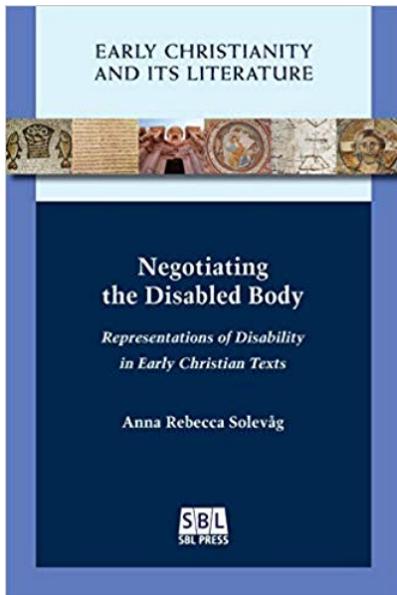


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Anna Rebecca Solevåg

Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts

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Vien V. Nguyen

Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology

“What representations of disability do we find in early Christian literature?” “What are the meanings ascribed to nonnormative bodies?” “Can we hear subversive voices?” (1). “Is disability used for a particular literary purpose?” “Which medical or etiological frameworks does the text rely on in its presentation of disability?” (25). These are the questions that Anna Rebecca Solevåg, professor of New Testament Studies at VID Specialized University in Stavanger, Norway, attempts to answer in this study. The study is divided into eight short chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction in which Solevåg discusses current scholarship on disability studies, explains the criterion for the selection of texts for analysis, provides an outline of the book, and briefly introduces the various theoretical frameworks for the analysis of disabled bodies in early Christian texts. Chapters 2–4 focus on healing narratives within the ancient literary and cultural framework. In the following three chapters Solevåg analyzes the representations of disability that are not preoccupied with healing (e.g., madness, monstrosity, eunuchism). A concluding chapter offers insights on potential future research within biblical disability studies.

In chapter 2, Solevåg uses David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s concept of *narrative prosthesis* to examine how disabled bodies in Mark’s Gospel function as a prosthesis for the narrative to either correct the problem of disability through a miraculous act of healing or to correlate an external symptom to an inner, moral deviance. The two Markan

healing stories analyzed are the lame man with the four helpers (2:1–10) and the demon-possessed Syro-Phoenician girl (7:24–30). In both stories the characters' exterior appearances relate to interior moral traits: the man's lameness relates to sinfulness; the Syro-Phoenician girl's disability and ethnicity are associated with animality. In both stories, Jesus's healing resolves the problem of disability and, at the same time, supports Jesus's divine power. Solevåg notes that Mark's literacy hinges on disability at the beginning of his gospel to show God's great power. Without them, Jesus's special character, his divinity, would not be revealed at all (52).

Solevåg continues to explore early Christian healing narratives in chapter 3 by drawing on Susan Sontag's metaphors of illness as a framework to examine three healing stories in the Gospel of John: the healing of the royal official's son (4:46–54), the man with a "weakness" at the Bethesda pool (5:1–15), and the man born blind (9:1–41). According to Sontag, different illnesses invoke different metaphorical associations with certain moral qualities or societal fears (53). For example, blindness was sometimes connected to exceptional insight, helplessness, or ignorance. Thus, Solevåg studies the terminologies used to describe illness, disability, and healing in each of John's three healing stories and analyzes the symbolic layers of meaning that John incorporates into the narrative. She concludes that John seems to have some knowledge of medical discourse and draws on insights from the professional section of the ancient healthcare system and incorporate them into his narrative (73).

In chapter 4 Solevåg turns attention to the presentation of female characters and their disabilities in the apocryphal Acts of Peter. Utilizing the concepts of "male gaze" and staring developed by feminist classics scholars and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Solevåg argues that male gaze and staring objectify women, for an act of gazing or staring is a form of othering or of asserting authority. For example, in the story of Peter's daughter, the reader's gaze lingers on the daughter's nudity, disability, and silence. Acts of Peter narrates that Ptolemy has seen her naked when she was bathing and wanted to marry her, but the mother refuses to give her consent. The daughter becomes paralyzed, presumably from the abduction by Ptolemy, which works in her favor because this would make her sexually inviolable and lead to her return to her parents. Although Peter has the capacity to heal his daughter, he chooses not to do so as a precautionary measure against future rape or forced marriage by Ptolemy or other men. Her disability is most beneficial for her, the household, and other men in the Christ-believing community.

Chapter 5 employs Erving Goffman's notion of stigma to analyze how Jesus and Paul were vilified and ostracized by their opponents with the stigmatizations of them as mad and demon-possessed. These stigmatizations draw attention to their nonnormative, deviant bodies. Since ancient medical writers categorized madness and demon-possession

as emasculating and evil, the gospel writers defend Jesus by conjuring the image of the “strong man” and by demonstrating that he was conforming to the culturally accepted norms of masculinity. Paul admits and defends the accusations of madness and bodily weakness in the Corinthian correspondence by aligning to and presenting it as Christlike. In doing so, Paul subverts the social notions of madness and bodily weakness and negates the physiognomic connection between weak bodily appearance and mental incapacity.

In chapter 6 Solevåg utilizes the framework of monster theory to examine the church father Papias’s description of the death of Judas, whose body is portrayed grotesquely disabled and effeminate to reveal a deviant, depraved soul. All these repulsive exterior descriptions (e.g., his unmanly obesity, invisible eyes, unsightly private parts), drawn from medical insights and ancient physiognomic literature, are tools used to condemn Judas for his act of betrayal and to stress the fate of those who betray their fellow Christ-believers.

Chapter 7 uses *crip* theory and *cripping* to analyze how the bodily marks of eunuchs qualify them as disabled figures. Eunuchs are disfigured because of their emasculation and, as a result, their gender fluidity. In Greco-Roman discourse, emasculation precluded men from marriage and procreation, and their gender fluidity challenged the ancient binary categories of male and female. In the Hebrew Bible, eunuchs were prohibited from participating in the worshiping assembly because their “crushed testicles” classified them as “blemished.” But this exclusion is challenged when, in the book of Isaiah, the prophet envisions an eschatological time when eunuchs are given a place in the Lord’s house and become part of the worshiping community. This biblical eschatological prophecy is fulfilled when the two New Testament eunuch passages, Matt 19:2 and Acts 8:26–40, subverted the social conventional notions of eunuchs as the *other*.

The book is thoroughly engaging, thought-provoking, and informative. What I find helpful in this book is that Solevåg offers an accessible treatment of her subject matter. In each chapter she systematically introduces the interpretative concept. She explains the reason for the selection of the texts and situates the healing stories in their literary frameworks. She highlights the disabled bodies’ social location and behaviors, and she continues with the application of the interpretative concept. Her careful weaving together of Greco-Roman and early Christian texts, ancient medical insights, and ancient pseudoscience of physiognomy into current disability studies concepts and frameworks to illustrate and fortify her arguments is one of the book’s greatest strengths. Her approach is interdisciplinary and intersectional in which identity categories such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and class intersect and reinforce or intensify marginalization. A plethora of interpretative concepts are introduced and employed in this study (i.e., narrative prosthesis, gaze and stare, stigma, monster theory, and crip theory) while also

employing historical-literary methodologies. These multiple, intersectional perspectives serve as useful tools to unpack layers of representation, attitude, and taxonomy toward disabled or nonnormative bodies in the biblical and ancient worlds.

I appreciate Solevåg's employment of various interpretive concepts, but at times the employment of a broad array of interpretive concepts in a short book leaves the reader wanting more. A more in-depth introduction of the concepts employed and their limitations would be beneficial to the readers. In chapters 2 and 3, for example, could it be possible to interpret Mark's and John's healing stories in the Roman imperialized world context in which disabled bodies were used as metaphors to disempower and dislocate imperial power, as well as highlighting the damage that imperial power inflicted on the subjugated people? In chapter 7, Solevåg could also address the issue of ethnicity. Since Solevåg's approach is intersectional and since disability is complicated by the intersecting factors of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, how, then, does the eunuch's ethnicity contribute to his social location and the categorization of his disability, if any?

Overall, this study on representational and rhetorical aspects of disability and the lived experience of people with disability in antiquity is commendable, valuable, and a welcome contribution to the discussion in disability studies. Anyone interested in understanding how disabled bodies are represented and negotiated in antiquity will find this study a stimulating and refreshing read. It can be a conversation starter in classrooms and church groups.