

SUSAN R. HOLMAN – CHRIS L. DE WET – JONATHAN L. ZECHER (eds), *Disability, Medicine, and Healing Discourse in Early Christianity: New Conversations for Health Humanities*. Abingdon: Routledge 2024. 194 pp. – ISBN 978-0-367-53118-8

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The volume under review offers a multidisciplinary contribution to the ongoing conversation on medical discourse and the health humanities in early Christian studies, while drawing connections to contemporary issues. It brings together a series of ten essays written by scholars in various fields of theology, early Christian studies, and history, philosophy, and the ethics of medicine. The volume's central aim is to critically explore the social, cultural, and religious aspects of disability, medicine, and healing in late antiquity and early Christianity. This framework is illustrated in the introduction, where the editors point out the need for a new paradigm for understanding these central topics, regarding them not merely as biomedical issues, but as nuanced and culturally embedded phenomena (p. 1).

The essays are grouped into three categories, each characterized by a distinct theme. This categorization serves not only as a helpful distinction for readers, but also to structure the volume's main argument, as one section comes into direct dialogue with the next. Under the heading 'Marking Bodies, Making Communities', the first part examines how complex meanings of medical language, health status, and pain are used to theologically and socially structure communities. A recurring concern that runs through this section is 'how experiences of othering and isolation can be reframed as signs of belonging' (p. 3). The second part, 'Defining Patients, Delimiting Communities', centers around the doctors', healers' and various Christian authors' concepts of health and disease, which can transcend mere medical categorization and influence social belonging. The third part, 'Performing Health, Preserving Communities', explores how different practical experiences of health in various aspects of Christian monastic, ecclesiastic, and secular life, can influence and preserve existing social structures. As a methodological approach, the authors analyze a variety of ancient primary sources and some draw on contemporary theoretical frameworks to strengthen their arguments. A concluding chapter by BRENDA

LLEWELLYN IHSEN provides both a theoretical framework and reflections for the essays, intersecting them with contemporary aspects of health-care (p. 5).

The introduction is followed by an opening chapter where ANNA REBECCA SOLEVÅG seeks to examine how the use of specific medical metaphors is chosen to fit a theological narrative, where heresy is associated with illness and orthodox Christianity with health (p. 13). To achieve this, she provides a theoretical framework based on cognitive theory, which explains that metaphors are an integral part in constructing meaning, shaping social and political reality. She continues with providing and critically examining excerpts of Ignatius of Antioch's letters, where medical metaphors describing Christ as a physician and an antidote, heretics as 'raving dogs' and 'foreign plants', and bishops as bodily and spiritual healers are introduced, providing specific explanations for each one. The close attention SOLEVÅG pays to the exact use and translation for each word should also be noted. An example of this is the word φάρμακον, where she pinpoints the different meaning regarding the different situations it is used (p. 17). SOLEVÅG extends the argument further by examining a metaphor attributing a positive trait, namely that of deafness to heresy. This article not only urges us to think critically about the literal and metaphorical use of phrases in a theological context, but to reexamine the notion that disability was only viewed with a negative light in early Christianity.

In Chapter 3, ADAM BOOTH, using the findings of modern psychological research, explores the motivations for the practice of circumcision of first century Christians, disciples of the second-wave teachers of a Pauline church (p. 30). The author introduces the concept of 'hazing' through the definition of psychologist ANDO CIMINO, as gentile members who were yet to be officiated would have seen the proposition of circumcision as hazing, due to the costs being both painful and shameful. To justify these aspects of circumcision, BOOTH uses a range of ancient sources. An important part of this essay, which connects it to the book's theme of social aspect, are the practice's hidden power dynamics (pp. 35–36). Here the author uses excerpts of the Pauline corpus. The justification of the social dominance theory of hazing is that the second-wave teachers may have considered Paul a weak leader, thus seeking to assert themselves through this painful and humiliating practice. The Pauline corpus illuminates the alleged self-perception of Paul. This is that of a weak, suffering, dependent figure, which is closely related to the passions of Christ and is this way more appropriate for a leadership figure (in the context of church followers).

HELEN RHEE follows up in Chapter 4 with an essay regarding the construction of meaning and communities through pain in early Christianity – more specifically, that early Christian ‘pain pedagogy’ was influenced by the medically and culturally curated view of pain from Greco-Roman times and then transformed through Jesus’s passions. This resulted in communities being built ‘as co-sufferers in Christ.’ (p. 47). RHEE begins by examining, through the works of Galen and Celsus, the view of pain in Greco-Roman medical texts. These texts focus on the subjectivity and elusiveness of pain. Celsus stresses the difference in pain that can be felt and the one expressed and Galen extends this concept further, stating that to accurately express the pain, the person should be a physician, since he possesses the ‘mental powers’ to do so (p. 50). The author then moves on to Aelius Aristides, a sophist of the second century who struggled with chronic illness, to show the change in narrative, namely of ‘pain pedagogy’. Through his text, RHEE highlights a contrast: not only did the doctors not understand Aelius’s illness, but through the help of the god Asclepius, Aelius could both surpass it and express his previously unspeakable pain, making it shareable. Finally, pain is transformed in early Christian texts as a ‘pain pedagogy’ of virtue, and its shareability is central to the community. The life of Syncretica and Augustine’s text emphasize pain as a shared communal experience, where believers suffer to come closer to God, just like Jesus’s suffering. In my view, RHEE convincingly shows the transformation of pain narrative, while at the same time showing a compelling view of community building.

The second part of the book opens with ELISA GROFF’s essay in Chapter 4. Sexual health and gender identity in late antiquity and early Byzantium remain underexplored in medical discourse. Addressing these issues, GROFF attempts to clarify the discussion surrounding sterility and infertility in early Byzantine times, aiming to bring new perspectives and to connect them with contemporary concerns. In a detailed analysis of the work of Aëtius of Amida regarding sterility and infertility, she highlights that they were not only medical but also social and psychological phenomena (pp. 67–68). After introducing the ancient author, GROFF then emphasizes the use of exact terminology in Aëtius’s work (namely that sterility and infertility were different), to show that there were several types of them, with different medical and social implications. She goes on to show how Aëtius perceived both men and women as responsible for the failure to conceive. This failure (or success) of conception could occur due to medical, physiological, and psychological reasons (pp. 71–73). Aëtius’s thought is

influenced by Greco-Roman philosophical and medical discourse, and it should be noted that some of the factors which affect fertility (e.g. general lifestyle, psychological factors) are still relevant today. This can strengthen GROFF's aim of bridging the gap between ancient and contemporary issues. She then closes the chapter with cases of permanent or medically induced sterility and their social implications, connecting them with modern definitions of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and concluding that this discourse 'can be successfully complemented by modern discussion of fertility in clinical practice and research, and vice versa'.

Chapter 6 by JONATHAN L. ZECHER examines the work of Alexander of Tralles. More specifically, ZECHER explores the meaning behind so-called 'natural' remedies and how the construction of meaning translates into medical practice, epistemology, and doctor-patient relationships of his time. He starts by addressing key characteristics of Alexander's life, specifically that he was a medical 'encyclopedist'. Rather than only organizing and systematizing works of others, Zecher explains that Alexander inserts his own thought and emphasizes his clinical experience, coming into discussion and critique with previous medical authors, most notably Galen (p. 86). Alexander employed the medical aspects of Galenic thought in his practice, but because he emphasized his experience, he would also use natural remedies that he has deemed effective, because they work by their nature. These remedies, dismissed by Galen, also included amulets. The author takes a critical stance towards the Christian aspect that these amulets could have or even that Alexander was Christian at all, considering 'the lack of any discernible Christian influence' and the difficulties in pinpointing the exact period in which he lived. He states that there is not any form of Christian theology or practices in his writings and thus Alexander cannot confidently be called a Christian. The use of 'non-medical, natural' remedies has been a result of his practical experience, the practices of other doctors, and at the request of wealthier patients (p. 90), thus co-constructing the meaning of healing. ZECHER concludes with the notion that Alexander pushes the limits of 'medicine', 'so as to incorporate amulets as *medical* rather than "non-medical" means, and to translate between professional and lay explanatory models' (p. 91). With these conclusions, the author broadens our historical understanding regarding medicine in Christian late antiquity and can thus open the way to include his work in contemporary discourse.

The last chapter of part two, authored by CHRIS L. DE WET, focuses on the way Christianized medical discourse in late antique and early Byzan-

tine East could construct identities and shape meanings of otherness (p. 102). Throughout the essay DE WET utilizes and critically examines excerpts of many late antique and early Christian medical, theological and monastic authors. He begins by arguing that medical discourse of this time encompassed the entirety of the human subject, with the health of the soul oftentimes more important than bodily health. Disease could also function as a form of asceticism (p. 104), a point which directly correlates with RHEE's argument when writing about Saint Syncletica. He continues by examining the tradition of medical encyclopedias, which are not merely an act of collecting, but rather an imperializing act. This is so, because the authors attempt to systematize, rationalize and institutionalize the knowledge 'under the precepts of Empire' but also attempt at 'epistemological deconstruction and reconstruction' (pp. 105–106). Within this frame, it is reasonable for these encyclopedias to be Christianized, and social relationships structured in accordance with heresiological and polemical discourse. This point also correlates with SOLEVÅG's argument, where medical metaphors can shape social structures. This social structuring, which imposes moral figures but also 'figures of otherness', connected with the 'populist' discourse of early Byzantine Christianity affirmed through preaching, makes the discourse itself a type of healing (pp. 109–110). With this essay, the author not only highlights the nuances in medical discourse (in many frameworks) but also places himself in a dialogue with other authors of this volume, further strengthening its main aims.

Part three opens with Chapter 8, PAUL DILLEY's examination of the lives of saints and hagiographies as a medium of regulation of monks' mental health and their spiritual development (p. 121). Although modern definitions of mental health entail cultural significances and nuances, they cannot fully correspond with the complex meanings of the early Byzantine times. Thus, the author implements the 'theory of mind', a concept of cognitive studies, which more accurately reflects the nuances of the period. DILLEY argues that because hagiographies depict the emotional and mental aspects of saints' lives, they functioned as mediums of the theory for monks, as they could help with ordering thoughts and cultivate moral and cognitive disciplines. He moves on to examine two hagiographies, which belong in a tradition of 'invented ascetic heroines', whose names correspond with the theme of the hagiography. These female monks renounced their gender, leaving behind their families but believing in an ascetic renunciation. The grief of family abandonment was a common mental health issue that monks faced, and such hagiographies served as guidelines to cope with the mental

distress and order their thoughts. With the *Life of Euphrosyne* and *Life of Athanasia and Andronicus* the author highlights these aspects and urges us to rediscover them as a part of early Byzantine medical discourse.

Chapter 9 by SUSAN R. HOLMAN explores the complex relationship between public health and theological concepts and practices. The focus of this essay is water ethics (as forms of public health measures) with DOREEN MASSEY's philosophy of space and contemporary discourse surrounding the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a theoretical framework, to 'offer a provocative kinetic image to help connect religious and public health history with water ethics across time' (pp. 133–134). HOLMAN addresses the medical aspects of water in late antiquity, particularly the importance of its location and flow stemming from Hippocratic and Galenic thought, infused with ontological and theological meanings (p. 136). After a brief mention of Christian water ethics, based on the wellness and social order from public water supplies, she moves on to her central case study: she examines the case of the 'Great Well' of Shenoute, analyzing modern sources and some excerpts from Shenoute's writings. Because this 'Great Well' was used as a crisis relief for several thousands of refugees and archaeological evidence suggesting that it was constructed like the triconch of the church, HOLMAN argues that specific theological messaging is implied. Clean water could thus be perceived as a good with spiritual and theological properties and a public water supply constructing such meaning. Connecting it with contemporary challenges of the sort, HOLMAN's conclusions highlight the need for a broadened understanding of such subjects, with the relevance of ancient discourse.

The volume concludes with Chapter 10 by BRENDA LLEWELLYN IHSEN. She aims to provide a theoretical framework for the essays, and to demonstrate that ancient Christian medical texts can offer significant insights into contemporary healthcare (p. 155). IHSEN engages with the chapters written by CHRIS L. DE WET, SUSAN R. HOLMAN, and HELEN RHEE to propose intersections between these studies and with her own thinking. Using the premise that early Christian medicine valued the entirety of the person, something that, she points out, has changed in the last two centuries, she urges us to reconsider such aspects. With the three essays as her intersection points, she highlights how public health and the construction of pain and illness can affect contemporary practices. She underscores the danger of oversimplification of the dialogue between medicine and religion and concludes with a proposition of a multidisciplinary approach to contemporary medicine, which can draw from ancient Christian discourse.

To conclude, *Disability, Medicine, and Healing Discourse in Early Christianity* constitutes an important contribution to the discourse surrounding the complexity of medical phenomena, emphasizing their socially, culturally, and theologically structured nature. The essays come into dialogue with one another and offer a multidisciplinary approach to various aspects of medicine and healing. Even so, I believe that the aspects of disability, although crucial, are not always equally developed in order to constitute a central axis of this volume. Instead, when they are being discussed, they are utilized as a theoretical framework by authors in each case. A more precise engagement with disability in this historical context could prove more fruitful in complementing or enhancing our modern understandings. Nevertheless, the volume can ultimately challenge our views regarding the relationship between medicine and religion and illustrate their social implications. A more nuanced perspective, one with respect to cultural complexities, is indeed necessary to surpass the problems of a purely biomedical approach to medicine. This volume successfully shows that this can also be achieved through ancient Christian medical discourse.

Keywords

disability studies; history of medicine; early Christianity; Byzantine theology