



DISABILITY, PAIN AND MEDICINE IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

HOLMAN (S.R.), DE WET (C.L.), ZECHER (J.L.) (edd.) *Disability, Medicine, and Healing Discourse in Early Christianity. New Conversations for Health Humanities*. Pp. viii + 186. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. Cased, £130, US\$170. ISBN: 978-0-367-52100-4.

RHEE (H.) *Illness, Pain, and Health Care in Early Christianity*. Pp. xvi + 351. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2022. Cased, US\$49.99. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7684-3.

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These interconnected books use health humanities and medical anthropology to examine critically various socio-cultural and religious aspects of illness, disability, pain and healthcare in the early Christian world. The first by Holman, de Wet and Zecher is an edited volume. The second is a scholarly monograph by Rhee, who also contributes to the first book.

The edited volume is arranged thematically into three sections: ‘Marking Bodies, Making Communities’, ‘Defining Patients, Delimiting Communities’ and ‘Performing Health, Preserving Communities’. Noteworthy is the community focused approach, especially with reference to both how an individual’s health status allowed them to relate (or not) to their community, particularly as tied to religion, and also how this status was linked to ancient medical discourse pertaining to health and wellbeing. Almost all authors utilise modern medical and theoretical approaches to health and apply them to the ancient world. This approach thereby makes readers question the assumption of modern medicine as tied to progress or development. In addition, it showcases different theoretical approaches of connecting the modern with the ancient past. The volume contains more creative approaches to health, disability and community building as viewed through Rhee’s discourse around pain as a source of community building in early Christianity. This is also seen in Holman’s discourse on water access as a public health concern in the ancient world. Holman notes that access to this resource in a closed early Christian community could either dissolve community ties through lack of it or strengthen them through increased access. Similarly, Rhee examines the nature of how a shared sense of suffering as seen through illness and disability could build community.

Other chapters examine such varied topics further, linking health and modern approaches to society with ancient community, including A. Booth’s discussion of gentiles and ancient hazing culture. De Wet discusses otherness, medical discourse and identity formation in early Christianity partially through the social body. Zecher critically examines the physician Alexander of Tralles’ approach to ancient medicine, especially his focus on natural and ‘magical’ remedies seen in pagan medicine as supplementing and even in some cases surpassing that of the Christian medical knowledge of his time. P. Dilley explores the complexities of mental health in a late antique monastic context through women as depicted in hagiography. E. Groff discusses sterility and infertility as a medical and social condition in ancient Byzantine medical discourses of the sixth century CE. B. Llewellyn Ihssen provides a final chapter tying together discourses surrounding modern healthcare and late Christian antiquity by further dialoguing with the chapters authored by de Wet, Holman and Rhee.

Most interesting for this critical ancient disability studies scholar, however, was A.R. Solevåg's chapter on disability as a source of positive medical metaphor in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch. This chapter is representative of a recent shift in the critical ancient disability studies field towards questioning the overly negative assumptions surrounding disability in the ancient world that have traditionally been seen in modern scholarship. It follows I.T. Soon's (2023) approach of reinterpreting historical narratives to illuminate better the lives of disabled ancient authors, as he did with the apostle Paul. Solevåg critically examines the use of disability as a metaphor designed to bring people closer to Christ and thereby strengthen their beliefs in Christianity. This is seen in urgings for followers "'to be deaf'... [in Ignatius'] fight against heresy' (p. 24) and that, while 'a healthy, and able body is an ideal for the metaphorical blend of Christ as physician, it is not ideal for the body of the believer, who should be deaf and mute; nor for the body of Ignatius, who is described as a miscarriage, and whose body is willingly given up for destruction in martyrdom' (p. 24). However, this engagement with disability studies is applied unevenly in the rest of the book, and most worryingly the book's introduction makes clear that this particular subfield is significantly behind other ancient disciplines in engaging with disability studies, 'One of the most important contributions to this research is its call for a new paradigm for understanding disability, medicine and healthcare, both in antiquity and today. This new paradigm would be one based on the complex, culturally embedded nature of illness and health rather than one reduced to the biomedical model alone' (p. 1). This approach has existed in disability studies since at least the 1970s and is known as the social model of disability. More engagement with disability studies could further open up new avenues of research.

Rhee's book is arranged helpfully into different chapters that cover both Graeco-Roman and early Christian approaches to topics such as health, disease and illness, and healthcare in the ancient world. She utilises the modern field of medical anthropology, most notably that of medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman, to gain critical insight into the ancient past. This chapter-by-chapter approach allows for specialists of different areas to focus on their own areas of interest if they so choose. The first chapter lays the foundation through an examination of major texts for Graeco-Roman literature's approaches to disease, health, disability and illness that influenced Christian and therefore later Renaissance thought. Chapter 2 examines these same themes in Christian literature from the fourth century CE as well as the New Testament and the major religious texts of the Hebrew Bible. Rhee demonstrates that, while borrowing from Graeco-Roman thought, these religious scholars and medical professionals constructed their own world views and narratives around illness. Rhee, however, abandons this separate chapter approach for a combined third chapter that covers pain in both the Graeco-Roman world and early Christianity. She demonstrates that once again Christians adopted Roman thoughts around pain and pain narratives, but then made it their own ideologically through deep personal individual identifications with Christ as a suffering saviour. Chapters 4 and 5 revert back to separate examinations of Graeco-Roman and Christian approaches to healthcare. Chapter 4 provides the larger Graeco-Roman context through examination of differing magico-religious and philosophically influenced healing practices as seen in healing temples, amulet medicine, Graeco-Roman philosophy's varying views on the soul, and hospital care. Chapter 5 examines all of this in a Christian context, where the author once again demonstrates that Christians directly adapted Graeco-Roman healthcare practices while simultaneously making them fit within their new theologies. The volume ends with a tightly written conclusion summarising the rest of the book. Rhee's work, especially Chapter 3, therefore serves as an expanded and more detailed form of her chapter in the edited volume.

Some scholars, particularly those coming from different areas of ancient world studies or disability studies will have difficulty with the implicit background knowledge assumed by the authors of their readers. Most, if not all authors, are members of the Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in Late Antiquity working group ReMeDHe, which has produced work that has pushed the field in new and exciting directions. Both books, though, seem to be written for the specialist within this subfield rather than the generalist reader, or even readers from other ancient world studies disciplines, as texts, theories and presumed background knowledge are so densely interwoven at times that the books become hard to follow. Also missing in some instances from both books are discussions of or identification of disabled historical religious figures such as Paul, even when referenced in relation to Ignatius. However, both books offer a good framework for bridging ancient and modern approaches to disability and health in the ancient world, and should become foundational if not seminal texts for this discipline within ancient world studies.

University of Lincoln / University of Nottingham ALEXANDRA F. MORRIS