

CHAPTER 11

In Sickness and in Health: Ancient “Rituals of Truth” in the Greco-Roman World and 1 Peter

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The literature of the Jesus movement is filled with dramatic scenes of healing in which the sick are rescued from demonic forces (Jesus’ healing miracles in the Gospels), aligning sickness and disability with evil. The violent death of Jesus became a rallying point for early Christians, elevating the weak body as a source of identity and power (the passion narrative in the Gospels, Pauline Christianity, 1 Peter). This chapter examines ancient attitudes toward illness and disability as a means of understanding the opposing attitudes represented in 1 Peter. The study of disability in the ancient world poses several problems for historians of religion. First, the New Testament sources themselves are not written as historical accounts of sickness and healing, but as narratives or treatises with a broader agenda: providing an account or explanation of the early Jesus movement. Second, even if the perspectives of the sick are available to us through historical criticism of the texts, there is no guarantee that they do not represent mere parroting of the dominant narratives of healing and wholeness.

The contention of this chapter is that an ancient discourse of “bodily functioning” provided the framework of thought surrounding illness and disability, in much the way that Western medicine’s discourse of “bodily functioning” has permeated contemporary thought. As a point of departure, this work will begin with Michel Foucault’s concept of “rituals of truth.” According to Foucault “rituals of truth” are constructed through specific discursive practices, thereby inscribing a particular understanding of reality.¹ Next, this chapter will look at two bodies of evidence in order to sketch the discursive

practice of illness in antiquity: (1) the observations of ancient physicians and (2) the testimonies of the “sick.” The best sources for reconstructing the ancient perspectives of the “well” are found in the Hippocratic corpus and the writings of Galen. The primary sources available for reconstructing the experiences of the “sick” are two catalogues of inscriptions from the Asklepieion at Epidaurus and the Asklepieion at Athens (ancient sites of healing dedicated to the god Asklepios), and photos from the Asklepieion at Pergamon and the Pergamon museum (which I have visited in modern day Bergama, Turkey). Finally, I will consider the manner in which 1 Peter’s attitudes toward illness/disability subvert these ancient “rituals of truth” surrounding sickness and healing. Throughout, this chapter will demonstrate that the discourse of “bodily functioning” was pervasive in antiquity, placing those who were not in a state of “bodily functioning” (in other words, those in a state of “bodily weakness”) at the margins of society.

The Work of Michel Foucault: Discursive Practices as “Rituals of Truth”

Michel Foucault’s methods are useful for the historian who is faced with otherwise inaccessible phenomena like sickness or health. The evidence materialized to identify someone as “healthy” is entirely dependent upon the authority structures and cultural assumptions used to interpret that evidence. Likewise, the evidence for confirming that someone is “sick” is equally dependent upon a set of standards and authority structures used by a culture to interpret the available evidence (e.g., in the modern era, reported or perceived symptoms, and blood work). Enter into this dilemma Michel Foucault, whose work demonstrates that while the historian may have access only to the discourses, or socially constructed languages, used to describe a phenomenon, she can still learn something about that society by reconstructing its discursive practices.

For Foucault, the discursive practices of a particular historical period, or “episteme,” are self-consistent and political.² For example when looking at the history of the modern penal system he identifies three different “technologies of power” at play in the late eighteenth century: “torture,” “punishment as sign,” and “punishment as technique.”³ He then isolates the late eighteenth century as a point in history when one discourse of power (monarchical power) and its corresponding “technology of power” (torture) was about to be abandoned for another discourse of power (the power of the administrative apparatus) and its corresponding “technology of power” (punishment as technique/the prison). By isolating these three different discursive practices at