

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The body's availability: Ezekiel 37, Robert Jenson and disabled flesh

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Abstract

This paper puts Ezekiel 37 in conversation with Robert W. Jenson's theological anthropology. It claims that a theological reading of scripture can clarify moral reflection on personhood in general, and the personhood of humans with disabilities in particular. Ezekiel 37:1–14, read through Jenson's exegesis and theology, offers a theological anthropology in which human personhood is given by God's address. To be a person is to be available to God's address. Such an understanding does not rely on capacities inherent to the person, but extrinsically in God's word and freedom to be available to human flesh.

Keywords: disability; Ezekiel; Robert W. Jenson; theological anthropology

Moral theology's preferred disciplinary conversation partners tend to be philosophy or the social sciences. While these are valuable interlocutors for the task of moral theology, approaching biblical interpretation through theological frameworks offers much promise for clarifying issues in moral theology. I will demonstrate this by exemplifying how a theological reading of scripture can clarify moral reflection on personhood in general, and the personhood of humans with disabilities in particular. I will develop this claim through a reading of Ezekiel 37:1–14 through Robert W. Jenson's theological anthropology.

Theologians interested in disability often note that classical theological anthropologies rely too heavily on capacities or abilities for defining the human person. Locating personhood in capacities, theologians often claim, is exclusionary of individuals with disabilities.¹ This charge is made by John Swinton about Augustine's and Calvin's focus on knowledge of God, and by Hans Reinders concerning the importance of reason and will in the tradition of Catholic social thought.² What is needed instead is theological anthropology in which the disabled are counted as full persons, one in which capacities or abilities are not requisite for personhood.

Locating personhood in inherent capacities not only obscures the personhood of humans with disabilities but potentially excludes them from goods owed by right to

¹For example, see Miguel J. Romero, 'Profound Cognitive Impairment, Moral Virtue, and Our Life in Christ: Can my Brother Live a Happy and Holy Life?', *Church Life* 34/4 (2015), pp. 80–94.

²John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 10–13; Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 88–122.

persons.³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, claims that attempts to ground human rights in the *imago Dei* cannot adequately account for those with profound intellectual disability since the *imago* is often located precisely in human capacities for intellect, memory and will.⁴ Personhood must therefore be construed in a way that does not focus on inherent capacities, since to do otherwise questions the personhood of humans with limited use of certain capacities.⁵

God's address in Ezekiel 37:1–14

A theological anthropology that can sustain the personhood of the disabled emerges from Ezekiel 37:1–14. Ezekiel is brought to a valley full of bones and commanded to prophesy over the bones. When he does, bone comes to bone; flesh, sinews and skin come upon them; and, finally, God's spirit enters them and gives them life. As verses 11–14 specify, the bones are the whole house of Israel, whom God promises to bring back to the land of Israel. In light of the exile, the scattered bones thus represent Israel's 'death' in being exiled. God's reconstitution of the bones marks a promise to revive Israel by bringing the people out of exile.⁶ Israel's exile is likened to a shameful death, the bones left scattered and unburied.⁷ Ezekiel's vision promises that God can reconstitute the people and vindicate God's name in the face of the death of exile.

In addition to this vivid focus on exile, the text's central elements of bones, death, and breath bring us to theological anthropology. It is, as Christopher Seitz puts it, 'as though we are being treated to a short course on human anatomy' in Ezekiel's prophetic address.⁸ Note that it is God's address, God's *spoken word*, that constitutes the bones as living persons. The dry bones have no capacity in themselves to hear or respond to Ezekiel's prophesying or God's call. However, God's call reaches them, as Jenson writes, '[e]ven in the nonbeing of death'.⁹ The reconstituting of the bones, Jenson continues, echoes the creation of the human person in Genesis 2:7, as the body is first drawn together (Ezek 37:7–8) before being given the breath of life (vv. 9–10). Just as God created the human person from the dust of the earth, so too does God recreate persons by addressing the valley's scattered mass of dry bones. It is God's address that gives life, that gives personhood to the dead and dry bones of the valley.

³See Stanley Hauerwas, 'Are Human Rights Founded in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures?', ABC Religion and Ethics, 30 January 2012, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/are-human-rights-founded-in-hebrew-and-christian-scriptures/10100830>.

⁴Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 342–61. See also Luke Zerra, 'Reformed Aesthetics and Disability Ethics: The Potential Contribution of Nicholas Wolterstorff', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34/1 (February 2021), pp. 76–87.

⁵In defining disability I am convinced by Elizabeth Barnes' defence of disability as 'mere difference' rather than 'bad difference'. Disability is a value-neutral category stating that one has a minority body, not a defective body. This is not to say that the disabled do not suffer because of their disability. Disabled bodies, like any other body, will sustain 'local bads', but this does not mean that the person counts their life as a 'global bad'. See Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2016), pp. 54–77.

⁶Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, trans. Cosslett Quin (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1970), pp. 509–10.

⁷John T. Strong, 'Egypt's Shameful Death and the House of Israel's Exodus from Sheol (Ezekiel 32.17–32 and 37.1–14)', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34/4 (June 2010), pp. 475–504.

⁸Christopher R. Seitz, 'Ezekiel 37:1–14', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 46/1 (January 1992), p. 53.

⁹Robert W. Jenson, *Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), pp. 281–2.

That the dry bones are enlivened by God's address reflects the fact that they are available to God. This focus on availability will be central to my consideration of disability below. From another perspective, however, there is merit in stressing that the bones represent total unavailability. Not only are the persons from whence they came dead, but the bones seem to be scattered, a point implied by the assertion that they 'come together' (v. 7). Jenson notes here that not only are the bones dead, but they cannot even be picked out as particular persons.¹⁰ Their scattered nature is a further disintegration of any semblance of personhood. Ezekiel's answer 'O Lord God, you know' to the question 'can these bones live?' (v. 3) reveals the utter unavailability of these bones. There is death, but there is also the further disintegration of being scattered. Ezekiel knows these bones are beyond life, that they are beyond address and availability. Yet Ezekiel also knows that they are available to God's power, address and word. Hence the prophet's demurral, 'O Lord God, *you* know' (v. 3). As the reconstitution and animation of the bones shows, these bones are available to God. God can address them, and in God's address they are reshaped as bodies and as persons.

Availability in Jenson's anthropology

Although the bones are 'unavailable' in the sense of having no intrinsic appearance of life or worth, my reading of Ezekiel 37:1–14 nevertheless centers on the availability of the dry bones to God's address. It is God's word that gives the bones being and personhood. The concept of availability needs to be developed. Central to Jenson's understanding of a body is that it is available. He develops this to explain certain features of christology and sacramental theology. A classic debate between Lutheran and Reformed theologies concerns the location of Christ's resurrected body. The Reformed claim that Christ's body has ascended to the right hand of the Father and is thus not locally present in the eucharistic elements. Bodies do not extend like this; they must be in one place rather than two. The Lutherans, on the other hand, claim that Christ's divine nature means his body can be present in heaven and on the altar of the Eucharist at the same time. A debate about sacramentology turns out to be a debate about how we ought to conceive of the human body, its features and its limits.

Jenson notes that these debates become more complicated after the advent of Copernicus' cosmology, which made the idea of 'heaven' as a space above the spheres unintelligible. No longer could Jesus's body be seen as located in a specific place above the sky, from which it is united to the eucharistic elements or its communicants. Jenson turns to Johannes Brenz and other sixteenth-century Swabian theologians, for whom 'there is no mystery about Christ's bodily presence on the altars beyond the great mystery of the Incarnation itself. Christ does not need to get from heaven to the earthly churches, by travel or by supernatural exception to the otherwise determining situation of his body.'¹¹ Christ is one person, meaning that if the Son in his deity is present on the altar, then so too is Jesus' humanity.

Key here is that God 'is *in* no place but *is* his own place'.¹² Christ's body does not need to travel or be supernaturally extended from heaven. Heaven simply is God's place in the world. The answer to the question of where Christ's body spatially exists

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* [hereafter *ST*], 2 vols (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1997–9), vol. 1, p. 203.

¹²Ibid.

simply is that his body is in the Eucharist's loaf and cup and the church assembled around them. Jenson notes this is the only body of Christ to which Paul ever actually refers.¹³ There is no body up above that is separate from Eucharist and church which must 'get to' the eucharistic altar. Rather, as scripture promises, Christ's body just is available in bread, cup and church.¹⁴ This discussion of the Eucharist and heaven is important for Jenson because it shows that *availability* is key to understanding the body. 'In Paul's language', Jenson notes, 'someone's "body" is simply him or herself insofar as this person is *available* to other persons and to him or herself, insofar as the person is an *object* for other persons and him or herself.'¹⁵ To say that Christ is bodily present in the elements or that the church is Christ's body is just to say that Christ is available there, that we can locate Christ in these places as an object to us.

This focus on bodily availability continues in Jenson's formal treatment of theological anthropology. There Jenson notes that human uniqueness resides in the fact that humans are addressable by God and in turn are enabled to respond to God's word.¹⁶ As Jenson rhetorically asks: 'Who then are Adam and Eve? They were the first hominid group that in whatever form of religion or language used some expression that we might translate "God" as a vocative.'¹⁷ Response to God cannot be anything other than embodied since 'the body ... is the person insofar as he or she is available to others. It is by its "visible" aspects that our converse makes us available to one another. We may even say that my body simply is the ensemble visibility of my self-presentation to others.'¹⁸ For Jenson, humans are addressable animals, and the body is how we are available to God and one another.

Let me more explicitly put Jenson's anthropology in conversation with disability theology. It would seem Jenson is *not* a friend to the concerns of disability given his stress on speech and address. To be a person is to be available, and to be available is to be addressable. Therefore, insofar as one is un-addressable one is not available and thus a defective person. This seems to package a certain component of reason into the definition of personhood. If this capacity for reason is absent then so too would be personhood, thereby excluding many with cognitive disabilities. If my reading of Ezekiel 37 is right, then this worry ought not to haunt us, since God addresses flesh even in the non-being of death, even in the absence of particularity.

Jenson follows Ezekiel's lead in wanting to avoid conceptions of personhood that are capacity- or reason-based. He notes that attempts to locate the *imago Dei* in features such as intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, will, virtue or judgment finally come up unsatisfactory.¹⁹ Rather, he sees humanity as constituted through relationship with God. Humanity is addressed by God and as such uniquely bears the *imago Dei*. By focusing not on any feature of human personhood, but on the fact that humans are addressed by God, Jenson can centre human personhood in relation to God rather than in some aspect of the person. As Eugene Rogers highlights, for Jenson there is no ontological difference between us and our hominid progenitors which makes humanity more capable of fellowship with God, as this would bind God's

¹³Ibid., vol. 1, p. 204.

¹⁴See 1 Cor 10:16–17, 11:17–34; Eph 1:22–3; 5:23; Col 1:18, 24.

¹⁵Jenson, *ST*, vol. 1, p. 205.

¹⁶Jenson, *ST*, vol. 2, pp. 58–9.

¹⁷Ibid., vol. 2, p. 59.

¹⁸Ibid., vol. 2, p. 60.

¹⁹Ibid., vol. 2, p. 55.

love.²⁰ Rather, this fellowship comes by grace and divine initiative. This moves us away from a reason- or capacity-based account of human personhood, potentially securing an account of full personhood for the intellectually disabled.

Jenson also stresses the communal nature of personhood. Individuals are humans in communion, not by themselves. This is what Jenson's stress on the body's availability secures: to be available is to be an object to another subject. What this means for disability is that the disabled, just like those who are currently abled, are dependent on one another for their well-being and personhood. To be a person means that one has standing in a community and can either speak for themselves or be spoken for, on account of certain rights and privileges.²¹

While often discussing availability in terms of address and speech, Jenson also highlights the presence of bodies, of flesh, as constitutive of availability. For instance, that creation is material means creatures are 'available to one another as other than another' solely because of their materiality.²² So, too, he is keen to note that prayer cannot be reduced simply to verbal forms, reserving room for a wide range of bodily and non-verbal forms of prayer.²³ Note what is going on here: Jenson is saying that the person is available by virtue of their body, by their flesh, both to each other and God. Personhood is not secured by any capacity within the individual, but by relation to God. God addresses humanity as fitting in itself to bear God's image and gives us flesh through which we are available to God and another. This is precisely what is articulated in Ezekiel's vision, as discussed above.

Jenson's anthropology, by focusing on the presence and availability of bodily flesh, can affirm the personhood of the disabled as full – not defective – persons. Bodies, both minority bodies and so-called 'normal' bodies, are available to one another by and to God through God's creative artistry in giving us flesh and addressing this flesh as God's image. To the question, 'Can these bodies be persons?' the only answer is Ezekiel's, 'O Lord, you know.' This answer points to the promise of God's address of flesh, of all body's availability to God, as what makes a person a person. Ezekiel 37 – read in light of that text's great commentator Jenson – thus presents a theological anthropology centred on availability to God. This is a theological anthropology that can affirm the personhood of persons with disabilities since it is not focused on capacities.

One may be puzzled by this understanding of personhood. If it is the flesh by which we are available, then what is to stop us from thinking a corpse is a person. If Jenson can say that an unresponsive individual with a severe cognitive disability is a person because of the flesh through which they are available to God, then seemingly he would have to say a similarly unresponsive corpse would be a person given that it too has flesh. This, of course, goes against our normal ways of speaking. We do not, in most circumstances, count corpses as persons.

In answering this worry, it is key to remember that it is not simply *flesh* that makes one a person on Jenson's account, but God's *address* of this flesh. To see the source of

²⁰Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., 'The Blood of Christ and the Christology of All Things: Or, Why Things Became Human', in Stephen John Wright and Chris E.W. Green (eds), *The Promise of Robert W. Jenson's Theology: Constructive Engagements* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), p. 160; Jenson, *ST*, vol. 2, p. 59.

²¹See Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 159–217.

²²Jenson, *ST*, vol. 2, p. 49.

²³Jenson, *ST*, vol. 2, pp. 59–60.

personhood in the flesh itself would be to return to capacity talk, seeing personhood as intrinsic to the flesh rather than in flesh's relationship to God. Jenson demonstrates this well in his commentary on Ezekiel 37's famous question, 'Can these bones live?' There Jenson says that the bones of the decayed corpses in the valley are truly dead, lacking personal identity or even the possibility of being picked out as the remains of particular individuals.²⁴ These 'things that are not' are restored to unity, life and identity through God's address through Ezekiel.²⁵ This address is heard *by* the bones even in the non-being of death.²⁶ The priority of God's action makes one a person, and all things are available to this address. Corpses here are not persons but are nonetheless capable of being – if addressed by God. Of course, such an address has a name: resurrection.

In this essay, I have sketched the advantage of approaching biblical interpretation from a theological framework to moral theologians. Reading scripture theologically can shed new light on moral issues. I have shown this concerning the personhood of humans with disabilities. Ezekiel 37:1–14, read through Jenson's exegesis and theology, offers a theological anthropology in which human personhood is given by God's address. To be a person is to be available to God's address. Such an understanding does not rely on capacities inherent to the person, but extrinsically in God's word and freedom to be available to human flesh.²⁷

²⁴Jenson, *Ezekiel*, pp. 281–2.

²⁵Ibid., p. 282.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷I would like to thank Nicola Whyte and Andrew Peterson for the invitation to present the earliest draft of this paper at the 2018 Princeton Seminary Graduate Student Conference, my co-panellists Kevin Vollrath and Andrew Kimmitt for helpful conversation, and Miguel Romero for his role as respondent. I am particularly grateful to Eugene Rogers for his enthusiasm for this project and encouragement to seek publication of this essay and Morgan Bell for similar encouragement. Gratitude is also due to Ephraim Radner, who offered feedback on this essay as part of Wycliffe College's 2021 Scripture and Theology Essay Competition. Finally, thank you to the anonymous reviewers for the *Scottish Journal of Theology* for the time and care with which they read this paper.