11 Disability in History, Disability in Eschatology

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Introduction

Tom Wright's corpus, as folks familiar with his many scholarly contributions recognize, is insightful, nuanced, and wide-ranging. His most recent book, *History and Eschatology*, is no different. It continues and develops many themes that can be found elsewhere among his vast publications. It is also a rather large and complex book. The first four chapters, over 150 pages, "[stake] out the territory" before he begins to build his main argument (2019: 152).

There is no way that contributors to a volume such as this can individually address the myriad issues that this work brings up; the collection of engagements as a whole probably cannot even do that, not even cumulatively. Furthermore, far be it from me, trained as an analytic philosopher, to take direct issue with either Wright's biblical or historical interpretation. There are others in this forum better able to engage those aspects of the body of his writing. My primary goal, then, is to explore Wright's approach to the relationship between history and eschatology—as found most recently and fully in the aptly named book *History and Eschatology*, but also elsewhere in his work—and argue that while he does not extend it as far as he should, his approach nevertheless has the resources to be extended in just this way. That is, Wright's own approach has the resources to correct the lacuna I identify. Given this, I will do my best to remain true to the central thrust of what I take to be important insights from Wright, drawing heavily on his texts both for the sake of accuracy and continuity.

I am going to largely grant Wright his general methodology and many of his specific conclusions for the sake of the present discussion. My comments here are intended primarily as an extension of his work rather than as a critique of it, though the expansion will lead me to critique his approach on a number of points.[1] The points of criticism are rooted in the expansion of his approach: taking history seriously for natural theology[2] requires that the range of human experiences that natural theology seeks to engage also needs to be expanded. Wright holds that "'history', after all, is not neutral . . . itself contested territory, part of the battlefield" (2019: 75–76). One important

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way that history is not "neutral" is exemplified by the systemic tendency to overlook the plight of the marginalized and the oppressed. History, as the saying goes, is often written by the victors; but the corollary of this is that the disenfranchised are often screened out of the narratives that we tell ourselves about the past and the present (and which in turn shape our vision of the future). In the domain of theology, this has long resulted in a situation wherein the Church has both failed to identify these areas of oppression and failed to pursue its God-given calling to bring healing, hope, and liberation to those currently suffering marginalization. This theme is especially prevalent in the work, for example, of James Cone. His work on black theology builds on the assumption that "Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation" (2010: ix). The theological task, for Cone, but also I think for Wright, is always contextual.[3] In order to be specifically *Christian* theology, Cone thinks theology must identify with the goals of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.

> There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. . . . [It is] not only appropriate but necessary to define the Christian community as the community of the oppressed which joins Jesus Christ in his fight for the liberation of humankind.
>
> (2010: 10)

And so Cone thinks that, given how anti-black oppression has and continues to function in at least American culture, in order for theology to be specifically *Christian* theology, it must seek to "[speak] of God as related to black liberation" (2010: 10). If this is right, then in order to be specifically *Christian*, so too must our theology address the oppression, marginalization, and devaluation of disabled individuals.

Wright would agree, I think, at least to a large extent. While the importance of the gospel as liberation is not as central to his work as it is for Cone, it is there. In a letter to the UK newspaper, *The Spectator*, addressing the charge raised by others that the Church is getting co-opted by "the new religion of anti-racism," Wright had the following to say:

> The truth, which neither [Douglas Murray] nor the church seems to have realized, is that the "anti-racist" agenda is a secular attempt to plug a long-standing gap in western Christianity. . . . At the climax of his letter, St Paul urges Christians to "welcome one another" across all social and ethnic barriers, insisting that the church will thereby function as the advance sign of God's coming renewal of all creation.
>
> This is the three-dimensional meaning of "justification by faith": all those who believe in Jesus, rescued by his cross and resurrection and enlivened by his Spirit, are part of the new family. This was and is central, not peripheral. The church was the original multicultural project,

> with Jesus as its only point of identity. It was known, and was for this reason seen as both attractive and dangerous, as a worship-based, spiritually renewed, multi-ethnic, polychrome, mutually supportive, outward-facing, culturally creative, chastity-celebrating, socially responsible fictive kinship group, gender-blind in leadership, generous to the poor and courageous in speaking up for the voiceless.
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> If this had been celebrated, taught and practiced, the church would early on have recognized ecclesial racism for what it is. . . . If it has taken modern secular movements to jolt the church into recognizing a long-standing problem, shame on us. . . . The answer is teaching and practising the whole biblical gospel.
>
> (2021)[4]

The Church, Wright says elsewhere, has failed in its vocation by becoming infected with systemic racism and oppression rather than living into the redesigned model of human social life that is its calling and its eschatological telos.

> The point of being part of Jesus's people was never that we as individuals could get to heaven—perhaps associating with other slightly different people on the way, or perhaps not. The point was that we were and are supposed to be, in our personal and corporate lives, small working models of the ultimate new creation which God has promised to make and has launched decisively in raising Jesus, the anointed one, from the dead. That has always been our glorious vocation. So rejecting racism and embracing the diversity of Jesus' family ought to be as obvious as praying the Lord's Prayer or celebrating the Eucharist.
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> (2020a: 5min 25)[5]

Here, the connection between both history and eschatology in terms of the Church's calling is obvious.

So I think that Wright would agree with Cone that the eschatological vision that we are called into as Christians is fundamentally liberatory. But here we must confront the internal conflicts that are woven throughout Church history and theology. How that history has played out does not only reflect a failure of liberation from racism. There are certain aspects of life in which marginalization and oppression are the norm, something that the Church has often contributed to rather than opposed. One such area of widespread marginalization, of course, includes the experience of disabled individuals. While perhaps not explicitly oppressive, as are other parts of the Church's history, the mere ignoring of disabled individuals is something that, unfortunately, we also find in Wright's substantive work on eschatology and history. That work has taught us that we need to pay attention to "selection and arrangement." What we select for inclusion and attention is not neutral and can actually contribute to exclusion, even if we do not intend it to. Even mere silence about disability as part of the human experience is not neutral.

And so, following Wright's and Cone's comments about liberation, theological engagement with disability should play a more central role in our theology, natural or otherwise, than we have often afforded it.

Natural Theology and History

My primary engagement with Wright's work on history will focus on the book that came out of his recent Gifford lectures. At its core, *History and Eschatology* argues that the sources of natural theology need to be expanded because the constraints within which natural theology currently operates (as it is most commonly practiced) are artificially small. "'Natural theology' has normally been lined up as though questions about Jesus are excluded automatically" (2019: 42). Wright argues that history is a proper source of natural theology, not something that should be excluded. The rejection of history (especially, for Wright, the history of Jesus) is not inherent to the natural theological task, but it is instead an assumption of the last three hundred years that ought to be rejected. "History," Wright reminds us, "matters" (2019: xiii). As such, it is a necessary ingredient in Christian natural theology that is all too often absent. In fact, there is no Christian theology, natural or otherwise, without history given the Christ event. Without history, there is no guarantee that our theology is sound.[6] One simply should not avoid engaging history in Christian theology: "The Word became *flesh*. Avoiding history is the first step to Gnosticism" (2019: 122). A central theme of *History and Eschatology* is that "Jesus was as much part of the 'natural world' as anyone else" (2019:157)[7] and thus cannot be ruled out from natural theology *a priori*. All attempts to do natural theology that do not place the historicity of the incarnation at the center are problematic as specifically Christian approaches to natural theology:

> If the modern discipline calling itself "natural theology" is looking for a god other than the one nailed to the cross [in history], it is looking, however accidentally, for an idol and needs to be reminded that our knowledge of God, if it is to be genuine knowledge, is the reflex of God's knowledge of us.
>
> (2019: 244)[8]

That knowledge breaks into history in solidarity, rooted ultimately in the God-become-human. Our knowledge of God's actions in history is witnessed to by the biblical authors, whose writings are themselves part of history. This is why, for Wright, "we must include the question of Jesus and the Gospels within the discussion of 'natural theology.'" (2019: 43).

Wright thinks that history is full of "broken signposts" (or, in older language, "signposts pointing into a fog" (2008: xiii)) which point to, even if in a marred or distorted way, the new creation that will be brought about by God. Christian hope is built on Jesus's resurrection from the dead, a hope

that we are reminded of by these signposts. And if, as he writes, "the present spirit-driven mission of the church is to anticipate, by freshly embodying the previously 'broken' signposts, the promised time when God will be 'all in all,'" (2019: xvii) then we should hope to be able to freshly embody that mission in areas of the Church's life and thought where too often those signposts have been ignored, abandoned, or even vandalized. Because he takes the historical Jesus seriously, Wright also takes seriously the second temple Jewish context within which we can properly understand Jesus as a first-century itinerant preacher and eschatological prophet. Wright argues that Israel's temple should be properly understood as "the *microcosmos* disclosing God's ultimate purposes for the heaven/earth world" (2019: 219; emphasis original). Below, we will see how disabled individuals have been excluded (from the temple and much of the Christian community) in a way that may actually be better understood as a mark of the brokenness of the signpost.[9] Many of the signposts are broken indeed. But, as Wright's work shows, even broken signposts are able to point beyond themselves to something more. In fact, he thinks that their brokenness "turns out to be crucial in discerning what they really mean" (Wright 2020b: viii).[10]

In a number of places, Wright delineates a number of different accounts of the nature of history, all of which he argues are needed for good theology.[11] And while I do not have the space here to demarcate all of these different senses, each of them can be used to push their own agendas and to hide their own bias. "*History works towards a narrative display of results.* The historian's narrative is more than chronical. History presupposes, and attempts to display, causes, connections, and consequences" (2019: 100). The ways in which at least some of these different senses of history include, encourage, and also hide the systemic oppression of disabled histories have been well documented elsewhere.[12] The multi-faceted nature of history matters for disability, in part, because how we understand our past (both in an academic sense and in a more general sense) is one of the ways that disability-based oppression continues. One way of perpetuating that oppression is simply leaving it out of our tellings of history, by which we also risk leaving out the same group from our understanding of the present. For Wright, a proper Christian understanding of history is not *just* the events of the world, but the history of the Spirit moving among the face of the deep and among God's people. And the Spirit's moving connects back to the liberatory work of God. But that liberatory movement of the Spirit has not always been extended to all, despite the fact that the Gospel is for all. We have already seen mentioned, both in the work of Wright and Cone, this failure with regard to race. It is also true, among other groups, of disabled people. Those with disabilities are equally God's people. Failing to include them in our history risks failing to include them in our eschatology (understood as Wright wants us to). So, an unwillingness to confront the history of disability oppression within Church history pressures us, even if subtly and unintentionally, to exclude disability from our eschatological vision.[13]

Returning now to the need for natural theology to draw on history in a way that Wright thinks it often has failed to do, he writes that once history is allowed as a part of natural theology, "you cannot logically keep the question of Jesus himself, Jesus as a real first-century human being, out of the possible sources for 'natural theology.' At least, you can't do it without begging a central and vital question" (2019: 31). The attempt to separate history and theology is "itself the either/or of what I have characterized as Epicureanism, with heaven and the gods radically separated from the world in which we live" (2019: 31). Wright thinks that "today in the Western world [we] live in an Epicurean paradise" (2019: 28) while Epicureanism historically has been diverse, Wright's use of the term is primarily in the cosmological sense "in which the domain of the gods is totally removed from our own" (2019: 13).

Wright thinks of the Enlightenment as a return to Epicureanism so understood, in spirit if not in name. Historically, the Enlightenment and its focus on certain roles for human reason track changes in how the supposedly Christian culture of Europe treated those with disabilities and disability oppression. Wright argues that Enlightenment thought was a kind of revival of Epicureanism, which then came to dominate much of modern theology's collective theological imagination. While there are differences between ancient Epicureanism and its modern Enlightenment cousin (such as the notion of "progress" built into the latter[14]), both involved the removal of the gods from history, and thus an apparent randomness of how history unfolds since the gods are no longer in control. Given this providential disappearance of the gods, there is little functional difference between Epicureanism and atheism (2019: 14). But if Christian theology is to be a robust alternative to Epicureanism, the removal of divine action in history must be resisted. Wright also connects the Enlightenment's Epicureanism with the rise of metaphysical naturalism and social Darwinism,[15] especially when seen as intertwined with the rise of modern medicine, technology, industrialization, and rationalism.[16]

This cluster of views has not just damaged the project of natural theology. It also facilitated a number of ways to devalue disabled lives. The Industrial Revolution led to a prioritization of the economization of human value and things in Europe (and through colonialism, throughout much of the rest of the world), leading to a scenario in which life generally became worse for individuals with disabilities since they were not "productive" members of society. Families were less able to care for their members with disabilities, given the changes to the exploitative demands of the new economy. Conditions would worsen, especially for those in urban areas during industrialization, as economic pressures increased. Institutions and asylums increased in numbers and size. Many of these involved conditions that we would now recognize as abuse, and had rates of death within the first year of over 80 percent. (I write this as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to sweep the world, and a number of countries are finally taking drastic steps to slow its spread. The ways in which those steps and decisions about how to prioritize human lives in

health-care rationing, among other contexts, have a long history of devaluing disabled lives.) Many disabled individuals were not able to live up to the new industrial-economic standard of worth. When connected with a "survival of the fittest" and "the weak die out because they can't keep up" mentality, eugenic thought and social structures were not far behind.

The push for "progress" contributed to eugenic understandings that have resulted in mass institutionalization, forced sterilization, disability-based defenses of slavery, and indeed genocide. If "the Enlightenment has done its best to rubbish church history," 2019: 243), it has also done its best to rubbish inherent human value.[17] Now, one might object that on an Epicurean picture, the question of how god (or gods) relate to disability does not come up. At the core of the Epicurean cosmology is, according to Wright, a total removal of the gods from the domain of creation. If the gods are not engaged with creation at all, it follows that they would not be engaged with that part of creation that includes human disability. But Christianity cannot make this move if it is to remain faithful to its incarnational center, given that the crux of Christianity is that God directly enters and shapes creation in the person of Jesus. Human value is highlighted and affirmed rather than rubbished.

Eschatology and Redemption

As already indicated, one central theme of Wright's Gifford lectures is the linkage between history and eschatology. Misunderstanding history contributes to misunderstanding the doctrine of eschatology and its role. One such misunderstanding is the supposed belief by first-century Jews in the imminent end of the world that would bring about escape into an other-worldly heaven. Wright describes this view as "a modern myth."[18]

> A quick "historical" glance through some more Jewish texts—Josephus, say, or the admittedly more sketchy evidence for the bar-Kochba revolt—would have shown that the "end of the world" picture bore no relation to what actual first-century Jews believed. Some Jews did indeed expect the kingdom to come through miraculous acts of divine providence, but the new "kingdom" would still consist of *a new state of affairs on earth*, not the abolition of earth and its replacement with something completely different.
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> (2019: 58; emphasis original)

In this context, Wright also notes Platonism's influence on Christian culture, an influence that goes back at least as far as Augustine. While not all parts of Platonism necessarily need to be rejected,[19] its dualism about the human person has led to "modern Western Christianity abandon[ing] the biblical hope of new creation and bodily resurrection" in favor of a gnostic escapism (2019: 33).[20] If the present world "is not my home" but instead "a vale of tears," then the resulting escapist eschatology will naturally lend itself toward

the assumption that we should likewise seek to escape disability as a form of suffering to be avoided.[21] "The Gnostic believes, not in 'redemption,' but in 'revelation,' the unveiling of the true self rather than its death and resurrection" (Wright 2019: 35).[22]

In contrast, Christianity rejects the attempt to escape either the body or the present world. Instead, for Christianity, "new creation means new *creation*, the *renewal* of the present world rather than its abandonment and replacement by some other kind of world altogether" (Wright 2017: 2; emphasis original). For Wright, the original creation is included within, though transcended by, God's eschatological purposes in the new creation. Christian hope is in redemption, not escapism, a central theme in Wright's *Surprised by Hope*. For instance, in talking about 1 Corinthians 15, Wright describes it as "a theology of new creation, not of the abandonment of creation" (2008: 155). The coming Kingdom of God "refers not to our escape from this world into another one, but to God's sovereign rule coming 'on earth as it is in heaven'" (2008: 18). Christianity affirms the goodness of creation in which "the age to come" has already been inaugurated in Christ's bodily death and resurrection, the ultimate eschatological signpost—the arrival of the new creation in the midst of time, a proleptic anticipation of future cosmic redemption.[23] The Christian hope, rooted in participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, is not escapism or the abolition of the old world, but rather in being set free from death, decay, and destruction. In a word, redemption.

A full grasp of redemption must include its social and political dimensions. As mentioned above, too often Christian theology has seen disability in terms of the fall, personal sin, and bodies that must be "cured" in order to be redeemed. "Seeing 'heaven' and 'earth' as two utterly different and incompatible spheres of existence, as in Epicureanism, and in a sense as also in Platonism" (2019: 176) enables us to think of those with disabilities as "broken bodies" from which we likewise need to escape. Disability, on this way of thinking, becomes something that needs to be viewed as part of the old earth to be escaped, rather than something to be redemptively transformed in the age to come. Wright's discussion of Jesus' healing the man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5, where he connects the command to "get up" with the resurrection strikes me as at least encouraging belief that disability is to be escaped (2002: 57). But once we instead start thinking of redemption as consisting of bodily, corporate, and political dimensions, we can see Jesus's healing ministry less in terms of fixing broken bodies and more as disabled individuals being set free from the exclusion and ostracism they have experienced.[24] This ministry of deliverance from oppression is subversive to present power structures:

> Those who pray that God's kingdom will come and his will be done "on earth as it is in heaven" are *ipso facto* committed to focusing on real life, real space-time-and-matter existence, *not as an illustration of*

> *abstract truth but as the ultimate reality to which the best "abstract truths" bear humble witness.*
>
> (2019: 74; emphasis original)[25]

The coming kingdom of God is about the redemption and reconstruction of the present power structures that harm and exclude. Without undoing this harm and exclusion and marginalization, we cannot form the community we are called to (2011b: 265ff). If image-bearers are, in the new heavens and new earth, to "implement the intentions of the creator, . . . summoned and equipped to take forward the creator's purposes,"(2019: 170) then we need to rethink how we understand the *imago* as it relates to disability so that we do not exclude disabled individuals from full participation in God's kingdom.[26] Elsewhere, I have argued that not only do we *not* need to see all forms of disability as taking away from our eschatological perfection, but that there might actually be reasons to think that disability can contribute to and be a constitutive component of that eschatological state.[27] There is, I contend, no reason to think that disabilities lack the capacity to be signposts to the goodness of God and creation:

> The resurrection, in fact, assures us that all that we have known in the present creation, all that we have glimpsed of glory and wisdom and creational goodness, will indeed be rescued from corruption and decay and transformed into the new mode the Creator always intended.
>
> (2019: 212; emphasis original)

With disabilities, as with creation in general, we can transcend the "either/or" mentality of Epicureanism in favor of redemptive transformation.

The new creation is *creatio ex vetere* rather than a fresh *creatio ex nihilo*; Christ's resurrection "*retrospectively and transformatively validated* what was there before" (2019: 200). The new creation is inaugurated in Christ's resurrection, which reaffirms the goodness of the original creation. And while Jesus did engage in healing ministries, we need to keep in mind both that he did not (and does not) heal everyone with a disability, and that healings often were more about restoration of persons to the community than about bodies in particular.[28] Disability theologian Nancy Eiesland goes so far as to argue that Jesus himself was disabled in the resurrection. Speaking of Jesus's post-resurrection appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem, recounted in Luke 24, she writes:

> Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood,

> underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.
>
> (1994: 100)

Unfortunately, Eiesland does not specify what the disability is that the incarnate God has. She appears to endorse the impairment/disability distinction that is at the core of the social model of disability, since earlier in *The Disabled God*, she allows that someone could have an impairment and not be disabled if they have not been "single[d] out for differential treatment" or "shaped primarily by exclusion" (1994: 24).[29]

Even if, as I have argued elsewhere,[30] it is not obvious that Jesus was impaired, much less disabled, he would not need to be for the crux of my point here to hold. What is affirmed in the resurrection is the goodness of the human body, not just those that meet some idealization that rules out disabilities *a priori*. Bodies are not left behind. And Jesus was not afraid of messy, culturally despised bodies. Jesus's alignment with the marginalized—the outcast, the downtrodden, the culturally despised—should shape how the renewed community that is his body engages and values disabled individuals. And the fact that our bodies—including disabled bodies—are resurrected rather than replaced should compel us to recognize the goodness of disabled bodies. In both his historical time and ours, they are too often pushed to the margins not only of our communities but of our theological narratives. In later parts of *History and Eschatology*, Wright argues that Christian natural theology is centrally connected with love, which he takes to be "the most complete form of knowledge"—a kind of knowledge "*including* not bypassing historical knowledge in particular" (2019: 187). Knowing and loving are both "whole person" activities. They are both also inherently communal. If we are to know and love disabled folks, they have to be a part of our communities, especially our communities of faith. We have to make sure that they are not only welcomed but valued. It is hard to engage with people if they do not feel welcome, do not feel wanted, and if their contributions are not taken seriously.[31] Loving and caring for disabled individuals requires that we foreground their concerns.[32] However, history shows us that attempts to love and care for disabled individuals can go really wrong, especially when we do not give them the opportunity to shape what that care looks like. Too many of our practices and our theologies do not center on disabled individuals. As a result, we fail by passing over them in silence.[33] But love, as Wright himself argues, requires engagement (2008: 73).

The last two chapters of *History and Eschatology*, as with the final section of his earlier *Surprised by Hope*, do not give us a step-by-step argument, but rather a sweeping vision of the kingdom inaugurated and coming. Exactly what kind of vision we need is itself contingent on our own histories; our history shapes how we address theological questions and how we read the biblical texts. Other biblical scholars have shown what a more nuanced

rereading of the biblical texts surrounding disability might look like.[34] In these chapters, Wright returns to the idea of signposts:

> All this alerts us to the possibility to be explored in the next chapter: that the strange signposts we find in the present world, though in the dark of midnight they may seem to point nowhere, or even to be some kind of sick joke, are after all true, if broken, signposts to the ultimate realities of God and the world.
>
> (2019: 213)

And if the signposts have something to do with "the horror, shame, and injustice of the world" (2019: 214), then we should not be surprised to see a key place for disability given the horror, shame, and injustice directed at disabled individuals throughout history.

Both in *History and Eschatology* and in his more recent *Broken Signposts*, Wright looks to seven specifically vocational signposts which are observed across different societies and times: justice, beauty, freedom, truth, power, spirituality, and relationships.[35] (As Wright notes, these seven are not fully separable or isolatable from each other.) Each of these vocations is ripe for a more thorough exploration from the standpoint of a theology of disability. I have only touched on it briefly above, but others have documented well the history of injustices toward the disabled community.[36] The fight for disability civil rights can be seen as a communal struggle to secure more just treatment, for liberation to "put the world right" (2020b: 6). Disability aesthetics seeks to, among other things, change how negative stereotypes toward disabled bodies impact our perception of beauty. Not only has forced institutionalization curtailed the freedoms of many disabled individuals, but disability rights movements like the independent living movement are attempts to increase freedoms and kinds of autonomy often denied to disabled individuals. And extending these freedoms and autonomy to individuals, rather than denying them simply on the basis of disability, is intertwined with justice. None of these vocations is immune to the need for engagement with disability. Wright describes these as "broken signposts, promising much but failing to deliver" (2019: 235); too often that also describes the Church's attempts to love its disabled members.

Conclusion

To what do these signposts point, if we ourselves are not too broken to recognize? "*At the very moment of their failure, they point to the ultimate broken signpost, which turns out to be the place in real life, in concrete history, where the living God is truly received, known and loved*" (original emphasis; 2019: 237). Wright suggests that natural theology should thus focus on the second person of the Trinity rather than the first, where the distinctly Christian engagement with history is centered. Taking the bodily

particularity of the incarnation seriously should encourage us to take seriously the bodily particularity of disability as well.[37] These signposts are also connected with the Church's mission. For Wright, the new and expansive approach to natural theology that he advocates, this "new-creational eschatology," must "issue in the flesh-and-blood *missio Dei*" (2019: 248). Natural theology leads to praxis because, for Wright, natural theology is essentially vocational.[38] It is "the task of the church . . . to take up that sense of injustice, to bring it to speech, to help people both articulate it and, when they are ready to do so, to turn it into prayer" (2008: 231). This vocation directly connects back to the discussion earlier about the need for theology to be liberatory. We must, in the poetic lyrics from Bruce Cockburn, "kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight" rather than seek release from the world or history. If history is to frame the vision of God who enters and encounters us in history, then we must also take seriously the ways that the Church as the body of that same incarnate God has failed to live into and extend that mission of liberation—not only to disabled individuals, but certainly including them. We have, too often, settled for a "*quietism that leaves the world as it is and thus allows evil to proceed unchecked*" (2008: 269; emphasis in the original). We must do better.[39] It is unfortunate that even when writing about topics directly pertinent to disabled individuals,[40] disability functionally disappears from the otherwise compelling portrayal Wright gives.

On the whole, Wright's eschatological vision through his written corpus is a call to a wider and deeper approach to natural theology. "Those who discern the dawn must awaken the world" (2019: 248). And I have tried to show how disability theology is central to the theological project that Wright is already engaged in, even if he has not made that connection explicit himself. First, we must notice how our theology has silenced and used as a justification for oppression. We must then seek to bring healing, hope, and liberation to those currently suffering marginalization if we are to participate in the realization of the inaugurated eschatology that, as Wright described it, lies at the heart of the gospel. We must work to realize the hope that our theology points to.

May those of us who seek to follow Wright's lead and take history seriously also take the history of disability oppression and exclusion seriously because "*we* fail to deliver" (2020b: 189). May we learn how to be the community that we are called to be toward all, recognizing that sometimes disability has been the boundary by which we have excluded others or been excluded ourselves, so that we can realize our professed eschatology.[41]

Notes

1 For instance, there are a number of places where Wright adopts potentially ableist language, such as referring to unbelief as "a blindness that can be overcome" (Wright 2019: 260; see also Wright 2011: 116). Of course, he is here using a biblical metaphor, but that, in my view, does not mean that the underlying ableist

assumptions that inform even some of the biblical writers are not problematic (see, for instance, Melcher, Parsons, and Yong 2017; Wilder 2016; Yong 2011 for concerns about ableism in biblical texts). It is also surprising that in Chapter 10 of *Surprised by Hope*, dedicated to a discussion of "The Redemption of our Bodies," there is not a single mention of disability as it relates to that hope.

2 Of course, exactly what the project (or projects) of natural theology is (or are) is itself a complex question, as Wright himself notes in the preface to *History and Eschatology*. Wright takes it "for granted that underneath all these various ways of understanding 'natural theology' there lies the great theological and philosophical challenge of talking about God and the world and the relation between them" (x). Wright's book is an attempt to see "whether a biblical theology might offer some fresh parameters within which the old questions would appear in a different light" (2019: x–xi).

3 Mitch Mallary points out that theology may be contextual for Wright and Cone in different ways, with the former focusing primarily on the original context of Christian origins with Cone focusing on how the liberative message of Jesus ought to shape our present context. That strikes me as a helpful point; with this in mind, perhaps the lacuna I see in Wright's work is that he does not make explicit enough what the Gospel's call for liberation might look like for disabled individuals in our present context.

4 The letter can be found here: https://ntwrightpage.com/2021/03/27/anti-racism-in-the-church/. I thank Joshua Cockayne for bringing it to my attention. In fact, Wright's vision of what the early Christian social imagination was forces us to think about how Christian theology has played out so badly with regard to its history in terms of supporting oppression rather than liberation. Failure to ensure that the Gospel was liberatory at its core reiterates rather than addresses this gap. In fact, it may be that given the actual history of Christian theology, the failure to include a sufficient role for liberation in our eschatological thinking has resulted in a situation where omission becomes commission. I thank Sameer Yadav for helping me think about these issues. See Jantzen (2021) for a worthwhile discussion.

5 "Undermining Racism," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwohWaJHOp0, beginning at 5:25. In this talk, Wright gives an impressive application of his larger eschatology to issues connected to race. "The racism, both casual and institutional, that we so deplore today is but one outworking of the much deeper failure of Western Protestantism" (beginning at 23:15); later in the talk, Wright connects institutional racism directly with the Platonic influence on eschatology discussed below. It is not obvious from what he says there exactly how Platonism contributes to institutional racism, an external explanation, rather than Christian institutions simply failing to live up to their calling, which is an internal explanation.

6 See Wright (2011): 121f.

7 Of course, the claims about the historicity of the incarnate Christ are contested, and Wright is taking for granted a number of central theological claims that are at the heart of Christianity. Some of his earlier work also "challenges the easy-going proposals which have often been advanced for disbelieving in Jesus' bodily resurrection" (2019: 192). See, for instance, Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of* God, Chapter 18. That said, he does not believe that there can be a knock-down argument for the historicity of Jesus' bodily resurrection (2019: 197). But all arguments have assumptions, and I see no reason to deny Wright his.

8 At times, the Christo-centric account of the project of natural theology Wright is working with seems to exclude the appropriateness of, say, Islamic natural theology, given that such an approach would not be "looking for a god nailed to the cross in history"; see pages 191, 255, 316n3 for instances of this exclusion.

He explains this reasoning for this approach in Chapter 7, though I am not convinced. While it strikes me as a historically problematic way to think about the project of natural theology, particularly in other religious traditions, for present purposes, I simply note and set aside this concern.

9 See, for instance, Steward (2017), "Leviticus—Deuteronomy" and Ackerman (2011). If, as Wright argues, creation is seen as "a macro-Temple, God's Palace" (2019: 163), given that disabled individuals were not allowed to be priests, one can see how this view would encourage thinking of disability as the kind of thing that needs to be excluded.

10 See also (2020b): 4.

11 See Wright (2018, 2019).

12 Among others, see Rembis et al. (2018), Longmore and Umansky (2001), and Burch and Rembis (2014). I do appreciate that Wright is willing to admit quite clearly that the Church has often been wrong about important matters; see Wright (2019): 122.

13 See Timpe (2019, 2020) and Efird (2019). This exclusion is not unproblematic for being unintentional.

14 Cf. Wright 2019: 24.

15 See Wright (2019): 18: "Alongside the political revolutions, there was, second, the rise of pre- Darwinian evolutionism. Note the 'ism': this wasn't just a theory about biology; it was a worldview in which an evolution without divine guidance played a necessary role." It should not be surprising that social Darwinist impulses have greatly contributed to eugenics, both outside and within the Church. See, for instance, Rosen (2004).

16 See, for instance, Wright (2008): 68, 81ff.

17 The devaluing of disabled lives was not new in the Enlightenment, of course. But it did arguably make disability oppression significantly worse.

18 Here, he means myth in "the more technical sense of a story told by a community to sustain a particular view of its common life and purpose" (Wright 2019: 47).

19 Wright is rejecting its cosmology, anthropology, and implied soteriology, rather than all of its metaphysical or ethical aspects.

20 This is a theme that Wright has emphasized for quite some time; see also (Wright 1998, 2008, 2008b, 2017). The connection between ableist assumptions and escape from the body is not hard to come by. For a discussion of rejecting dualism in thinking about disability, see Eli Clare's discussion of the "body-mind" in Clare (2017).

21 For a discussion of the problematic conflation of disability and suffering in philosophical and theological contexts, see Yancey and Timpe (2023).

22 Here we see a remnant of Wright's ongoing debates with those in the "apocalyptic" school of Pauline interpreters.

23 I owe this way of putting the point to Mitch Mallary.

24 In this context, Wright's discussion of the man with an unclean spirit in Mark 5 is helpful; see Wright (2001): 54–57. See also the broader discussion in Moss (2017).

25 See also Wright (2008b).

26 Granted, Wright interprets the *imago* primarily in vocational rather than ontological terms, where it is our vocation to reflect God's glory and power; see Wright (2020a): 99f, 67ff. But even on this approach to the *imago*, disabled individuals can be given a more central role to play in this vocation than they have often been allowed to.

27 See Timpe (2020, 2019).

28 See Fox (2019) and Yong (2011). This emphasis strikes me as consistent with Wright's treatment of the demoniac in Mark 5; see Wright (1996).

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29 For a related discussion of the marks of disability, specifically those caused by martyrdom, see Williams (2018), particularly 4f.
30 See Timpe (2019): 246f. Transformed and incorruptible bodies are not, without argument, necessarily "cured" bodies. Imagine if the discussion of "Resurrection Beauty" in Wright (2020a) had included disability as a vehicle for beauty.
31 Kinard (2019) is a useful introduction to what disability-centric theology might look like.
32 For an excellent discussion of care as it relates to disabled individuals, see Kittay (2019).
33 One need not intend to silence a theological concern to nevertheless silence it. For a discussion of this point as applied to a different issue, see Cone (2004).
34 The best single resource here is Melcher, Parsons, and Yong 2017; see also Wilder (2016), especially Chapter 2.
35 This list is taken from Wright (2019). In Wright (2020b), "relationship" is replaced with the more specific "love."
36 For three excellent discussions, see Baynton (2001), Nielsen (2012), and Shapiro (1993).
37 Nancy Eiesland's *The Disabled God* (1994) has been extremely influential on this score, even if it is more provocative than carefully argued.
38 See Wright (2017).
39 See Conner (2018), Kinard (2019), Timpe (2018), and Yong (2011).
40 For example, "the present hope that is the basis of all Christian Mission" (Wright 2008: 191) and the discussion throughout part III of *Surprised by Hope*. Many of the social justice issues Wright treats there have clear parallels to disability, not simply in the developing world but even in the US and the UK.
41 Thanks to Mitch Mallary, Joshua Cockayne, Barrett Emerick, and Tim Pawl for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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