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The Body, Sickness, and the Bible

Timothy Yap

Introduction

The human body is an entity that can drive ideologies, both as an artifact and about other bodies.¹ Issues such as a body's anatomy, disability, sickness, body size, age, gender, clothing, amputation, bodily movements, modesty, and sexual activity can be used as rhetorical devices within the texts of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or early Jewish and Christian writings. Wade Davis goes further to argue that people's hopes and fears can also be pinned on a human body.² The articles in this issue explore how biblical writers can utilize the human body to convey their intended messages. One aspect of bodily rhetoric that will be the focus of most of these articles is sickness, a condition shared by various biblical characters.³

This special issue opens with the article "Let the Body Do the Talking: The Rhetorical Use of Body Parts in 2 Samuel 4." This study is paradigmatic in showing how body parts (such as a character's head, hands, feet, and amputated body anatomy) can be used to serve political agendas. Specifically, the essay asserts that the narrator of 2 Samuel seeks to utilize the body parts of the narrative's characters for the twin purpose of legitimatizing the Davidic dynasty and describing the fall of the Saulide family.

The following three articles deal with the issue of royal bodies. In Gregory Goswell's contribution, he examines the rhetorical impact of King Hezekiah's crisis and its impact on prayer and the city's future. Within the context of Kings, where we read of various sick royals, the prophet Elisha is presented as a prophet with a body that can defy sickness and, ultimately, death. In my article "Body Shaming or Body Honoring? The Function of Elisha's Body in the Book of Kings," I argue that within the context of the ancient world, kings are often portrayed as ones with robust bodies, many of whom can even live beyond death. To signify that the monarchs are not the genuine leaders of Israel and Judah, the narrator portrays them as sickly. In contrast, Elisha not only can raise the Shunammite's son, but even in his death, he can also raise the dead. The trio of articles on sickly kings concludes with Ched Spellman's contribution. While the preceding two studies deal with the narratives of

¹ Taylor, Introduction, xv.

² Davis, Forward, 5.

³ Yap, Sick Child.

Kings, Spellman's focus is on Chronicles. Rich in exegetical details, Spellman contends that sickness in Chronicles functions not only to affirm God's judgment but also to help the reader hear the subtle yet distinct chords of hope.

Crossing over to the New Testament, Paul Himes' article offers a fascinating study of the phrase “ἐν ἁγῶνι,” an odd description of the sweat of Jesus in Luke 22,43-44. Himes argues for the authenticity of these verses and attempts to demonstrate how they fit within a Lukan emphasis on physicality and the body of Jesus. Taking a more panoramic perspective, Esther Ng re-examines the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcisms. With well-documented results, Ng highlights the distinctiveness of Jesus' healing in each Gospel regarding the methods used, the healing process, and its theological significance.

Each of these contributions shows how the themes of the body and sickness resonate throughout the storyline of the biblical books. The body not only serves as a backdrop but also functions as a key literary device used to advance the ideologies and theologies of the writers. The contributions in this volume provide a small sampling of how such an endeavor is advanced. Hence, this theme issue will continue to stimulate scholars to take this conversation further as the body and the sickness motifs are examined in other parts of the biblical texts.

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Let the Body Do the Talking: The Rhetorical Use of Body Parts in 2 Samuel 4

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Many scholars agree with Jon Berquist that "the Hebrew Bible obsesses about bodies."¹ Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, for example, observes that there are "more than a thousand explicit references to the body and its parts and a distribution that shows occurrences within 143 psalms."² Meanwhile, Jennifer Koosed notices that the body and its parts are embedded in Qohelet's text.³ She even goes on to argue that the body is encoded in the book's form and structure. Brian Gault not only shows how figurative language is used in the Song of Songs but he also draws attention to the fact that at least four songs describe the body from head to toe or vice versa.⁴ Three are directed at the woman (4,1-7; 6,4-7; 7,2-7) and one to the man (5,10-16). The Hebrew Bible's fascination with the body is not restricted to human beings. Yahweh is also depicted as one who embodies the human form (Amos 9,3; Isa 5,25; Dan 9,18).⁵ This has spawned many studies in the Bible on how anthropomorphic language is used for God.⁶

Second Samuel 4 has a fair share of references to the various parts of the human body.⁷ The chapter is prefaced by David's dirge, where the king honors Abner by stating that his "hands were not bound and whose feet were not fettered" (3,34). As the narrative of 2 Samuel 4 commences, we read of how a "son of Saul" (whom we take to be Ish-Bosheth)⁸ "lost courage" when he receives news that Abner has died. The phrase which the NIV translates

¹ Berquist, *Controlling*, 2. On the use of the body-centered language and imagery in the Hebrew Bible, see Seidl, *Schön*, 129-157; Kalverkämper, *Literatur*, 228-273; Xeravits, *Religion*; Koosed, *(Per)mutations*; Wolff, *Anthropologie*; Gillmayr-Bucher, *Body*, 301-326.

² Gillmayr-Bucher, *Body*, 301.

³ Koosed, *(Per)mutations*, 34.

⁴ Gault, *Body*, 33.

⁵ Baumann, *Das*, 220-50.

⁶ Schroer, *'Im Schatten*, 296-316; Seidl, *'Schön bist*, 129-157; Wagner, *God's Body*; Smith, *Three*, 471-488; Grant, *Fire*, 139-161; Amzallag, *Nostrils*, 298-309.

⁷ McCracken, *Family*, 156.

⁸ Wellhausen, *Der Text*, 160.

as “lost courage” (וִירָפוּ יָדָיו) means “his hands became weak.”⁹ Three verses later, we are introduced to Mephibosheth, whom we are informed is “disabled”

(נִכָּה רַגְלָיו) or literally “stricken in the feet.” As Mephibosheth was “stricken” (נִכָּה) in the feet when he was five, Ish-Bosheth is “stricken” (נִכָּה) in the “stomach” (הַחֹמֶשׁ, literally “in the fifth rib”) (v.6).¹⁰ To prove that they have gotten rid of David's rival, Rekab and his brother Baanah amputate the head of Saul's son (4,7). Learning of Ish-Bosheth's murder, David orders that the feet and hands of the two assailants be cut off after they have been put to death. The chapter closes with Ish-Bosheth's severed head being buried in Abner's tomb.

The repeated references to the body's various parts raise several questions. What is the significance of the beheading of Ish-Bosheth? Why is the narrative intruded with the account of Mephibosheth and his “stricken feet”? Is there any connection between Abner's bodily parts (as per David's dirge) and the amputation of Rekab and Baanah's feet and hands? Why is Ish-Bosheth's severed head buried in Abner's tomb, especially after Abner had betrayed the house of Saul?¹¹

Though various aspects of the narrative (such as the function of Ish-Bosheth's death¹² and Mephibosheth's disability in the books of Samuel¹³) have been examined in the past, a lacuna exists regarding how the notion of body parts is used as a literary device in 2 Samuel 4. This article contends that the imagery of body parts signals the end of Saul's dynasty and reveals David's attitude and treatment of Saul's house. This study will proceed by examining the significance of the beheading of Ish-Bosheth. Attention will then be paid to the rhetorical purpose of Ish-bosheth's “weak hands” and Mephibosheth's “stricken feet” and what they convey about the leadership suitability of Saul's descendants. Finally, David's response toward Saul's family via the amputated hands and feet motif will conclude our analysis.

⁹ Smith, College Press, 367.

¹⁰ Newkirk, Deceivers, 99.

¹¹ Gunn raises this question in *The Story of David*, 96. See also Fokkelman, *Narrative*, 136.

¹² Bodner, *Crime Scene*, 2-17; McCracken, *Family*, 142-44; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 233; Exum, *Tragedy*, 108; Polzin, *Samuel*, 123-26.

¹³ Schipper, *Reconsidering*, 422-434; idem. *Disability Studies*; Olyan, *Blind*, 218-227; Vargon, *Blind*, 498-514; Rouse, *Scripture*, 183-199; Ceresko, *The Identity*, 23-30. Murray, *Significant*, 521-529.