

Jesus the Slaughtered Lamb: A Disability Hermeneutics of Revelation 5

by Tabita Kartika Christiani

Introduction

Nancy Eiesland, in her book entitled *The Disabled God*, interprets Jesus, the incarnated God, as the disabled God after his resurrection with pierced hands, feet, and side. The remembrance of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist is remembrance of the disabled God. Eiesland's interpretation of the disabled God ends with the risen Christ, who is celebrated by the church. Inspired by the creative work of Eiesland, I would like to continue the interpretation of resurrected Jesus as the disabled God, with Jesus as the Lamb of God who is slaughtered in the book of Revelation chapter 5. Before interpreting this passage from a disability perspective, I describe how this passage has been interpreted by New Testament scholars using socio-rhetorical, postcolonial, and political hermeneutics. The results of these methods of interpretation of Revelation 5 become a comparison to my own interpretation from disability perspective.

Jesus Christ the Disabled God in His Resurrection

Eiesland proposes what she calls a "contextualized Christology," namely, Jesus Christ, the disabled God.¹ It is 'contextualized' because it emerges in a particular situation,

when people with disabilities were struggling for worth and dignity. It is Christology, because "the Incarnation is the ultimate contextual revelation."² God became flesh in a particular time and place. Jesus the Incarnated God was known through his life, death, and resurrection. And the resurrection is the lens to understand the meaning of Jesus' life and works. Eiesland writes, "In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the *imago Dei*."³ Jesus bears the body reshaped by injustice and sin, yet he bears the fullness of the Godhead.⁴

The resurrected Jesus is in solidarity with people with disabilities at the margin of the current social-symbolic order. He invites frightened disciples, those who are without disabilities, to touch his physical impairment and to recognize their connection and equality. Disability, therefore, becomes "a new model of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity."⁵ This is a new way of looking at disability. Instead of it being a barrier, disability is a connection; instead of shortage, disability is wholeness.

The disabled body of Christ, together with his blood, is remembered in the Eucharist.

¹ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 98.

² Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 99.

³ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 99.

⁴ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 100.

⁵ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 101.

Through the body and blood of Christ, God liberates one's relationships with God, his/her own body, and others. The Eucharist reminds us that the disabled God is present in our midst. "At the table, we remember the physical reality of that body broken for a people broken."⁶ The Eucharist invites all people, with and without disabilities, to participate; thus the Eucharist calls for justice and inclusion.

Socio-Rhetorical Hermeneutics on Jesus the Slaughtered Lamb

Ben Witherington III develops socio-rhetorical hermeneutics on the book of Revelation.⁷ Socio-rhetorical hermeneutics has "more in common with various forms of literary and narrative criticism."⁸ Socio-rhetorical hermeneutics integrates narrative criticism and social-scientific criticism.⁹ "Narrative criticism or narratology is a branch of literary criticism that has as its object the study of the formal features of narrative texts."¹⁰ In narrative criticism, the text is seen as a way of communication between the writer and the reader. An important point of narrative criticism is the narrator's theological point of view. In social-scientific criticism, "the text is analyzed as a vehicle of communication whose genre, structure, content, themes and aims are shaped by the cultural and social dynamics of the social system and the specific historical setting in which the text was produced and to which it constituted a specific response."¹¹ In other words, the social-scientific

criticism focuses on the sociology of narrative worlds. "The socio-rhetorical interpretation of biblical texts can therefore be seen as a combination of a literary critical reading (narratological) and a social-scientific reading of the text, concentrating on the text's situation and strategy, as well as on the intended communication of the text as social force and social product."¹²

Using socio-rhetorical hermeneutics, Witherington III shows the rhetorical problem that is answered in the book of Revelation: "To whom does the earth belong? Who is the ruler of this world?"¹³ To deal with this rhetorical problem, the center of the book of Revelation is therefore the throne. Revelation 4 and 5 describe the throne of God and of the Lamb. The scenes of the throne are similar to that of Ancient Near East, or Roman Empire, or any imperial cult in Asia. But, "the scenes in Rev. 4-5 then become John's rhetorical means of offering an alternative vision of who is really in charge of the world in which John's audience lives."¹⁴ Quoting Talbert, Witherington III compares Rev. 4 and Rev. 5:¹⁵

Rev. 4 (about God)	Rev. 5 (about the Lamb)
God's glory (4:2b-8a)	The Lamb's glory (5:5-7)
Worship of God (8b-11)	Worship of the Lamb (8-12)
First hymn (8b)	First hymn (9-10)
Narrative (9-10)	Narrative (11-12a)
Second hymn (11)	Second hymn (12b)

⁶ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 114.

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Revelation: The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸ Witherington III, *Revelation*, 53.

⁹ Ernest van Eck, "Socio-rhetorical interpretation: Theoretical points of departure," *HTS Journal* 57, no. 1&2 (2001): 593.

¹⁰ van Eck, "Socio-rhetorical interpretation": 597.

¹¹ van Eck, "Socio-rhetorical interpretation": 596.

¹² van Eck, "Socio-rhetorical interpretation": 608.

¹³ Witherington III, *Revelation*, 113.

¹⁴ Witherington III, *Revelation*, 113-114.

¹⁵ Witherington III, *Revelation*, 114.

This comparison shows how the Lamb is exalted as high as God, yet the two are different. God is not the Lamb, the Lamb is not God. Christ the Lamb is praised for his atoning sacrifice for the salvation of humankind.

The elders (symbolizing human beings, either saints or the elect people of God) announce the appearance of the Lamb as the only one who is worthy to open the seven seals of the scroll and look inside. One of the elders says it is the Lion of the tribe of Judah who is also called the Root of David. But when John looks, he sees not a lion but a lamb, the slaughtered Lamb of God. Lion and lamb symbolize judgment and redemption, justice and mercy, punitive action and sacrifice. The word for "lamb" in Greek is *arnion*, the one which is offered in the Passover sacrifice.¹⁶ The lamb is chosen and slain. Yet the lamb, which is vulnerable and slain, is strong like a ram, which has horns. Above all, in the scene, the Lamb is Divine. The Lamb is worthy because he was slain and bought for God by his blood (verse 9b).

Postcolonial Hermeneutics on Jesus the Slaughtered Lamb

Stephen Moore interprets Revelation 5 using postcolonial hermeneutics.¹⁷ Postcolonial hermeneutics tries to answer the question: how to interpret the text in a postcolonial context. In New Testament studies, postcolonial hermeneutics often deals with relations between early Christianity and the Roman Empire as the original historical and socio-cultural contexts. Postcolonial hermeneutics looks for the colonial intentions (political, cultural or economic) that informed and

influenced the writer's context. It supports a reconstructive reading, which helps the present reader to see the liberation struggles of the past and the present (therefore, it concerns hybridity, new identities, fragmentation and deterritorialization). It is critical to the colonial interpretation, so it helps to establish a reconstructed identity from the colonial context.¹⁸ Kwok Pui-lan in her introduction of postcolonial hermeneutics contends that the Bible is about "a cultural product, the formation of canon, and the politics of biblical interpretation."¹⁹ The Bible is a cultural product in time and space, and not a frozen artefact, whose meaning can only be activated by the experts in the metropolitan centers, under the rubric of objectivity and scientific inquiry.

The book of Revelation appears to be an anti-imperialistic text that "announces the transfer of worldwide *imperium* from the Roman Emperor to the heavenly Emperor and his Son and co-regent, the King of kings and Lord of lords. The empire [*basileia*] of the world has become the empire of our Lord and of his Messiah."²⁰ The question, then, is whether Revelation merely reinscribes or effectively resists Roman imperial ideology? The use of the word *basileia* itself is a form of resistance. At that time, this term usually referred to Roman Empire alone. But the book of Revelation shows there is another empire, which is truly Divine, the empire of God.

Moore interprets Revelation 4-5 as part of the mimicry done by the heavenly empire toward the Roman Empire:²¹

- The acclamation "Worthy art thou" to God/Lamb was also used in Roman imperial

¹⁶ Witherington III, *Revelation*, 120-121.

¹⁷ Stephen D. Moore, "The Revelation to John," in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 436-454.

¹⁸ Lazare S. Rukundwa, "Postcolonial theory as a hermeneutical tool for Biblical reading," *HTS Journal* 64, no. 1 (2008): 339.

¹⁹ Kwok Pui-Lan, "Response to the *Semeia* volume on postcolonial criticism," *Semeia* 75 (1996): 212-213.

²⁰ Moore, "The Revelation to John," 437.

²¹ Moore, "The Revelation to John," 442-443.

court ceremonial proceedings to greet the Emperor

- The title “our Lord and God” in the heavenly court was also applied to Emperor Domitian
- The 24 elders around the throne correspond to 24 lictors who accompanied Emperor Domitian
- The elders’ gesture of casting their crowns or wreaths before the throne corresponds with obeisance offered to the Roman Empire
- The appearance of Jesus as a Lamb standing in the presence of the Divine Emperor can be related to the Roman Emperor officiating at a sacrifice.

These examples show that the book of Revelation, especially chapter 4-5, does not seem strong enough to resist the power of Roman Empire. Rather, the Divine Empire is absorbed into the Roman Empire’s images. Moore describes this in the title he gives for Revelation 4-5: God as Caesar. However, in postcolonial thinking, this mimicry is like a parody, and parody is a form of catachresis (misuse, misinterpretation), to resist the power of empire.

Political Hermeneutics on Jesus the Slaughtered Lamb

J. Nelson Kraybill interprets the book of Revelation using political hermeneutics, which shows that “Revelation highlights the way worship, with its reliance on symbol, expresses and shapes allegiance.”²² These images are not predictions about what will happen thousands of years later at the end of time, but “first of all speak to realities of the author’s era.”²³ The central political reality in the author’s day was

the Roman Empire with its Divine emperors, who urged people to worship them—or be killed.

Through the lens of political hermeneutics, Kraybill contends that the Greek word for “slaughtered” is closer to murder than to sacrifice.²⁴ The same word is used in Rev. 6:9 to describe saints in heaven who had been slaughtered for the word of God, and in Rev. 18:24 to describe all kinds of people who have been slaughtered on earth by Babylon/Rome. He concludes, “The Lamb that is worthy to reveal God’s future for the world is himself a victim of violence.”²⁵ Jesus confronted the powers of evil, died at Roman hands, yet triumphed over them through resurrection. Emperors, “who presumed to control history, are now upstaged by the Lamb.”²⁶

A Disability Hermeneutics on Jesus the Slaughtered Lamb

I conclude that socio-rhetorical hermeneutics emphasizes that Jesus the slaughtered Lamb is really in charge of the world. There are paradoxes in him: vulnerable and slain, yet strong, divine, and worthy. He is slaughtered as atoning sacrifice for the salvation of the world. Postcolonial hermeneutics emphasizes that Jesus the slaughtered Lamb is related to the parody of sacrifice in front of the Emperor. However, the sacrifice of Jesus is not for the sake of God, but for the sake of human beings who are oppressed by the dominant powers. Political hermeneutics emphasizes Jesus’ death because of the violence done by the dominant power, yet triumphing over them through resurrection. All of these hermeneutics do not look at Jesus the slaughtered Lamb as the disabled God.

²² J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 115.

²³ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 115.

²⁴ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 98.

²⁵ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 98.

²⁶ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 101.

Now I turn to disability hermeneutics, which has been developed since the work of Eiesland. Disability hermeneutics starts from sensitivity and solidarity with persons with disabilities. Eiesland already shows that Jesus is the disabled God in his resurrection. And the book of Revelation shows how Jesus still becomes a person with disabilities in the throne and empire of God. Jesus is exalted, yet slaughtered. It is interesting to compare these two pictures of the slaughtered Lamb. The first one describes a simple slaughtered Lamb, and the second one describes a perfect Lamb in his glory. Which picture is more in accordance with Revelation 5?



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Source: <http://trackingbibleprophecy.com/revelation5A.php>



Source: <https://iconreader.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/unknown-artist-agnus-dei-lamb-of-god-basilica-dei-santi-cosma-e-damiano-roma-italy-7th-century.jpg>

Jesus the slaughtered Lamb reminds us of what John the Baptist says about Jesus at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

(John 1:29). It is interesting that John says Jesus is the Lamb of God. In the Old Testament, Lamb is used in the Passover since the night before Israelites left Egypt (Exodus 12). The Lamb should be slaughtered (Exodus 12:21), its blood used to touch the lintel and two doorposts, and the whole flesh eaten by families. The Lamb is called Passover sacrifice, when God saves and liberates Israelites (Exodus 12:26). From these two passages, Jesus the Lamb of God can be related to the Passover sacrifice: the Lamb is slaughtered as sacrifice to the Lord.

Jesus the Lamb of God is slaughtered and dies on the cross. The stigmas of the slain remain even after his resurrection and ascension. The Lamb of God is still slaughtered today. In the context of the socio-political background of the book of Revelation, Jesus the slaughtered Lamb was present in the midst of suffering and marginalized Christians in the first century. In terms of the issue of disability, where persons with disabilities are sometimes suffering and marginalized in society—up till now, the presence of Jesus the slaughtered Lamb in the midst of persons with disabilities is powerful and meaningful. Yet when the empire of God replaces the empire of humans, Jesus is still the slaughtered Lamb. Jesus does not change to be a "perfect" Lamb, because the "perfect" Lamb does not have any special meaning. The lamb becomes sacrifice only when it is slaughtered. For persons with disabilities who do not suffer from marginality, Jesus is still the slaughtered Lamb because he is always in solidarity with those—with or without disabilities—who are suffering and marginalized. On the throne, which symbolized power, Jesus is the slaughtered Lamb. The power he has does not change who he is. This is important for everyone (with or without disabilities) who has power in some ways, to use the power to empower others—including persons with disabilities.

For persons with disabilities it is interesting to see that Jesus remains the slaughtered

Lamb after his ascension to heaven (or after he goes back to the Father in the Johannine concept). Some persons with disabilities hope to have “perfect” bodies when they are raised from the dead at the end of time. This hope may have many meanings. First, there is a concept of “perfect and imperfect” or “normal and not normal” that is used to categorize people in society here and now, which causes persons with disabilities who are recognized as imperfect and not normal to want to have perfect and normal bodies. This categorization is constructed in society, and strongly influences many people—with and without disabilities—to categorize people. In Christian concept of *imago Dei*, that every person is created in the image of God, this categorization is not right. Everyone, with and without disabilities, is *imago Dei*. Second, there may be a lack of self-acceptance within persons with disabilities. It is not always easy to accept our own bodies with disabilities and make peace with them. There is a concept of “beauty and ugly” that categorizes people in society or family on a daily basis, which influences people to think that disability is ugly. Self-acceptance is needed by everyone—with and without disability. Third, there is a theological concept that sees life in the here and now as totally different from eternal life. There is discontinuity between the world and heaven. Therefore, the worldly body is different from heavenly body. The end of Revelation shows there is continuity between this heaven and earth with the new heaven and earth. The new Jerusalem comes down.

Jesus the slaughtered Lamb always reminds us of who we are, how to accept ourselves, how to be in solidarity with others, and how to experience God's presence in the midst of suffering, injustices, and marginalization. We are called to bring liberation, justice, and love to people—with and without disabilities. Theology of disability does not talk only about disability, but about human beings, as well as the world—now and then. Theology of

disability brings good news to the world: Jesus the slaughtered Lamb is always present in every situation.

Conclusion

Disability hermeneutics tries to focus on Jesus the slaughtered Lamb. Jesus, the disabled God in his resurrection with pierced hands, feet, and side, is still disabled in front of the throne and empire of God. Jesus is the Passover Lamb, slaughtered for salvation of humankind. Jesus the Passover Lamb, saves and liberates humankind, including persons with disabilities, from oppressions and injustices.

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