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# Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen

BY AMOS YONG

**Societal fears of disability often warp how we read the Bible. But the Zacchaeus story challenges the normate assumption that disability is a problem needing to be fixed or eliminated. All human beings can be accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities.**

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Contemporary understandings of disability are not identical to those of the biblical authors. Nevertheless, some interpretations of the Bible, often based on the normate and ableist assumptions, experiences, and perspectives of non-disabled people, have shaped popular views of disability throughout history.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, many think that disabilities are ordained by God for God's purposes. But on the other hand, this is often accompanied by the feeling that people with disabilities are or ought to be pitiable and charitable objects of the care of others, and with the judgment that their condition is a sign of divine punishment for sin, or of the presence and activity of an evil spirit. By and large, then, disability has been viewed negatively, as a blot on an originally good creation.

Yet these views of disability can have negative effects. Images of Jesus and the apostles healing the sick, raising the lame, opening the eyes of the blind, and so on, fueled the historic quest for cures for disabling conditions, but they may lead people with disabilities to internalize the normate view and thereby wonder what is wrong with them that prevents their reception of God's healing power. The further assumption that disabilities will be erased in the end—rooted in a belief that the resurrection body will be free from earthly disabilities, which overlooks the fact that the New Testament describes the raised body of Jesus as including the marks of the crucifixion—provides added impetus both to prevent the onset of disability and to

cure or alleviate it if possible in the present life. It is no wonder that people with disabilities are often stigmatized and feel unwanted in public spaces. They remain in back rooms of homes around most of the world as even their families are ashamed by their existence. In technologically advanced societies, there have been initiatives to prevent people with disabilities from reproducing (motivated by the supposition that their children will perpetuate the parents' disability); in the worst case scenarios, eugenic projects have both attempted to select against disability and committed genocide against people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> Is it any wonder that many people with disabilities do not feel welcome in the Church? Church leaders may claim that there are few people with disabilities in their congregations because there aren't many in the wider community. But up to twenty percent of Americans have disabilities of some sort and most believe that Christians think negatively about them rather than desire to include them in the Church.

In this essay I would like to highlight how our societal fears regarding disability can be seen in the way we read the Bible. Normate assumptions, which lead to the notion that disability is a problem needing to be fixed or eliminated, generate a hermeneutical approach that minimizes what the Bible features about disability.

In a recent book Jeremy Schipper has shown how the normate perspective ignores or even goes so far as to eliminate disability in the biblical message through his treatment of Isaiah 52:13-53:12's reception history (the passage widely known as describing the "suffering servant").<sup>3</sup> Schipper shows not only that the biblical text and context clearly denote that the servant suffered and perhaps even died from a skin anomaly, but also that it was precisely because of this skin condition that the servant was socially ostracized, marginalized, and, in this most fundamental sense, experienced suffering. Yet the interpretation of this passage over the centuries has by and large failed to recognize this, suggesting instead that the servant was injured, in some cases perhaps to the point of death. More intriguingly, what has consistently emerged is a view of the servant as able-bodied, rather than afflicted or plagued. The disability imagery present in the Isaianic text has been lost either in translation or in interpretation. Instead, what has been invented is an able-bodied suffering servant. The irony here is that people with disabilities have long felt the pressure to pass as able-bodied persons, and in this case, the impaired servant has been recreated in the able-bodied image of normate interpreters.

Schipper's study invites reconsideration of other scriptural narratives to see if similar interpretive bias can be identified. Although not a biblical scholar myself, I have spent a significant amount of time on the study of Luke-Acts. A Lukan story that many Christian readers are familiar with is that of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), a rich chief tax-collector who is described as being "short in stature" (19:3). The Sunday school version has been told with a song:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,  
and a wee little man was he.  
He climbed up in a sycamore tree  
for the Lord he wanted to see....

A canonical reading of the Zacchaeus story could begin by connecting his short-staturedness to the dwarfism that is identified among a list of disabilities disqualifying priests from offering the sacrificial food or approaching the altar of the Holy of Holies in ancient Israel (Leviticus 21:16-24). Yet interpreters rarely attend to Zacchaeus's shortness, to the point of thinking that "short in stature" refers to no more than his youthfulness. Even when acknowledged, its import is subordinated to the assertion that in the story Zacchaeus seems "exceedingly large in spirit"; in this way his littleness of stature is spiritualized, understood for instance with reference to his humility.<sup>4</sup> Some commentators – even major ones like John Calvin and John Wesley – simply say nothing about Zacchaeus's lack of height. Instead, a great deal of attention is put on debating whether what he says about giving half his possession to the poor or repaying fourfold those he has defrauded (Luke 19:8) amounts to a set of resolutions following his conversion to Jesus or are statements vindicating his practices to local Judeans who would have despised a person in his official governmental position.

Beyond this, the major messages highlighted by scholars, commentators, and preachers appear to be communicable quite independently of Zacchaeus's shortness. His generosity has

been understood as enacting the Year of Jubilee economic vision running throughout the Lukan corpus. Jesus' pronouncement of his salvation as a son of Abraham (Luke 19:9) has been viewed both as contributing to the major theme of Israel's renewal and as an indictment of the crowd's beliefs that certain people, such as stigmatized

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tax collectors, were excluded from this restoration. Most generally, the conclusion of the pericope has been that "the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (19:10). Yet, none of these readings are dependent on or even remotely connected to Zacchaeus being a person of little stature, and thus it is warranted to conclude that interpreters think Luke's physical description is a minor, even negligible, part of the story. In effect, then, Zacchaeus's shortness has been overlooked, if not rendered invisible, by normative readers.

But does this dismissal of Zacchaeus's shortness inhabit the spirit of what

Luke is attempting to communicate or reflect instead an ableist bias that literally handicaps readers from engaging the full meaning of the text? I suggest that while it is quite normal for normative interpreters to make little of Zacchaeus's littleness, this dismissal fails to recognize an essential aspect of his humanity and impoverishes our understanding of what is going in this story and in Luke's overall message. Mikeal Parsons's analysis of ancient physiognomic assumptions regarding outward bodily traits expressing inward characteristics suggests that physical descriptions are not throw-away lines in the biblical account.<sup>5</sup> Rather, similar to how contemporary readings have been inspired by the reference to Zacchaeus's littleness to observe the largeness of his heart, so also did Luke deploy the physiognomic conventions of his day only to subvert them in light of the gospel of Christ.

Of the four Lukan characters explored in depth by Parsons – the bent over woman (Luke 13:10-17), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the man lame from birth at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3-4), and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) – our focus will be on the smallest one. Though grammatically the *hēlikia mikros* (being short of stature) in Luke 19:3 does not necessarily refer to dwarfism, and the Greeks had other more technical terms for this condition (*pygmē* and *nanos* or *nanosues*), Parsons documents that *mikros* was “also used for pathological dwarfism in texts from the fourth century BCE to the ninth century CE.”<sup>6</sup> He also shows that the contemporary “science” of physiognomy would have read Luke's physical description of Zacchaeus not only as a window into the smallness of his character or of his lowly self-esteem, but also in a derogatory sense as indicative of small-mindedness and greed.

Yet this is only what is most obvious. The assumption of Zacchaeus's pathological dwarfism more provocatively enables Luke to undermine the accepted physiognomic beliefs. The fact that Zacchaeus is later designated a sinner (19:7) would have provided further confirmation for his pathological dwarfism since congenital physical diminutiveness would have been assumed to be the result of sin. The image of Zacchaeus running ahead of the crowd and climbing a sycamore tree (19:4) would have provoked the derision of the crowd. Both those watching Zacchaeus and Luke's readers would have been fascinated by the awkward movements of a pathological dwarf with his less symmetrically proportioned body. My point is this: even if the technical grammatical construct in this passage suggests only that Zacchaeus is relatively short rather than that he is a dwarf (someone under 4'10" by today's measurements), there is nothing to prohibit viewing Zacchaeus as a dwarf and the Lukan strategy of subverting contemporary physiognomic conventions is much more effective precisely if that were the case.

I am not aware of any published readings of the Zacchaeus story by little people, but what if we were to deploy a *littlist* or *shortist* perspective in reapproaching this text?<sup>7</sup> Let me hazard three possible lines of reflection. First, although little people do not agree about whether or not they are part of the wider disability community, there is no doubt that pathological dwarf-

ism across a very broad spectrum brings with it a wide range of physical disabilities and intellectual deficiencies. Beyond this, of course, is the social stigma and public ridicule elicited by their very visible condition resulting in unfair caricatures, discriminatory attitudes, and economic employability (and its concomitant poverty). Little people despair in this hostile climate, to the point that many live in self-denial or even avoid interacting with other little people since they do not want to be reminded of their condition.<sup>8</sup> What transpires, regardless of how physically capable little people might be, is the reality of a “social disability”: they must deal daily with stereotypes of little people as bitter, disagreeable, and vengeful, and with accounts that rarely portray them “as thinking, feeling individuals who were at the center of their own lives, but rather... as adjuncts to the lives of others.”<sup>9</sup> Against this background, however, Zacchaeus emerges not as a passive recipient of pity but as an agent in his own right. It is not so much that he was fully employed – after all, collecting taxes for the Romans was a despicable task that allowed few in the position to live at peace within their community – but that he was capable of and actively sought out Jesus, despite having to contend with the crowds. Further, his desire to see Jesus led him to expose himself to ridicule because “it was considered undignified for a grown man to run, and a man of his importance would certainly not climb a tree.”<sup>10</sup> Yet he persisted and even got the opportunity to host the Son of Man in his own home. In these ways, Zacchaeus becomes a model for what little people can hope to accomplish.

Beyond this, however, little people would resonate with Parsons’s reading of Luke as intending to subvert the physiognomic assumptions of his day. With Jesus’ pronouncement, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9), the (Levitical) prohibition against dwarfs from full participation in the liturgical cult of ancient Israel was lifted. Little people are not only agents in their own right, but also in God’s eyes, regardless of the limitations imposed on them by society or of the lowered expectations that they have to contend with.<sup>11</sup>

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Thirdly, little people would also help us to notice that the structure of this passage results in the salvation or healing of both Zacchaeus and the people in ironic and counter-intuitive senses. On the one hand, normate assumptions would have expected Jesus to heal the sick, impaired, and disabled. Jesus does no such thing in this case, although he definitively acknowledges the presence of full health in the sense of salvation for Zacchaeus. On the other hand, the

prejudices of the people are confronted, and Jesus' acceptance of Zacchaeus just as he is undermines their expectations that those who are impaired and disabled need to be "fixed" or cured in order to participate fully in the renewal and restoration of Israel. Zacchaeus becomes a disciple of the Messiah without having to go through the process of literally being stretched from his diminutive condition. Similarly, little people today need not undergo the various surgical procedures touted to increase the length of their limbs or their overall height in order to fit in with the aesthetic sensibilities of normate culture.

I do not present the preceding as representative of little people's understanding of the Zacchaeus story. Instead, I provide it as a counter to normate readings of Luke 19 that all too often minimize, eradicate, or even render invisible – as impossible as that seems! – Zacchaeus's littleness. It is not that disability and its various features are absent from the Bible; it is rather that normate interpretations are insensitive to their presence and thus overlook them as supplementary to the message that is, for them, obviously meant for normal people (like them). Of course most normate readers are not conscious of the marginalization of disability in their interactions with Scripture. The ableist bias is insensitive to the world of disability and their normative assumption is that the world as it ought to be will not feature any signs or marks of impairment, even those related to littleness. It thus never occurs to them that what they are rendering invisible is actually essential to the message of the gospel that comes to specific human beings. The result is not only an overlooking of important features of a text expressive of the salvific message of the gospel, but the perpetuation of an oppressive social imagination that has negative repercussions for people with disabilities.

My claim, however, is that the Bible really is good news for all people, including those with disabilities and those who are temporarily able-bodied.<sup>12</sup> It is just that normate prejudices have created a chasm between people of varying abilities – separating "normals" like "us" from "them" – so that we are not able to stand in solidarity as human beings created in the image of God. Without such solidarity, normate folk are incapable of understanding the world from the perspective of their friends and therefore think that they need to do what they can to save, heal, or otherwise fix those who have disabilities. Perhaps what the Zacchaeus story teaches us is that human beings are equals both in their sinfulness and need for repentance, and in their being accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1 "Normate" in the field of disability studies refers to the assumptions about disabilities held by those without disabilities; "ableism," parallel to *sexism* or *ageism*, thus represents the discriminatory perspectives and practices imposed, sometimes unconsciously so, by non-disabled people, structures, and policies, on those with disabilities. For further discussion, see my *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 10-12.

2 The latter was enacted in Nazi Germany, but the Anglo-American world has also been tainted by eugenic assumptions, policies, and practices, especially now that we have the technology to identify disabilities *in utero* and up to 90% of parents (by some estimates) are opting for abortion in these cases. See also Marta Russell, *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998), chapter 2.

3 Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant*, Biblical Reconfigurations (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4 St. Peter Chrysologus, Sermon 54, "On Zacchaeus the Tax Collector," in *Selected Sermons*, volume 2, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, 109, translated by William B. Palardy (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 207. See also Cyril of Alexandria, Sermon 127, in *A Commentary upon the Gospel according to Saint Luke*, part II, translated by R. Payne Smith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1859), 587-590, for another spiritualized view of Zacchaeus's short-staturedness.

5 Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

6 Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 102.

7 While "dwarf" remains the correct medical term, the nomenclature of "little people" or "LP" is the prevalent self-description today; see, e.g., Betty M. Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarfs: Their Journey from Public Curiosity toward Social Liberation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), xvii. The following is inspired by what David E. Orton, "We Felt Like Grasshoppers: The Little Ones in Biblical Interpretation," *Biblical Interpretation* 11:3-4 (2003): 488-502, calls a *shortist* – which is parallel, for instance, to *feminist* – reading or hermeneutic of Scripture, focused particularly on the *mikroi* or little ones who are repeatedly mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew.

8 Joan Ablon, *Little People in America: The Social Dimensions of Dwarfism* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 91-94.

9 Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarfs*, 372; for the reference to dwarfism as a "social disability," see Joan Ablon, *Living with Difference: Families with Dwarf Children* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 7.

10 Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, volume IX: *Luke, John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 357. To be sure, besides the ambivalence toward dwarfs in the ancient Greco-Roman world, there was also some degree of acceptance, at least in Egypt and Greece, as documented by Véronique Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1993).

11 On having to live according to the lowered expectations of others, see the moving autobiographical account of Matt Roloff with Tracy Sumner, *Against Tall Odds: Being a David in a Goliath World* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1999), especially chapter 12.

12 See my *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

13 Thanks to David Orton and Vince Le (my graduate assistant) for their encouraging comments on a previous version of this article. I of course am fully responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.



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