christian church to formulate its belief through Athanasius that Jesus Christ and the Father were one and the same being. To refer to Brunner Jesus Christ the resurrected one is the one who is divine and one with the Father and not Jesus of Nazareth. The Chalcedonian Creed should be read and understood as being discontinuous with both the OT and the NT in its understanding of the Christ. By this, the argument is that there is no way by which one could justify disability from both the OT and NT except through the constructed theology of Athanasius and the Council of Chalcedon. This is the core of the argument which separated the East from the West because the East cannot accept a disabled God as its saviour.

Moltmann and the Theology of Disability

To follow Moltmann's argument further in simple language, in Christ God is passible and therefore God actually suffered on the cross. The body of Christ which was inflicted with wounds and defamed on the cross was the body of God. The resurrected Christ is one emphasis of Moltmann as had been taught by Paul. The resurrected Christ had a disabled body because of the wounds inflicted on him at crucifixion. In Judaism a disabled body was not allowed to serve God as we have argued above. But the NT God who is the Father and one with Christ allowed Christ to save humanity with his disabled body. At this point it must be argued that none of the disciples ever got worried about the state of the resurrected Christ except for Thomas. Thomas who had always wanted to be clear in his mind and in his beliefs doubted the resurrected Christ and wanted to see some proof by asking Christ to show him his wounds. Jesus Christ did not hesitate to prove to Thomas that he had risen from the dead in spite of the suffering and the deformed body which he had. But due to the great surprise about the resurrected Christ none of the disciples was prejudiced against Christ as a disabled person. They all had faith in him and also hoped for their resurrection. The issue of disability was never considered. In Moltmann's theology, they all knew that God was passible especially for our salvation.

Baile (mcmxlviii) has devoted chapter five of his lectures to –The Paradox of the Incarnation. If one puts the theological arguments aside, one comes with a simple statement that God decided to die a stigmatized death on the cross for our salvation. The paradox lies in the fact that God who in both the OT and NT disliked disability all of a sudden died disabled for our salvation. At this point the OT and NT concept of a God who was perfect in body and did not like any imperfection in his human beings whom he created in his image suddenly accepted all his creation as perfect. There was no more disabled person but human beings loved and created by God. The argument of Baile has some similarities with that of Brunner (1956:265) where he discusses the divine person. In simple terms, Brunner argues that the historical Jesus cannot be worshiped as divine because that would be idolatry. The one to be worshiped as divine is the resurrected Christ. In this resurrected Christ is also the God of the OT. This is the disabled Christ who still remained our saviour in his disabled body.

In the story of Paul there is a lot to learn about disability. Paul was a typical Pharisaic Jew who had respected the Jewish law to the letter. But when he weighed the crucifixion of Christ with the Jewish Law, he found that Christ had achieved what the law had failed to achieve. Once convinced that Jesus was unfairly treated by the Jewish law (Walker, 1968) Paul put all his devotion to Christ and left his dependence on the Jewish law for his salvation. That is the reason why in Galatians 2:20 he

maintains that it is no longer himself who lived but Christ who lived in him. From this standpoint Paul did not want to get healed from his disability before he could proclaim the gospel of Christ. He proclaimed the gospel in his deformed and suffering state. This is a clear acceptance of disability as a state of life which is also normal like that of ability if we may call it. Church history records that there is no single missionary who propagated the gospel like Paul even in our own times. But he did all this with some disability.

How then do we apply these arguments to real life situations?

The above question is very crucial because this discussion needs to develop or construct a theology of disability which is a practical rather than a theoretical theology. The examples which are given here are to help us to be realistic about our theology of disability. To put our discussion in proper perspective, the first question to ask ourselves is what is disability? There is no one acceptable definition of disability but it is understood and defined in many social and community contexts. The context which I am going to use here is the Botswana context narrowed down to the Kalanga context which I am more familiar with. A disabled person in the Kalanga context is a person who lacks one bodily limb or one of the human senses which is considered to constitute a full human being. There are two major terms used to define these two major aspects of disability. The first term is *tjilema* which translates as —crippled. This term refers to a person who has one part of his or her physical body deformed either due to injury or from birth. The person who is deformed due to injury is generally acceptable in the society and community because at one stage he or she was once normal. But the person who has no limb or any deformed part of the body at birth is not easily accepted by the Kalanga society because such deformation is associated and interpreted in terms of some curse from an ancestor who could be dissatisfied about his or her handling by the living. Such a person is shunned and stigmatized and in many cases hidden away from the community. In the past such people were killed at birth. The same applies to blindness. If a person gets blind due to some injury that person is acceptable to the community. But if the person is born blind then the person is shunned and questions are asked as to what taboo has been violated. In a nutshell, attitudes towards disability depend on the causes of that disability.

The second word used is *tjihema* which translates to some form of mental retardation. Mental retardation or some form of mental disability is also considered in two forms. The first one is that of a person who was born with all the senses and considered normal. But due to injury or witchcraft, the person loses some of his or her senses. Such a person is acceptable in the community and people do sympathise with him or her. But if a person is born with a mental problem, that one is stigmatized and the community believes that one taboo was violated which raised the anger of the ancestors. These attitudes to disability are the most common amongst the Bakalanga and also extend in many forms to the Batswana and other Africans.

Let us illustrate how these attitudes reveal themselves. Some thirty or so years back a child was born in Botswana without hands or legs but with a normal bosom. The child was taken from the parents and put in an institution called SOS (Save Our Souls) as a disabled child. A national appeal was made asking for assistance to help in the care of this child. As usual many NGOs and individuals sent money and goods to SOS to assist this child. In 2005 in one of my workshops against the stigmatization of people living with HIV and AIDS, I visited this boy's village of the origin. After our workshop in the afternoon we had a music show with my singing group. As we were playing our

keyboards and singing some family members of this boy came with him being pushed in a wheel chair. As soon as he entered the hall he started dancing in his wheel chair. After a few minutes he asked his brother to push him nearer the stage. Like a bullet he jumped out of his wheel chair and went on the stage. He started jumping up and down and sometimes standing upside down on his head and making all sorts of gyrations to the music. Everybody in the hall stood up and came forward to get a clear picture of this wonderful performance. To my surprise nobody ever made any remarks about the fellow being disabled but all cheered him and praised him for his wonderful performance. There was no indication at all that he was a disabled person. In spite of the fact that some people had a feeling that he was born like that and that it could have been due to a curse, he was accepted as he was. This is one example amongst many.

The other example is one of a man whom I had known since my childhood days as a blindman from his birth. In about 1980 when I was ministering a congregation in Francistown, I was asked to accompany this man with my aunt to seek for a wife for my cousin. I had just bought a second hand green Peugeot pick-up which looked new and was shining like new. When the man got to my house with my aunt he made a remark: –Mbisawangu which translates my boy, you have bought such a nice car and it is really shining like new. My first reaction was to laugh at how could this blindman who is led by a stick see this car. But on second thought I could not laugh because I started asking myself as to how God makes such people see and conceive things just like those who call themselves normal. These two examples are not the only ones. There are many such stories which people always say about the disabled people. The major issue is that the attitudes to disabled people do differ in accordance with the circumstances surrounding the disability.

What is the way forward in establishing a practical study or theologically based syllabus which addresses disability?

The argument of this paper is that there is no biblical basis both from the OT and NT that we can use to convince all people to accept the disabled people in their communities. Such basis is theological. The major reason for a theological basis is that the Bible is full of stories which stigmatize people with some disability. In the NT the tax collector Zacheus is described as a short man. The fact that he was short was considered as a disability because he was not of the expected human height by the community. To make things even worse he worked for the Roman government in collecting taxes. But Jesus accepted Zacheus and even went to have dinner at his house. However many interpretations do focus on Jesus having dinner with a tax collector and there is little on a disabled person. One weak argument which does not help in doing away with the stigmatization of disabled people is that Jesus had pity for disabled people and healed them. This was the historical Jesus who was a Jew and not the Christ of faith. The historical Jesus was a Jew and he knew that his culture and religion did not accept disabled people. So he helped them and healed them so that they could be accepted in their communities as normal people and also be accepted by the Jewish God who did not like disabled people. In many sacrifices to the OT God, an animal that is to be sacrificed should not have any disability. The holistic view of life in Judaism does not only take into account human beings but also animals. Lame animals were also stigmatized and could not be sacrificed to God. When preparations for war were done only able bodied men of a certain height and body were considered fit to fight. The unfit were considered disabled. To get out of this view of human life, the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ is the only answer. The passible God of Ignatius of Antioch and Moltmann is the only God who accepts the disabled people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the most possible and practical syllabus on disability needs to be built from a theological standpoint rather than on a biblical basis. The resurrected and disabled Christ in whom is also the God of the OT is the basis of a practical syllabus and study of disability. The acceptance of the disabled Christ as the embodiment of God is the only one that can make us accept disabled people as part of God's creation as well as member of our communities.

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