

Who is the God we worship?

Reading scripture through disability theology

Christina Reimer

I became interested in theologies of disability as the parent of a child with cognitive and physical disabilities. This lived experience has changed the way I preach and teach and the way I think of God and community. Disability theologies tend to emerge from the real lived experiences of persons with disabilities and those close to them, and they offer creative readings of scripture and crucial insights into the practices of the church. They also expose the ableism of certain normative understandings of God. In this essay I discuss one of the central questions asked by disability theologians: Who is the God we worship?¹

Divine attributes and human nature

When we ask who the God is we worship, it raises further questions about the relationship between divine and human attributes: What attributes do we associate with God? What do these attributes say about us, if we are created in God's image? Which comes first in our theology: divine attributes or human nature? Do we look at ourselves and what we deem to be good and true and then form a picture of what God must be like? If we form our conception of God based on our vision of humanity, there's a temptation to deify the existing order—a potentially unjust order that needs dismantling and transformation.

In his piece "The Disabled God," Burton Cooper writes, "Our tendency is to think of divine power in the same terms as our power, except to extend God's power unlimitedly. That is, there are limits to our power; there are no limits to God's power. If we can do some things, God is able to do anything. Thus, human 'ableness' provides us with the image to think about God's power."² Cooper highlights a human inclination to think of God as the ideal version of what we aspire to be but cannot

1 See John Swinton, "Who Is the God We Worship?" *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14, no. 2 (Feb 2011): 273–307.

2 Burton Z. Cooper, "The Disabled God: Understanding God's Creative and Redemptive Love," *Theology Today* 49, no. 2 (1992): 173.

reach as mortals. The God we worship, then, is simply a better version of ourselves. In a similar vein, Stanley Hauerwas and Tom Reynolds both argue that Christian theology has been greatly influenced by the values of modernity, which shapes the way we view God. For example, assigning an attribute such as self-sufficiency to God aligns with the modern Western values of autonomy and independence.

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And a person's ability to achieve these values in our society is a mark of one's success as a human being.³ In theological terms, achieving autonomy and independence means that we resemble God's image of self-sufficiency.

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theology. A new image emerges when we focus on other aspects of God such as vulnerability and interdependence rather than perfection and self-sufficiency. But we must be careful not to simply swap one set of outdated values with another set of current values. If we do this, we run into the same theological temptation to project onto God's image what is normative today. One way to avoid this is to look to scripture for a more holistic picture of the image of God.

Moses's speech disorder—and God's—in Exodus

In 2014, the blockbuster movie *Exodus: Gods and Kings* was released. It is the epic story of Moses leading the Hebrew slaves to freedom. Moses is played by Christian Bale, the same actor who played Batman in the *Dark Knight* trilogy a few years earlier. In *Exodus*, as in the Batman movies, the protagonist is portrayed as an almost super-human, muscle-bound, lone-wolf type of hero. Certainly, Moses is one of the leading men of the Hebrew Bible, but if we read biblical descriptions of him through a disability theology lens, we get a radically different depiction of him.

When God calls Moses to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses is wracked with self-doubt and does not want to accept the call for

3 See Stanley Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 8, nos. 3-4 (2005): 11-25; Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

fear that no one will listen to him or take him seriously. Exodus 4:10–13 (NRSV) narrates the conversation:

Moses said to the LORD, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the LORD said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.”

One likely explanation for Moses’s discomfort with speaking publicly—especially when given the immense responsibility of representing God—is that he had a speech disorder. What we learn about God from this passage is that God does not seem to be concerned with Moses’s ability to orate perfectly. In the following verses, we also learn that God is flexible and accommodates Moses’s request to refrain from public speaking by appointing Moses’s brother Aaron for that task as his replacement.

Talmud and Rabbinics scholar Sarah Wolf observes that God needs Moses and Aaron to help God communicate with God’s people. God is not self-sufficient but depends on them.⁴ We can take this one step further to argue that God also experiences an impediment to speech. Something stands as a communication barrier between God and God’s people. God appears to need a translator to get God’s message across effectively, and this mutual need for support highlights the value of interdependence.

Wolf also states that this passage from Exodus discloses something about how humans are formed in God’s likeness. She writes: “God made humans *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God. Perhaps, then, God is reminding Moses of that: all humans are created by God, humans are physically diverse, and therefore all humans in all their differences are created in God’s image.”⁵

Jesus as disabled and divine liberator in the Gospels

Nancy Eiesland writes about the estranging effects of Christian theology regarding the question of how persons with disabilities are viewed as made

4 Sarah Wolf, “Why Did Moses Have a Speech Disability?” JTS, Torah commentary, January 20, 2023, <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/why-did-moses-have-a-speech-disability/>.

5 Wolf, “Why Did Moses Have a Speech Disability?”

in the image of God. In her experience, theology has been exclusionary rather than liberatory for persons with disabilities. She experienced this in her own life as someone living with a significant physical disability and chronic pain, and she admits that for many years she felt “spiritually estranged from God.”⁶

One of the moments that helped Eiesland overcome her own spiritual estrangement was when she re-read Luke 24:36–39 through a disability

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theology lens. This passage describes the moment when the resurrected Jesus meets his followers, and they know him by his wounds. Eiesland writes, “Here was the resurrected Christ making good on the promise that God would be with us, embodied, as we are—disabled and divine. In this passage, I recognized a part of my hidden history as a Christian. The foundation of Christian theology is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet seldom is the resurrected Christ recognized as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of a profound impairment.”⁷

Here we encounter a disabled God, an inclusive God in whom we find our image in all of its diversity. This God suffers with us and lives among us.

Eiesland and other disability theologians have provided fresh models for interpreting scripture and discerning the nature of God in a way that welcomes all followers of Christ to find their place within the Christian story. After reading Eiesland’s work, I was inspired to return to Jesus’s healing narratives to see if they remained exclusionary—associating sin with disability and forgiveness with restored ability—or if they could be re-interpreted as possible texts of liberation.

John 9:1–12 describes a conversation between Jesus and his disciples about a man who could not see and had to beg for food to stay alive. The disciples ask Jesus who had sinned to cause the man to lose his sight. Jesus said, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so

6 Nancy Eiesland, “Encountering the Disabled God,” *The Other Side* 38, no. 5 (Sept. and Oct. 2002): 13.

7 Eiesland, “Encountering the Disabled God,” 14.

that God's works might be revealed in him" (9:3). After this, Jesus mixed his spit with dirt and put the mud on the man's eyes. The man washed in a pool of water and was then able to see. A blind person hearing this miraculous story might feel estranged given that most people, even people of deep faith, do not experience miraculous ability after disability.

Blindness is used as a metaphor for the spiritual inability or refusal to hear and follow God's voice. Throughout the Bible, visual impairment is sometimes used as a symbol of ignorance, sin, and unbelief. It can also refer to a lack of understanding due to moral failure (see Exodus 23:8; Isaiah 56:10). It is no surprise that the disciples would assume that someone's sin had caused the man's blindness. But in John's narrative Jesus disrupts this assumption by saying that sin is not the cause of the man's blindness. When I read this passage, I see Jesus calling on the liberative resources of his religious tradition to challenge normative cultural beliefs about who is in and who is out.

Conclusion

When my son was young, we didn't know if he would ever talk, but through weekly visits to a speech therapist, he was slowly able to verbalize and share his inner world with us. This process did not cure him of his disabilities, but it made us feel like someone had put mud over our eyes so that we could see him more clearly. Disability theology has also acted as a healing mud, providing new perspectives on how we might read the Bible, practice Christian community, and encounter God.

About the author

Christina Reimer is a Toronto-based workshop facilitator in the fields of conflict resolution and trauma for Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute and has taught university courses in world religions.