

Job and disability theology

A lens for examining communal blame

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The book of Job has resulted in much discourse around suffering and disability. Among the many approaches to the investigation of the figure of Job, René Girard proposes that Job functions as a scapegoat for his community, albeit a “failed” one.¹ Yet Girard spends little time examining the role of Job’s physicality in the community’s decision to scapegoat him. I propose that, considering the role of the body in the Ancient Near East, Job’s bodily suffering and disability have been overlooked in the theory of Girard. Greater attention to the role of the body would confirm Job as the ideal scapegoat candidate. This missing component of Girard’s theory not only strengthens his case but also directly connects to the work of scholars who have focused on disability studies and disability theology, such as Nancy Eiesland and Sharon Betcher.² Indeed, Girard’s scapegoat mechanism in conversation with disability theorists functions as a lens through which we can recognize the scapegoating of disabled people in contemporary society.

Job as disabled

In his book *Job: The Victim of His People*, Girard proposes that Job is the scapegoat of his community. He uses Job’s fall from power, the mimetic desire of his friends, the community’s attitude towards his guilt, and his lack of family to speak on his behalf to confirm that Job is the ideal candidate to become a scapegoat.³ Yet, while Girard admits elsewhere that “sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries, and even disabilities in general tend to polarize persecutors,” he does not draw on this

1 René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

2 See Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

3 I discuss “mimetic desire” later in this essay, notably under the section “Job as scapegoat.”

insight in his theory of Job as scapegoat.⁴ Exploring the role of Job's bodily disfigurement in his scapegoating thus requires examining the position of the body in the Ancient Near East.

For ancient Israel, the ideal body was the whole body, and those Israelites without "whole bodies" were placed in a separate category, subject to restrictions as outlined in biblical purity law. A whole body was defined as one that contained all parts and functions and had no open sores. For Israelites, a whole body was more than the prerequisite for social interactions but was also a symbol for the society itself.⁵ Ritual purity laws ensured that the social order was maintained. When these laws were not followed, dirt or pollution (including excretions or mutilations of the body) threatened both the individual body and the social order.

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A closer examination of the specific bodily suffering that befell Job reveals that his suffering, indeed, would have placed him outside the concept of bodily wholeness. The Accuser inflicts "loathsome sores" all over Job's body

(2:7), Job mourns that his skin is "clothed with worms and dirt" (7:5), and he speaks of a pain in his bones that "gnaws" at him and "allows for no rest" (16:17). These ailments are accompanied by a trespassing of bodily boundaries. Job's skin "turns black and falls from him" (30:30), and eventually Job "wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten" (13:28).

Although the definition of disability has not been completely settled within the field of disability studies, Nancy Eiesland suggests that a consensus has emerged around disability as reflective of a socially constructed notion of "ability." She suggests that, as able-bodied individuals engage in the "othering" of disabled people, disability becomes "a form of inability or limitation in performing roles or tasks expected of an individual within

4 René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 18.

5 Scholars such as Mary Douglas speak to this sentiment. In her landmark work *Purity and Danger*, she reveals that "the body is a symbol of society" and that "the powers and dangers credited to social society are reproduced small on the human body." Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 115.

a social environment.”⁶ Rebecca Raphael builds on this understanding to distinguish impairment from disability, the latter of which has social implications. She argues that an impairment is a “biological fact”—for example, the loss of a limb. Disability, however, refers to the social context in which the impairment occurs, while also speaking to the implications of this impairment. It speaks to the “lack of fit” between the (impaired) body and society. Considering this definition of disability, Raphael argues that Job’s ailments place him squarely within the realm of disability. As Job’s physical body began to become “unwhole” or impaired, this would have resulted in a rift between himself and his social context, thus rendering him disabled.⁷ I believe this rendering of Job as disabled helps us understand the attempt to scapegoat Job.

Job as scapegoat

In *Job: The Victim of His People*, Girard outlines several requirements that must be met to ensure the efficacy of the scapegoat mechanism, the “destruction of a single victim by a host of enemies.”⁸ In Girard’s theory, this victim is the object of the “mimetic desire” of the community. Mimetic desire happens when humans subconsciously desire what others have *because* they have it. Since all cannot acquire what others already have, rivalry, hatred, and violence often emerge. For Girard, the scapegoat mechanism functions to quell the violence that results from mimetic desire and threatens to overwhelm society. When the hate and violence felt toward one another can be unanimously enacted against a carefully chosen (innocent) victim, that violence can take on a sacred character. Yet, for a group to perceive its own violence as sacred, there must be a “properly chosen victim.”⁹ Girard suggests that this must be a person who allows the group to embrace “unanimity” around their choice. Good candidates are those who have experienced a “fall from greatness” or are orphans (as there are no relatives to repudiate the choice).¹⁰ Unanimity allows the scapegoat mechanism to become a source of social transcendence, one that functions as a unifying element and causes other conflicts to dissipate.

6 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 27.

7 Rebecca Raphael, “Things Too Wonderful: A Disabled Reading of Job,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31, no. 4 (2004): 399–424.

8 Girard, *Job*, 25.

9 Girard, *Job*, 78.

10 See Girard’s discussion in *Job*, chap. 2, “Job the Idol of His People.”

Girard argues that Job is an “ideal victim.”¹¹ The same friends who once exalted and admired Job also harbored envy, rivalry, and hatred, which arose when Job enjoyed success. This desire, being mimetic, began with the elite (Job’s friends) and then, at their urging, spread through the wider society. Girard also notes that the contrast between the “Job of the prologue” and the “Job of the dialogues”

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is “between the favor and the disfavor of one and the same public . . . towards a sort of ‘statesman’ whose career has been shattered.”¹² Finally, Job also lacks relatives (or friends) to defend him. Yet, the scapegoat mechanism is only efficacious if the victim submits to the crimes against him. While Job’s friends endeavor

or to make him responsible for his supposed guilt, Job does not submit to their accusations. In this, he offers defiance in the face of the scapegoat mechanism, becoming a “failed scapegoat.”¹³

I propose, however, that the importance of bodily suffering is overlooked in Girard’s application of the scapegoat mechanism to the situation of Job. Our earlier exploration into the nature of the body revealed that bodily suffering and its various manifestations threatened the societal order in the Ancient Near East. Job’s community would therefore have ascribed great importance to his undeniable bodily suffering and disability; it would have caused the community to question his social and spiritual relationships, and his condition would have been seen as a threat to the social order. As such, Job’s bodily suffering would have functioned as the *ultimate* confirmation of Job as the ideal scapegoat candidate. While the other factors in the scapegoat mechanism (such as fall from power, orphan status, guilt) are psychological and sociological realities, bodily suffering and mutilation has a tangible aspect that is communicated outside of language. Even those who were not in direct daily relationship with Job would have been able to witness the degradation of his body! The community would have viewed Job’s bodily disability as a social threat that needed to be excised. Job’s bodily impairment would have confirmed

11 Girard, *Job*, 78.

12 Girard, *Job*, 18.

13 Girard, *Job*, 35.

his guilt and therefore justified his exclusion from society. It would have validated his selection as a victim of the scapegoat mechanism.

The disabled body and scapegoat mechanisms

Sharon Betcher argues that, in the postmodern age, the conflation of advertising, the obsession with celebrities and sports figures, and the rise of the “branding” of the body in transnational markets have created a society where the ideal body has become conflated with the norm.¹⁴ Today, the “wholesome self—brought to health by biotechnology, cosmetically augmented so as to achieve a ‘more natural’ look, and fashionably contoured in the global marketplace—has become normative.”¹⁵ Betcher depicts the wholesome self as a commodity sought after in the world market. The current economic system reveals that bodies are measured in light of their productivity and profit earning potential. The commitment to the ideal (healthful) body ostracizes those bodies who do not fall within its parameters, rendering them “a social disruption”: inferior, pitied, and in need of rehabilitation.

The experience of disability today is also integrally connected to the experience of stigma. Eiesland reflects that although people experience a wide range of mental and physical impairments, what binds them together is “whatever the setting, whether in education, medicine, rehabilitation, social welfare policy, or society at large, a common set of stigmatizing values and arrangements has historically operated against us.”¹⁶ For Erving Goffman, stigmas are socially constructed relationships where people are “marked” as “other,” either because of an outward visible sign or because of “something discrediting known about them.”¹⁷ Stigma enables the majority to engage in prejudicial actions against the stigmatized “other.” Thus, interpersonal interactions, as opposed to psychological reactions, result in stigmas.

Goffman also stresses the importance of the visibility of the stigma. A visible stigma functions as a sign for others to approach this person differently in social interactions. This frequently results in strained or un-

14 Sharon Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles and Mission: Religion and the Politics of Disablement,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 79–99.

15 Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission,” 83.

16 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 24.

17 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963); quoted in Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 59.

comfortable interpersonal interactions, culminating in an attempt, on the part of the stigmatized individual, to “pass” as part of the dominant social milieu. This attempt often fails, resulting in embarrassing situations and causing the stigmatized to seek “secondary gains”—to see the stigma as a blessing or to rethink normality. Stigmatized individuals have sometimes “bought into” the values of the majority and can internalize culpability for their stigma.¹⁸

While recognizing the importance of Goffman’s theory, Eiesland uses her own analysis of disability to critique it. Eiesland proposes that previous models that have attempted to explain disability (including Goffman’s) are individualistic, ignoring the institutional practices that undergird social relationships. She advocates “the minority group model” instead, asserting “that the physical and psychological restrictions that people with disabilities face are primarily due to prejudice and social discrimination and are only secondarily due to the functional limitations or emotional disturbance related to our physical impairments.”¹⁹ Eiesland suggests that the minority group model accurately describes the position of people with disabilities because it allows disability to be viewed as a stigmatized social condition rather than a private, physical tragedy. This stigmatized social condition means that those with disabilities experience many forms of discrimination, including paternalism and social avoidance. In times of economic or social unrest, however, outright violence can be directed toward disabled people. Once disability is viewed as a social condition, it can be “redressed through attitudinal changes and social commitment to equality of opportunity for people with disabilities.”²⁰

Job and the disabled body

The conjunction of these theories allows us to draw parallels between the role of the body in the book of Job (and his subsequent scapegoating) and the role of the disabled body today, including its stigmatization and scapegoating. First, Betcher’s theory of the “wholesome” body and the maintenance of current power structures resonates with the role of the body in the Ancient Near East, manifested in the relationship between Job and his friends as his body begins to experience degradation. Recall that “un-whole” bodies in the Ancient Near East were viewed as a threat to social

18 Goffman, *Stigma*; quoted in Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 60.

19 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 62.

20 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 66.

order. In the book of Job, we are reminded that Job's friends "helped" him while also reminding him of his place in society. Second, Goffman's theory supports the notion that visible bodily markers that signify lack of wholeness result in ostracism. Goffman reveals that those who are

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stigmatized can be labeled culpable for their condition, while stigmatized individuals sometimes adopt the mentality of the majority. This parallels Girard's assertion that the scapegoat must admit to the crimes against them, regardless of guilt, for the scapegoat mechanism to function properly. Third, Eiesland's minority group model also bears distinct

similarities to Girard's scapegoat mechanism. During a time of societal strain, Job the victim is chosen, and violence is enacted against him. For Girard, the selection of the victim is never voluntary and is frequently a person with disrupted social ties. A disabled person, as Eiesland describes them in the minority group model, would fit Girard's characterization quite well.

Viewing Job through these three theoretical lenses reveals how mimetic desire is integral to the scapegoating of disabled people. Betcher reminds us that the wholesome self is a commodity that is sought after—literally desired—in the world market. This wholesome self, aided by the system of globalized capitalism is, in the words of Girard, "venerated and imitated slavishly."²¹ As the idealized self is positioned as normative, desire becomes mimetic. Spurred on by advertising and instantaneous global communication, members of society imitate one another in fanatical worship of the idealized body. Yet, this wholesome self, by its very definition, is unattainable for most, if not all. The unattainable self becomes an *obstacle*, prompting the dark side of mimetic desire—envy and hatred—to surface. In the absence of the tangible *idealized body* of globalized capitalism, the projections of desire find their way to that which is a visible reminder of this obstacle—the bodies that seem to be the opposite of the wholesome self. The scapegoating of the disabled body and all it entails, including notions of culpability, protects the capitalistic system that both depends and thrives on the commodification of the wholesome self.

²¹ Girard, *Job*, 49.

Conclusion

The book of Job raises many questions regarding suffering, yet I believe that the question of bodily suffering is one that should not be overlooked. Girard's theory of scapegoating sheds light on Job's situation. Yet his theory does not consider the importance of the role of bodily suffering and disability, and it therefore misses an aspect that is central to the process of Job being marked as the scapegoat of his community. Girard's lack of attention to bodily suffering and disability also has implications for today. Given Girard's theory, it follows that the stigmatization of disabled people could be classified as scapegoating. Greater examination of the role of the body in Girard's theory could allow disabled people to find their story in Job, the scapegoat. It would also provide yet another lens through which the disabled community could identify the societal dynamics that surround their community. Beyond that, as scapegoating is an inherently religious term, Girard's theory could aid religious communities in their own exploration of the ways that religion has participated in the exclusion and stigmatization of disabled people.²² It would be interesting to explore whether seeing the disabled in light of Girard's scapegoat theory would enable religious communities (and society as a whole) to better embody the message of love and acceptance of all people.

About the author

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²² Theologically, many argue that modernist Christianity has also read disability as degeneracy.