

**DISABLED MEN AND WOMEN IN EARLY  
CHRISTIANITY. A STUDY OF CHRYSOSTOM'S  
WRITINGS**

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***Abstract***

*Studies on gender, race and sexuality have provided us with valuable insights into the study of disability, a field which has started to draw the attention of many scholars in varying fields. Various forms of disability were common occurrences in the ancient world and thus also in Chrysostom's world. When studying disability in the ancient world, one should be careful not to make anachronistic assumptions about disability, and should not approach the subject from a modern perspective or use modern medical categories of impairment to discuss the disabilities of the ancients.*

*In this paper we will examine Chrysostom's views on disability and how he chose to deal with the theological questions raised by disability.*

**1. Introduction**

Studies on gender, race and sexuality have provided us with valuable insights, principles and a theoretical framework in studying disability. Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary field which has started to draw the attention of scholars since the 1980s. This “new” social category of people is called by Kudlick “another Other” (Kudlick 2003:763). In the last few decades, studies on disabilities emerged within the Social Sciences and Humanities. Kudlick (2003:764) also says that one should not think about disability as an

individual characteristic or medical pathology, but rather as a social category on par with race, class and gender.

However, when one studies disability in the Ancient World, one should first of all acknowledge that there is no generic word that fully corresponds with the English word “disability”. There is a wide range of words to describe specific disabilities, such as χωλός (“lame”), πηρός (“disabled in a limb”), κυλλός (“crippled”), τυφλός (“blind”), κωφός (“deaf” and/or “dumb”). Words such as ἀδύνατος (“unable” to do a thing), ἀσθενής (“weak”) or ἀνάπειρος (“maimed” or “mutilated”) do not primarily have connotations of physical disability. Aristotle<sup>1</sup> uses the word πήρωσις (“deformity”) even of baldness, and speculates that a woman is technically a “deformed” (πεπηρωμένων) male. He even refers to “the menstrual discharge as semen, though in an impure condition.” But, as Edwards (1998:6) explains, women were regarded as being disabled not in the modern sense of the world, but because of their political and social position. One should therefore understand that disability is a cultural construct and not a medical condition (Edwards 1997:29; 1998:3). One should therefore be careful not to approach the subject from a modern perspective or use modern medical categories of impairment to discuss the disabilities of the ancients.

One’s worth and status in the ancient community were not defined in terms of medical conditions, but rather in terms of one’s integration in the activities of the community and one’s ability to play an economic role in one’s community (Edwards 1998:89). We do read in the ancient texts of disabled people who were economically productive. A deaf male person, for example, could still meet the demands of civic life and participate in military or agricultural activities. He would therefore not necessarily be regarded as a disabled person. Various levels of hearing impairment were also not regarded as a disability, as long as it did not affect one’s speech, because in Greek thought deafness was intertwined with an impairment of verbal communication (Edwards 1997:29). Someone who could not speak and reason was perceived as being dumb and lacking basic intelligence.

The roles of men and women in the ancient world differed, and therefore the criteria for what disability entails, were also different (Edwards 1998:8). It therefore implies that a woman who was perceived to be unable to bear children, and who could therefore not fulfil her primary role, was also regarded as being disabled (Edwards 1998:9). We must therefore guard against making anachronistic assumptions about disability in the ancient world.

## 2. Occurrence

It is very difficult to determine what percentage of the population in the

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<sup>1</sup> *De generatione animalium* 737a.

ancient world was disabled. Chrysostom says that life abounds with people who are maimed.<sup>2</sup> He also mentions in his writings that it was very common to see someone who has lost one of his members.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand one wonders why it would be so common in the ancient world (which was a non-industrialised world) to lose a member. On the other hand many people probably became maimed because of wars and sport activities. But the high occurrence of disabilities can also be contributed to a lack of medical care. Kelley (2007:31) points out that a relatively minor mishap such as a broken arm could result in permanent deformity. She believes that many infants were born with defects because of malnutrition, disease and inbreeding.

Old age, of course, also caused disabilities. Chrysostom indeed says that it was not uncommon to see old people who were maimed (γέροντας ἀναπήρους).<sup>4</sup> The physical handicaps that are most frequently mentioned in ancient texts (including in Chrysostom's writings) are blindness and deafness (cf. Kelley 2007:42). According to Kelley the frequency of blindness was much higher in the ancient world than today because many causes of blindness in our modern world can be addressed by medical intervention. Though noise-induced deafness is primarily a phenomenon of the industrial world, hearing impairment in the ancient world could also have resulted from hereditary factors and old age (Edwards 1997:30).

Although the incidence of hereditary deformities was probably higher then than today, only a small percentage of the afflicted would survive infancy (cf. Garland 2010:12). Congenital disability therefore probably played a lesser role than today. But we read that beggars also maimed themselves (κατακόπτεσθαι) to ensure that other people would pity them.<sup>5</sup> They then exposed their maimed limbs (τὰ ἡκρωτηριασμένα μέλη γυμνοῦσι) to passers-by in the hope that they may raise sympathy.<sup>6</sup>

Many deformed children probably did not survive infancy because the ancients did not have any scruples to withhold the necessities of life from them. Nonetheless, one can safely assume that the occurrence of disability in the ancient world was very high.

### 3. The Context

In order to grasp Chrysostom's views on disability, one should also understand the world in which he lived. Ancient communities acted equally brutally towards deformed children.

Plato (429-347 BC) describes his utopian state as follows: "The

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<sup>2</sup> *In epistulam ad Philippenses*, hom iv (MPG 62:210C); *In epistulam i ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. xi (MPG 62.466A).

<sup>3</sup> *In epistulam i ad Corinthios*, hom. xxx (MPG61.254B).

<sup>4</sup> *In epistulam ad Hebraeos*, hom. xi (MPG 63.95B).

<sup>5</sup> *In epistulam i ad Corinthios*, hom. xxi, (MPG 61.178C ).

<sup>6</sup> *In epistulam ad Hebraeos*, hom. xi (MPG 63.94D).

offspring of the good, I suppose, they will take to the pen or crèche, to certain nurses ... **but the offspring of the inferior, and any of those of the other sort who are born defective, they will properly dispose of in secret**, so that no one will know what has become of them.”<sup>7</sup> We also read in Plato's writings about the rite which was called the *amphidromia* (ἀμφιδρόμια).<sup>8</sup> This rite was performed on the fifth (or according to others on the seventh or tenth) day after birth. It was so called because the nurse or the friends of the parents then carried the infant round the hearth to introduce him to the family and the family deities. It was apparently at this time that the father would decide whether to bring up the child or to expose it (cf. Loeb translation).<sup>9</sup>

In Aristotle's (384-322BC) dream of the ideal state, he wants to have a law that would state "that no deformed (πεπηρωμένον) child shall be reared."<sup>10</sup> In the first century BC Dionysius of Halicarnassus<sup>11</sup> (60-7BC) said that Romulus “obliged the inhabitants to bring up all their male children and the first-born of the females, and forbade them to destroy any children under three years of age **unless they were maimed or monstrous from their very birth**. Thus he did not forbid their parents to expose children, provided they first showed them to their five nearest neighbours and these also approved.” The three year stipulation was probably to ensure that a normal child was not killed.

It thus seems that fathers did not have unlimited and unrestrained power over their deformed children. In Sparta new-born babies were officially examined. Plutarch<sup>12</sup> says that “Offspring was not reared at the will of the father, but was taken and carried by him to a place called *Lesche*,<sup>13</sup> where the elders of the tribes officially examined the infant, and if it was well-built and sturdy, they ordered the father to rear it ... but if it was ill-born and deformed, they sent it to the so-called *Apothetae*, a chasm-like place at the foot of Mount Taygetus, in the conviction that the life of that which nature had not well equipped at the very beginning for health and strength, was of no advantage either to itself or the state.”<sup>14</sup>

A few centuries later Soranus<sup>15</sup> (98-138AD second century AD) lists a number of criteria which one should apply when having to decide whether a baby is worth rearing. Some of these criteria are as follows: (i) the mother of

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<sup>7</sup> *Respublica*, book v, 460c (translated by Paul Shorey. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1969.).

<sup>8</sup> *Theaetetus*, 160E.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 74-75.

<sup>10</sup> *Politica*, book vi, 1335b (Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1944.)

<sup>11</sup> *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.15.

<sup>12</sup> *Lycurgus* 16.

<sup>13</sup> *le,sch* = a place for council or conversation.

<sup>14</sup> Plutarch, *Lycurgus* (Transl by Bernadotte Perrin, Ed).

<sup>15</sup> *Gynaeciorum* 2.6.

the baby must have been in good health for the whole period of her pregnancy (ii) it must be a full-term pregnancy (iii) when born, the baby must cry with vigour (iv) all the members of the baby must be perfect (v) the baby must have the correct size and shape. Soranus concludes that if the baby does not meet these criteria, “the infant is not worth rearing.” Patterson (1985:114) says that one may wonder how often a new-born underwent such a thorough and complete examination, as described by Soranus. He is of opinion that the father would merely look at the infant and then determine whether it was viable to rear the child or not.

There is much debate regarding the frequency or infrequency of this practice of exposing children in ancient Greece. Several scholars warn us against merely accepting modern medical and cultural assumptions that deformed infants “necessarily would have been rejected as medically fragile or economically burdensome” (Kelley 2007:38). Though the general perception is that the ancients regularly disposed of babies who were born with physical defects (cf. Edwards 1996:79), there are several scholars who nowadays contest this assumption. They do not argue that the Greeks never disposed of their deformed young. However, they merely argue that even if most deformed babies were killed, there were still many disabled people who inhabited the ancient world. It is safe to assume that the question whether the baby should be exposed or not, would perhaps also depend on whether it was a first-born, or the gender, or how dearly the parents wanted a child.

#### 4. Status

A disabled person who survived, had no status at all in ancient communities. Disabled people (λώβη σώματος) could often not be economically active and therefore suffered from famine and they lived in constant poverty.<sup>16</sup> Those who were “maimed from their earliest days” had to beg.<sup>17</sup> Chrysostom therefore refers to cripple, lame and maimed people as being synonymous with beggars (προσαιτούντων)<sup>18</sup> and homeless people (τούς ἀστέγους).<sup>19</sup> They were often despised (καταφρονεῖσθαι) and spurned (διαπτύεσθαι = to spit upon)<sup>20</sup> Chrysostom describes a hypothetical bad person as “a mean, abject man, low born, and crippled in body (τὸ σῶμα ἀνάπηρος), in fact a thoroughly bad fellow” (πάντων τῶν ὄντων μοχθηρότατος).<sup>21</sup>

People with physical abnormalities were often subjected to mockery and derision (cf. Kelley 2007:39). Cicero,<sup>22</sup> for example, says that “in ugliness

<sup>16</sup> *In Epistulam ad Romanos*, hom. xxv (MPG 60.634B-C).

<sup>17</sup> *In Epistulam ad Romanos*, hom. xxxi (MPG 60.674B).

<sup>18</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xiii (MPG 60.111A).

<sup>19</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xlv (MPG 60.319D).

<sup>20</sup> *In Matthaëum*, (MPG 58.671D).

<sup>21</sup> *De sacerdotio*, (SC 272 vi.115-116).

<sup>22</sup> *De Oratore* ii.239.

(*deformitatis*) ... and in physical blemishes (*corporis vitiorum*) there is good enough matter for jesting.”<sup>23</sup> However, he adds, one should know the limits of one’s mockery.

The disabled knew very well how they were viewed, and because of that they had a very low self-image. Chrysostom says that the disabled person was “ever lowly minded and subdued in his whole bearing” (ὁ δὲ ταπεινοφρονεῖ ἀεὶ καὶ συνέταλται διαπαντός).<sup>24</sup> If you bring these disabled and lowly people into a school of philosophy (φιλοσοφίας παιδευτήριον), you will notice that they are “at home with virtue” (ἐπιτηδείους πρὸς ἀρετήν). However, one should not think that this indicates that the disabled had much status. They were merely blessed because they were lowly and moderate (ταπεινὸς ἔσο καὶ μέτριος) as Christ taught us. This statement merely endorses the fact that they were regarded as having no status at all.<sup>25</sup>

It does affect one’s own status when one has contact with the lame and the blind. Chrysostom explains this by showing that when a poor man is walking with a rich man, the juxtaposition makes the low seem lower, not loftier.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, when one dines with people who have less honour, one appears to be “as of yet meaner condition” or “more worthless” (εὐτελεστέρους).<sup>27</sup>

That is why Chrysostom regards it as remarkable that David was not ashamed to bring Mephibosheth into his house.<sup>28</sup> As we know, Mephibosheth was crippled in both feet, and when he came into David's house, he bowed down and said: "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" (2 Sam. 9:8). It is interesting to note that Chrysostom himself refers to poor people (and in the context it is clear that he includes disabled people) as “admirable dogs of the royal courts” (κύνες γὰρ εἰσιν οὗτοί τινες θαυμαστοὶ τῶν αὐλῶν τῶν βασιλικῶν).<sup>29</sup> But then he immediately adds that he does not mean to dishonour (ἀτιμάζων) them when he calls them dogs. He actually wants to commend them highly! (σφόδρα ἐπαινῶν). The reason for this ambivalent remark is because Chrysostom is emphasising that despite the lowly nature of human beings they are allowed in royal courts, namely the Church. But this statement does betray Chrysostom's own attitude towards disabled people as well.

## 5. Medical explanations for disability

It was common in the ancient world to explain most medical conditions (and

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<sup>23</sup> Loeb translation.

<sup>24</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xiii (MPG 60.111B).

<sup>25</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xiii (MPG 60.111A).

<sup>26</sup> *In epistulam ad Colossenses*, hom. i (MPG 62.305C).

<sup>27</sup> *In epistulam ad Colossenses*, hom. i (MPG 62.305C).

<sup>28</sup> *De Davide et Saule*, (MPG 54.707D).

<sup>29</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. xi (MPG 62.466D).

even human behaviour) in terms of the balance of fluids or juices (humours) in the body. Chrysostom, for example, believes that blindness was caused “by the influx of ill humours, or by superabundance of rheum (χυμῶν ἐπιρροῇ πονηρῶν, ἢ ῥεύματος πλημμύρα).<sup>30</sup> He explains that this fluid substance clogs the channels when the fluids are curdled and collected into one place (πεπηγὸς εἰς ἓνα συνάγεται τόπον).<sup>31</sup> There is then no feeling and the limb becomes dead. One can then burn it, or cut it, or do whatever you will, there will still not be any feeling.

But there are also other causes. Chrysostom says that he knows that “excess of light” (ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τοῦ φωτὸς) can shock (πλήττειν) one because the eyes have their measure (μέτρα) and “excess of sound can make people deaf and stunned (as in a fit)” φωνῆς ὑπερβολὴ κωφοὺς ποιεῖν καὶ ἀποπληγᾶς.<sup>32</sup> Chrysostom was therefore very much surprised that only Paul was blinded by bright light that beamed down upon him, though all his companions saw the light (cf. Acts 9:3). Furthermore, the excess of sound did not make Paul deaf, though the brilliant light blinded him.

The ancients' physiological view of the body impacted on the treatment they prescribed. They for instance mentioned various possible medical treatments for deafness, such as flushing the ears with various lotions, or even shaving the head when it is too heavy.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately the disabled had very few options to alleviate their position. Crippled people could use a walking-stick and blind people could ask somebody to lead them. But, as Chrysostom says, often blind people did not even have a guide (τὸν χειραγωγόν) to rely on.<sup>34</sup>

Consequently the blind merely had to accept their disabilities and continue with their life. Chrysostom therefore says that if there is someone who is lame, or has distorted feet or withered hands, he does not grieve or cut it off (οὐκ ἀλγεῖ οὐδὲ ἐκκόπτει), but continues with his life.<sup>35</sup> They had, of course, no other options available.

## 6. Theological considerations

It comes as no surprise that since the earliest days disability led to numerous theological questions. The Scriptures of course played a prominent role in this debate. Leviticus 21:16-23, for example, makes it very clear that no person who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed, no person with a crippled foot or hand, or has any other defect, may perform priestly activities, or may come near God. Consequently many saw disabilities as sin because it is sin that

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<sup>30</sup> *In epistulam ad Ephesios*, hom. xiii (MPG 62.93D-94A).

<sup>31</sup> *In epistulam ad Ephesios*, hom. xiii (MPG 62.94B).

<sup>32</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xix (MPG 60.153A).

<sup>33</sup> Celsus, *De Medicina* 6.7; (transl. W. G. Spencer).

<sup>34</sup> *In Matthaëum*, hom. (MPG 58.515D).

<sup>35</sup> *In epistulam ad Ephesios*, hom. xx (MPG 62.140A).

separates us from God (Andrus 2010:132).

Throughout all centuries the question was asked whether God caused disability or not. Chrysostom also raised this issue on several occasions.<sup>36</sup> At one stage he admits that some may doubt that God could be called merciful (φιλάνθρωπος) if he allows people to become disabled.<sup>37</sup> Even if one says that God did not permit it, but that he merely allowed it, it could still not be called mercy (φιλάνθρωπίας). Chrysostom was an excellent orator and applied all his rhetorical skills when he answered this question. He first of all said that he was prepared to answer this question, but only if his audience was prepared to be baptised and to live good lives. Chrysostom probably thought that Christians would be less hostile in their questions once they were baptised and were "faithful followers". He also said that it would not help them if he did answer the question why God allows people to be disabled, since once this question is solved, it would merely lead to more questions, as numberless as the snowflakes (μυρίας νιφάδας ἐπιδεικνύω ζητημάτων).<sup>38</sup> Interestingly enough, Chrysostom then decides to nevertheless answer the question. He says that the best answer to this question is that "God does all things justly and mercifully and for the best." He adds that it is impossible to comprehend the reason for this, and there is no other answer that is better than this one!

But Chrysostom was right. Once it is said that God causes people to be disabled, more questions will follow, for example, why does God cause disabilities. Chrysostom says that there are so many incomprehensible activities in the world. We do not, for example, understand the work of a carpenter or of a painter, or even the handiwork of a bee, spider, or ant. We therefore have to realise that we cannot understand why there is so much inequality in the world. We must realise that we cannot understand everything.<sup>39</sup> Yet Chrysostom admits that our sins can be the reason why God caused us to be disabled. God can, for example, inflict many kinds of punishment on those who commit deeds of injustice.

Chrysostom argues that since the doctrine of the resurrection is not enough to bring all people to reason, God sometimes also uses other proofs of his righteous judgment. He sometimes causes them to be childless, or he causes them to be killed during warfare, or he causes them to lose a child through death, or he causes them to be maimed in body (τὸ σῶμα ἐπηρώθη).<sup>40</sup>

But the next question that flows from this theology is that not everybody suffers the same punishment for the same sins. That then brings the age-old question to the fore, namely "Where is then the justice of God, and where is

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<sup>36</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xxiii (MPG 60.183A).

<sup>37</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xxiii (MPG 60.183A).

<sup>38</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xxiii (MPG 60.183B).

<sup>39</sup> *In epistulam ad Ephesios*, hom. xix (MPG62.132B).

<sup>40</sup> *In epistulam ii ad Timotheum*, hom v (MPG62.628D).

his goodness?” (καὶ ποῦ τὸ δίκαιον τοῦ Θεοῦ; ἢ ποῦ τὸ ἀγαθόν;).<sup>41</sup> But Chrysostom has a very simple answer to this theodicean question: There is no better proof of the existence of hell (γέεννα).<sup>42</sup> Some people are now maimed in their bodies, but others will receive their punishment in hell. Chrysostom then appeals to 1 Timothy 5:24 to prove his point: “The sins of some men are obvious, ... the sins of others trail behind them.”

Jesus also linked sin and sickness. He said, for example, to a paralytic “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven” (Mt 9:2). When he saw the invalid (whom he healed at the pool near the Sheep Gate) in the temple, He said to him: “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (Joh 5:14). However, Chrysostom argued that one cannot use the story of the blind man who was healed by Jesus (John 9) as proof that disabilities were caused by sin. In this miracle story the disciples asked Jesus: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”<sup>43</sup> Chrysostom argues that the disciples did not ask a valid question, since one could not attribute his blindness to sins, since he was blind from his birth. Neither should one deduct from Jesus’ statement that one may be punished for one’s parents’ sake.

Chrysostom also poses the question whether **all** diseases proceed from sin. (Τί οὖν; πάντα, φησὶ, τὰ νοσήματα ἐξ ἀμαρτημάτων;).<sup>44</sup> He then unequivocally answers “Not all, but most of them” (οὐ πάντα μὲν, ἀλλὰ τὰ πλείονα).<sup>45</sup> Some disabilities proceed from different kinds of loose living (ἀπὸ ῥαθυμίας), and then he mentions a numbers of reasons, such as gluttony (γαστριμαργία), intemperance (μέθη) and sloth (ἀργία). Chrysostom argued gluttony, for example, could cause gout in the feet, apoplexy, pains in the hands, tremors, inflammatory fevers, jaundice, but also disabilities such as dimness of sight and paralytic attacks.<sup>46</sup> He calls “fullness the mother of sickness and debility” (πλησμονὴ μήτηρ νόσου καὶ ἀρ’ ῥωστίας ἐστί).<sup>47</sup>

But there are also disabilities that can be attributed to natural causes. Chrysostom says, for example, that though some diseases arise from acts of sin, others arise from natural infirmity (ἐξ ἀσθενείας φυσικῆς).<sup>48</sup> But it was not only God who was blamed for disabilities. Chrysostom also blamed the devil. He said that many cases of blindness or paralysed limbs are the devil’s work, and that diseases were a wrench (διαστροφήν) that was given by him to the body.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. viii (MPG62.445D).

<sup>42</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. viii (MPG62.445D).

<sup>43</sup> *In Ioannem*, hom. lvi (MPG 59.306B-C).

<sup>44</sup> *In Ioannem*, hom. xxxviii (MPG 59.212C).

<sup>45</sup> *In Ioannem*, hom. xxxviii (MPG 59.212C).

<sup>46</sup> *In Joannem*, hom. xxii (MPG 59.137C).

<sup>47</sup> *In Joannem*, hom. xxii (MPG 59.137C).

<sup>48</sup> *In Ioannem*, hom. xxxviii (MPG 59.213A).

<sup>49</sup> *In Acta Apostolorum*, hom. xxiii (MPG 60.179A).

But there was still another question that needs to be answered, namely what about the principle of equality amongst all (τὸ ἰσοτιμίαν εἶναι παρὰ πᾶσιν;). Chrysostom<sup>50</sup> said there are many who would ask why one has been crippled from his childhood, and another lives in poverty for his whole life, one is deaf, another poor, while there are people who are utterly impious and full of vices, yet they enjoy wealth and live an idle life. He says that it is easy when Greeks ask this question, since one can then merely put the same question to them. They believe in providence (πρόνοια) and therefore they too should be able to answer this question. But if one nevertheless has to answer this question, one has first of all to acknowledge how many proofs there are in the universe of God's existence and his blessings. Within this context, it is a small matter to be cripple.<sup>51</sup>

## 7. Disabled people in a Church Context

Chrysostom tells us that the poor and the disabled had to sit **before the vestibule** (προκάθηνται τῶν προπυλαίων) both in churches and in the chapels of the martyrs.<sup>52</sup> A vestibule or entrance hall was a distinct space between the interior of a building and the street. When one entered a temple, one had to pass through the vestibule to enter the atrium. Chrysostom's statement that the poor and the disabled **were sitting before** (προκάθηνται) the vestibule, might be interpreted that they were sitting outside, in front of the vestibule. However, it is more likely that he meant that they were sitting **in the front part** of the vestibule, meaning right at the entrance hall. This is actually a quite prominent spot and Chrysostom argues that it is actually God who sets them in his vestibules because he is not ashamed of them.<sup>53</sup> We, therefore, have even more reason not to be ashamed of them. Chrysostom continues by saying that Christ does not disdain them (οὐκ ἀπαξιοῖ), and even invites them to his table with the King (Emperor).<sup>54</sup>

Chrysostom gives two reasons for asking the disabled to sit in the vestibule: In the first place when one enters the Church, one can instantly see the maimed, the poor, the blind and those whose limbs are distorted.<sup>55</sup> It will help one to become less arrogant about your own position. Many of these people were probably also at some stage young or healthy or important. They will therefore remind one that one's health can be taken away.

But these maimed people also serve another purpose. They make one compassionate so that one can pity them and admire the lovingkindness of

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<sup>50</sup> *In epistulam ad Ephesios*, hom. xix (MPG62.131A-D).

<sup>51</sup> *In epistulam ad Ephesios*, hom. xix (MPG62.132B).

<sup>52</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. xi (MPG 62.466B).

<sup>53</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. xi (MPG 62.466D).

<sup>54</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. xi (MPG 62.467B).

<sup>55</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. xi (MPG 62.466B).

God (τοῦ Θεοῦ τὴν φιλανθρωπίαν).<sup>56</sup> Chrysostom writes that we should pity maimed people, because nothing so much pleases God as mercy (ἐλεημοσύνη).<sup>57</sup> We need to show pity to the naked and the maimed if we want to claim mercy.<sup>58</sup>

Jesus said in Luke 14:12 that we should not invite our friends or neighbours when we give a lunch or dinner. We should rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Chrysostom says that some in his congregation cannot endure to feast with the lame and the blind (οὐδὲ ἀνέχη μετὰ χωλῶν καὶ τυφλῶν ἐστιᾶσθαι).<sup>59</sup> They regard it as grievous and offensive (βαρὺ καὶ φορτικόν). But Chrysostom has a good plan for the circumvention of this problem: he says that one should never refuse to sit down with these people. If one does find it difficult to sit with them, one can only send to them of the dishes of one's own table! It is still better than to refuse to have contact with them.

Nevertheless, Chrysostom says that if there were two tables, and at the one table there are the blind, the lame, the maimed in hand or leg (τυφλοὺς, χωλοὺς, κυλλοὺς τὴν χεῖρα, τὸ σκέλος πεπηρωμένους)<sup>60</sup> he would prefer to sit at the latter table. The reason for his choice is that Christ would also sit at that table. To associate with the maimed and the poor, means that one has God as one's debtor (ὀφειλέτην).<sup>61</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

There are not many studies available on the ancients' views on disability. Yet, a historical study of disabilities can expose the roots of many ill-conceived modern views. However, one has to be very careful not to impose modern views on disability onto ancient communities.

It is interesting to see how Chrysostom's treatment of the poor and the disabled wavers between two positions: he encourages his congregation to respect these people, but he uses language that betrays his own disposition towards them. Disabled people were clearly seen as a marginal group of people. Their treatment by the Church was not much better than how they were treated by people outside the Church. The fact that disability was connected with sin led to further stigmatisation of disability.

When Chrysostom and his congregation did care for the disabled, it was for their own benefit. The disabled helped them, for example, to appreciate their own blessings. Chrysostom was also prepared to sit next to disabled people, but only because Christ would also be sitting at that table. Chrysostom

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<sup>56</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. xi (MPG 62.466D).

<sup>57</sup> *In epistulam ad Philippenses*, hom. iv (MPG62:210C).

<sup>58</sup> *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses*, hom. ix (MPG 62.455C).

<sup>59</sup> *In epistulam ad Colossenses*, hom. i (MPG 62.304A).

<sup>60</sup> *In epistulam ad Colossenses*, hom. i (MPG 62.304C).

<sup>61</sup> *In epistulam ad Colossenses*, hom. i (MPG 62.304A).

would not sit at the table of the disabled because he valued them.

The theology of the Cross embraces brokenness and I am surprised that this theme played almost no role in Chrysostom's deliberations on disability. But he did say that God's grace is always available even for the lame and for those who are maimed in body.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. *Ad Illuminandos Catecheses* 2 (MPG 49.236A).

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