

King Saul & the Stigma of Madness



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King Saul & the Stigma of Madness

I. Introduction

“Is this demon possession?” The young police officer whispered what others wonder. He spoke from a lifetime of hearing the Bible in our Bible-Belt metropolis. He had come to Holy Comforter’s Friendship Center, a gathering place for people with chronic mental illness,¹ as a member of a Crisis Intervention Training Class conducted by NAMI Georgia.² The objective of the visit was to expose these first responders to people with mental illness outside of a crisis to help them see past the stigma of mental illness.

The question of demon possession and mental illness is not new to Holy Comforter. Once, a young woman with, she said, schizoaffective disorder³ recalled her humiliation when her husband took her before their church for an exorcism. More recently, a regular worshipper reported that she and others from her group home had been taken to another church where “the service lasted six hours” and “they said we have demons.” Smiling broadly, she added, “I like this church better.”

Readers who filter the Bible through a modern mindset easily forget those who hear the Bible as literal truth or regard every word as historically and scientifically accurate. The former, even when they take the Bible seriously, dismiss references to demon possession as a peculiarity of ancient, pre-scientific cultures, which readily attributed illnesses to spirits or deities. The latter, however, may still entertain the possibility that demons are real operators today. Faced

¹ On Sundays, about 60 percent of Holy Comforter’s worshippers are people living with a chronic mental illness, many surviving on small disability checks. The Friendship Center provides community engagement for 80 to 100 members and neighbors living with mental illness. See <http://holycomforter.episcopalatlanta.org>.

² See <http://namiga.org/CIT/index.htm>.

³ For a description of this condition, see E. Fuller Torrey, *Surviving Schizophrenia: A Manual for Families, Patients, and Providers*, 5th ed. (New York: Collins, 2006), 71-75.

with people whose behaviors resemble those that biblical texts attribute to evil spirits from God or to demons, many ask, “Could this be demon possession?”

This perspective is not as rare as we sometimes assume. A survey by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) found that, overall, 12% of its lay members believe that “demon possession is an important cause of mental illness.” When certain sub-groups are isolated, the percentages increase significantly: “29% of those who self-identify as theologically conservative,” “34% of those who believe the Bible is ‘to be taken literally word for word,’” and “32% of those whose formal schooling ended with high school or earlier.”⁴ In addition, our complex, multicultural society includes perspectives on mental illness and divine or demonic spirits from across the world. Esler reports the following from a worldwide survey of theories of illness:

Of 139 cultures surveyed ..., spirit aggression was the most common cause of disease in 78 and an important secondary cause in 40 others.... Belief in spirit aggression as a cause of illness is almost universal....⁵

When biblical texts assign a cause to madness, they point to divine activity or to demon possession. Given the prevalence of mental illness, our audiences will always include people touched by mental illness, either directly or through family or friends, and they will struggle with what such texts mean for them or their loved ones. Because such texts contribute to the painful stigma of mental illness in our society,⁶ we who interpret and preach them must not be oblivious to their destructive potential in the ears of the Other with mental illness or the Other who hears the Bible literally. (Often these Other’s coincide.) If our preaching, teaching, and pastoral care

⁴ John P. Marcum and Staff, “Mental Illness: The February 2006 Presbyterian Panel Survey,” (Louisville: Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2006), 8.

⁵ Philip F. Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” in *Biblical Studies-- Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 248.

⁶ See Holly Joan Toensing, “Living among the Tombs,” in *Thisabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, *Semeia Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 133.

are to mitigate the stigmatizing effect of these texts, their interpretation over the millennia,⁷ and their interaction with cultural assumptions, we must understand them in their literary and cultural context and in light of contemporary struggles with the issues of human dignity that attend mental illness and other disabling conditions. So armed, we can explore how to be “Other-wise”⁸ expositors and pastors, faithful both to the sacred text and to those in our cure.

To that end, this essay examines one biblical text that gives rise to questions about God, demons, and people with mental illness, in light of selected recent literature on disabilities and theology,⁹ and explores strategies for negating the stigmatizing potential of such texts. The selected text is that pertaining to Israel’s first king, Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD (1 Sam. 16:14-23). First, however, we consider the prevalence and the stigma of mental illness.

A. Prevalence of Mental Illness

According to Torrey and Miller, mental illness is an invisible epidemic, and the incidence of mental illness is increasing.¹⁰ In 2003, the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health described the prevalence of mental illness in our society:

Mental illnesses are shockingly common; they affect almost every American family. It can happen to a child, a brother, a grandparent, or a co-worker. It can happen to someone from any background – African American, Alaska Native, Asian American, Hispanic American, Native American, Pacific Islander, or White American. It can occur at any stage of life, from childhood to old age. No community is unaffected by mental illnesses; no school or workplace is untouched.

In any given year, about 5% to 7% of adults have a serious mental illness, according to several nationally representative studies. A similar percentage of children – about 5% to

⁷ For a brief survey of the history of disabilities in the Bible and the church, see Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 19ff.

⁸Cf. John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001).

⁹ See Appendix A for reading list.

¹⁰ E. Fuller Torrey and Judy Miller, *The Invisible Plague: The Rise of Mental Illness from 1750 to the Present* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 299.

9% - have a serious emotional disturbance. These figures mean that millions of adults and children are disabled by mental illnesses every year.¹¹

The numbers increase dramatically when not limited to “serious mental illness.” According to the National Institute of Mental Health,

[a]n estimated 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older – about one in four adults – suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. When applied to the 2004 U.S. Census residential population estimate for ages 18 and older, this figure translates to 57.7 million people.... In addition, mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the U.S. and Canada....¹²

These numbers include a broad range of disorders diagnosed on the basis of criteria set forth in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*,¹³ including cognitive disorders (e.g. dementia), substance-related disorders, psychotic disorders (e.g., schizophrenia), mood disorders (e.g., depression and bipolar disorder), anxiety disorders, sexual disorders, and many others. For our purposes, diagnostic specificity is not necessary, but awareness of the prevalence of mental illness is.

B. Stigma of Mental Illness

Like other impairments, mental illness produces disability in two ways: (1) it directly impedes functioning of the persons affected; and (2) it triggers prejudicial responses that produce socially constructed impediments to their functioning.¹⁴ These responses, often called “stigma,” compound the disabling effects of the person’s medical condition.

Fear is a significant component of the stigma of mental illness:

¹¹ New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, “Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America. Final Report,” (Rockville, Md.: New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003), 2.

¹² National Institute of Mental Health, “The Numbers Count: Mental Disorders in America,” <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-numbers-count-mental-disorders-in-america/index.shtml#Intro>.

¹³ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric, 2000).

¹⁴ Martin Albl, ““For Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong,”” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, *Semeia Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 145.

In a 1996 survey, the public's perception of mental illnesses was frequently associated with the fear of violence Selective media reporting may reinforce negative stereotypes linking mental illnesses and violence, though studies have shown that the absolute risk of violence posed by persons with mental illnesses is small¹⁵

There is more, however, than fear behind stigma. It involves also the economics of disability. Our society tends to value people in terms of productivity, their contribution in the "economy of exchange."¹⁶ Economic contribution justifies existence. The economy has no room for those whose needs outweigh their contribution. In spite of their capabilities, people with disabilities are often presumed worthless and incapacitated.¹⁷

In recent years, we have made modest progress against the stigma of various illnesses and traumatic life experiences, but we have made little, if any, progress in erasing the stigma of mental illness. One government report finds that "despite the fact that public understanding of mental illnesses has grown since the 1950's, stigma and fear have increased."¹⁸ It remains a major impediment to maximal inclusion of people with mental illness in our communities, churches, and workforce.

The President's New Freedom Commission describes the stigma of mental illness and its effects on the welfare of people with mental illness as follows:

Stigma refers to a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid, and discriminate against people with mental illnesses. Stigma is widespread in the United States and other Western nations. Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing, or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders — especially severe disorders, such as schizophrenia. It leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking and wanting to pay for care. Responding to stigma, people with mental health problems internalize public

¹⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Blueprint for Change: Ending Chronic Homelessness for Persons with Serious Mental Illnesses and Co-Occurring Substance Use Disorders," (Rockville, Md.: U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, 2003), 26.

¹⁶ See Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2008), 56ff.

¹⁷ Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 108.

¹⁸ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Blueprint for Change," 26.

attitudes and become so embarrassed or ashamed that they often conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment.¹⁹

The impact of stigma on society's care for people with mental illness is so significant that reduction of stigma is the first of the Commission's two recommendations for transforming our mental health system:

1.1 Advance and implement a national campaign to reduce the stigma of seeking care and a national strategy for suicide prevention.

1.2 Address mental health with the same urgency as physical health.²⁰

As communities of love and acceptance, churches are well positioned to fight the stigma of mental illness, but often they are among its chief purveyors. They too easily baptize the values of the economies of exchange, and they are custodians of ancient texts that (1) attribute mental illness to spiritual causes,²¹ (2) disqualify from divine service based on bodily imperfections,²² (3) use metaphors of disability for spiritual deficiencies,²³ and (4) resolve cases of mental illness and other disabilities primarily by "erasure" of the disabled person, *i.e.*, by cure or restoration to wholeness, rather than through acceptance and accommodation.²⁴ There are a

¹⁹ New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, "Achieving the Promise," 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ See Neal H. Walls, "The Origins of the Disabled Body: Disability in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, *Semeia Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 25; Toensing, "Living among the Tombs," 133f; Abl, "For Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong," 153, 57.

²² See Sarah J. Melcher, "Visualizing the Perfect Cult: The Priestly Rationale for Exclusion," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 55ff.

²³ See Sarah J. Melcher, "With Whom Do the Disabled Associate? Metaphorical Interplay in the Latter Prophets," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, *Semeia Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 115ff. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance': Disability and Redemption in Biblical Literature," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, *Semeia Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 176.

²⁴ See Mitchell and Snyder, "Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance': Disability and Redemption in Biblical Literature," 178-83; Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 71.

few notable efforts in churches to fight stigma and to foster churches as safe and inviting communities in which people with mental illness can flourish, but substantially more is needed.²⁵

C. A Word about “Madness”

“Madness” and its cognates, with their history of pejorative use, are among the several problematic terms for designating mental illness. Yet, they are the most frequently used terms for this purpose in the NRSV. Most ways of designating mental illness and other disabilities are so fraught with negative implications that writers often justify their choices.²⁶ Every choice of terminology has shortcomings, and many inevitably reflect the stigma of mental illness. To those interested in a recovery model, common terms such as “mental illness” and “mental/brain disorders” may manifest an unwelcome bias toward the medical model for understanding or treating mental health issues or, as Hauerwas argues, a bias toward charity rather than justice.²⁷ The term “disability” itself can contribute to a greater focus on people’s incapability than their capabilities. This concern extends to how we speak of people who experience mental illness.

If we shun terms such as “lunatic” or “madman,” what terms should we use? Many prefer person-first language, avoiding, for example, terms such as “the mentally ill” in favor of terms such as “people with mental illness.” Consider Kathy Black’s approach:

In respect to those with particular disabilities, I will always name the person first and then the disability that the person lives with: man who is blind, boy with epilepsy. Terms such as “epileptic,” “demoniac,” and “blind man” identify the person *as* their disability, rather than identifying their disability as one part of the person’s life.²⁸

²⁵ See Appendix B for a list of mental health resources for congregations.

²⁶ See, e.g., John Swinton, ed. *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Retarded, Society, and the Family: The Dilemma of Care,” in *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*, ed. John Swinton (New York: Routledge, 2004), 171.

²⁸ Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 17.

In a world that has long stigmatized, excluded, and dehumanized people with mental illness, such sensitivity to terminology is not an exercise in political correctness, but a reflection of the struggle for freedom from stigma and recognition and respect as human beings, each, like all, uniquely limited and uniquely capable. This essay does not adopt any particular terminology but aims for respectful writing that puts humanity, not disease or disorder, in the foreground.

II. King Saul & the Evil Spirit: 1 Samuel 16:14-23

There are few texts in the whole Bible relating to madness. In the Old Testament, the “most important”²⁹ is the story of Saul in 1 Samuel 8-31. It is the first story in the Bible to suggest the presence of mental illness in a principal character. “The narrative of King Saul’s election, rejection, madness, and demise provides one of the most sustained depictions in the biblical corpus of what we would call mental illness.”³⁰ Because stigma so often involves fear of violent behavior or the suspicion that mental illness springs from a spiritual root, whether as punishment or discipline from God, as demonic activity, or as the psychic consequence of a disordered spiritual life, the case of King Saul offers rich fodder for rumination on stigma, God, and the church.

A. God’s Spirit Possesses Saul in Power

As Israel’s first king, Saul is on the cusp of the hotly contested transition from a tribal to a centralized, monarchical society.³¹ According to 1 Samuel 8, the people, seeing that Samuel is growing old and that his sons are scoundrels, push Samuel to appoint a king over Israel. Samuel resists, but God says to give them a king, for “they have not rejected you but have rejected me

²⁹ Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” 221.

³⁰ Rebecca Raphael, “Madly Disobedient: The Representation of Madness in Handel’s Oratorio *Saul*,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 7.

³¹ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., “First Samuel,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, and Jouette M. Bassler (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 389.

from being king over them” (8:7). Reluctantly, Samuel reports God’s words to the people, warning them of the acquisitive and oppressive ways of kings and of the dangers of this choice: “you shall be his slaves” (8: 18).

The narrative turns next to the young man Saul, whose mission to find lost donkeys brings him to the house of Samuel. Samuel privately anoints him king and tells him to go to Gilgal and wait for seven days until Samuel comes to offer sacrifices and show him what to do. As he leaves, God gives him another heart. On the way Saul joins a band of prophets, the spirit of God possesses him, and he falls into frenzy with them (10:9f).

In the meantime, Samuel summons the people to meet the LORD at Mizpah. There he berates them for rejecting God and demanding a king, but proceeds to select a king by lot. As the clans pass before him, the lot falls on Saul’s family and then on Saul. Saul, however, is absent. They find him hiding among the baggage (10:22). Once king, Saul gathers a band of warriors and returns home to plow the fields. In spite of this inauspicious and ambiguous beginning to Saul’s reign, God’s spirit comes upon Saul in power (11:6), and he proves himself an able warrior and leader, soon repelling a threat from the Ammonites (ch. 11).

From the first, however, Saul has a problem: Samuel “does not stay retired,”³² but maintains a position of control as God’s representative. When Saul finally arrives in Gilgal, more than a month after the events at Mizpah, a huge Philistine army threatens his small army. As directed, they wait for seven days for Samuel to come and offer sacrifices (ch. 13). Samuel is late, and Saul’s army begins to desert. Anxious, Saul offers the sacrifice. As soon as he finishes, Samuel arrives and, seeing what Saul has done, confronts him. Saul defends his actions: “When I saw that the people were slipping away from me ..., I forced myself, and offered the burnt

³² John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 223.

offering” (13:11f). Condemning Saul’s action as foolish and disobedient, Samuel plants the seed of Saul’s madness:

“The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you” (13:13f).

Traces of Saul’s unraveling soon appear. When the Philistines are fleeing Saul’s army, he commits “a very rash act,” putting his troops under oath not to eat “before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies” (14:24). The penalty for violation is death, no matter who the offender might be. Unaware of this proscription, Saul’s son Jonathan eats honey while pursuing the Philistines and, when his soldiers tell him of the oath, charges his father with troubling the land. When Saul learns of Jonathan’s violation, he prepares to put him to death, but the people stop him.

Saul’s victories continue and his power grows, though under the shadow of Samuel’s prophecy. When the time comes to take vengeance on Israel’s ancient enemy, the Amalekites,³³ Samuel commands their utter destruction, not sparing woman or man, child or infant, ox or sheep, cattle or donkey (ch. 15). Saul’s army destroys all the people, but Saul and the people spare the Amalekite king, Agag, and “the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable” (15:9). The LORD tells Samuel that Saul has disobeyed. When Samuel confronts Saul, he claims to have obeyed, but the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the cattle betray him. Saul accepts responsibility for sparing Agag, but blames the people for preserving the spoils. Finally, Saul confesses his sin: “I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice” (15:24). He begs for pardon, but Samuel says, “The LORD has torn the kingdom from you this

³³ See Exodus 17:8-13.

very day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you” (15:28). Nevertheless, Samuel preserves Saul’s honor before the elders of Israel by remaining while Saul worships the LORD (15:30f).

B. God’s Spirit Departs, and an Evil Spirit Torments Saul

Shortly, the LORD sends Samuel to anoint David to be Saul’s successor. Once David is anointed, the narrative reports, “The spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward” (16:13). Immediately, 1 Samuel recounts the onset of Saul’s madness (though the text never uses this word of Saul): “Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him” (16:14).

This declaration is the first of several in which the text attributes Saul’s torment to “an evil spirit from the LORD.” In the next nine verses, this attribution appears three more times. It comes twice from Saul’s servants, who say to him,

“See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.” (16:16)

The third time comes after Saul agrees to their proposal and brings David into his court: “And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played ..., and Saul would be relieved ..., and the evil spirit would depart ...” (16:23).

Soon, however, David’s presence becomes a trigger for the evil spirit’s return. When he defeats Goliath, David becomes instantly popular. The people sing his praises, contrasting him to the king, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (18:7). This ditty angers Saul, who from that day eyes David with suspicion.

The next day “an evil spirit from God” rushes upon Saul, and he raves in his house while David plays the lyre. Saul tries to pin David to the wall with his spear. The narrator now states the problem in a nutshell: “Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him but had

departed from Saul” (18:12). The women’s honoring of David came at the expense of Saul’s honor. This “public shaming” is likely the trigger for Saul’s raving and his attempt on David’s life.³⁴

Saul sends David away from court, not banished, but as commander of an army. David’s military successes deepen Saul’s fear, but all Israel and Judah love him (18:15). That Saul’s daughter Michal, whom Saul has given to be David’s wife hoping she will be a snare to him, and his son Jonathan, the heir apparent, also love David aggravates Saul’s fear and anger (18:28f; 20:30ff). David makes one last attempt to remain in Saul’s court, but again “an evil spirit from the LORD” comes upon Saul, and again he tries to spear David (19:9f). Michal helps David escape, and he becomes a fugitive.

The last time the narrative reports the possession of Saul by the spirit from God harks back to Saul’s first possession by the spirit of the LORD (10:9ff). Saul, hearing that David has gone with Samuel to Naioth, sends messengers to take David, but they encounter a company of prophets in frenzy, with Samuel in charge, and they also fall into prophetic frenzy. Saul hears and sends other messengers, and the same thing happens, a second time and then a third. After the third time, Saul goes, and the spirit of God comes upon him. He falls into prophetic frenzy until he comes to Naioth. There, he strips off his clothes, falls into frenzy before Samuel, and lies there naked, all day and all night (19:18-24).

There is no more mention of the spirit of God and Saul for good or ill. Saul lives abandoned by God, fearful and suspicious, obsessed with murderous intent toward David and any who help him. He descends to his most vicious when, supposing that some priests have conspired with David against him, he orders the priests and their families slaughtered (ch. 22).

³⁴ Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” 240f.

Finally, mortally wounded by Philistines, Saul falls upon his sword, lest the Philistines make sport of him (ch. 31).

C. Was Saul mentally ill?

One way of sidestepping the issues that this story raises concerning contemporary experiences of mental illness is to deny that Saul is mentally ill. The text never says that Saul is mad, even though the narrator knows the terms “mad” and “madman” and uses them in the midst of this narrative to describe David’s feigned madness before King Achish.³⁵ Moreover, there are subtle suggestions that Saul is reactive and undisciplined in his thinking and behavior, for example, his hiding among the baggage, his propensity to blame the people when confronted by Samuel, and his rash oath. The ambiguity of his position from the start has made him insecure. Samuel, though anointing him, openly opposes having a king and does not cede authority to Saul. Add to this ambiguity Samuel’s two declarations that God has taken the throne from Saul’s house, David’s meteoric rise to fame, and the resulting shame to Saul, and there is an entirely rational reason for Saul’s insecurity and his “insane jealousy”³⁶ of David. We do not usually assume mental illness when a monarch or dictator ruthlessly eliminates his enemies.

This approach, however, fails to deal with the story as the Bible tells it and readers read it. Saul’s behavior is so much like that of people with a mental illness that some interpreters propose a diagnosis, for instance: “anxiety disorder featuring panic attacks,”³⁷ “psychosis—evidently , fits of depression later accompanied by paranoia,”³⁸ “fits of depression,”³⁹

³⁵ See 1 Sam. 21:13ff.

³⁶ Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 236.

³⁷ Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” 249.

³⁸ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 98, n. 14.

³⁹ Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 138.

“depression and paranoia,” or “perhaps manic depression.”⁴⁰ Other interpreters, while not attempting a diagnosis,⁴¹ speak in terms of mental illness, for example: “madness”⁴²; “troubled,” “disorder”⁴³; “psychological illness”⁴⁴; “inward feeling of depression ... , which grew into melancholy, and ... passing fits of insanity”⁴⁵; “a gloomy, suspicious melancholy, bordering on madness”⁴⁶; “melancholia”⁴⁷; “mental disorder” benefitted by “music therapy”⁴⁸; “cerebral disease,” “unhinging of mind”⁴⁹; “a mental illness.”⁵⁰

To argue that Saul’s behavior is not a mental illness would miss the point. His behavior suggests mental illness, and generations of interpreters and readers have made the association. Regardless of whether Saul is, in fact, mentally ill, the persistent association of his condition with mental illness and of mental illness with an evil spirit from God is a fact of our experience.

⁴⁰ Peter C. Craigie, “Saul,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 1911. See also Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 227.

⁴¹ “[W]e cannot diagnose his condition accurately three thousand years later” David F. Payne, *I & II Samuel*, Daily Study Bible: Old Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 84. On the other hand, some seem to think that diagnosis is “the dominant interpretive issue” in texts describing disabilities. See Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, eds., *This Aabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 2f.

⁴² D. M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Philip R. Davies, and D. M. Gunn, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1980), 81.

⁴³ Ralph W. Klein, *I Samuel*, vol. 10, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 165, 67.

⁴⁴ Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 227.

⁴⁵ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1873; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 1 Sam 16:14f.

⁴⁶ Fred E. Young, “First and Second Samuel,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1 Sam 16:14f.

⁴⁷ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 429.

⁴⁸ Shimon Bar-Efrat, “First Samuel,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 592.

⁴⁹ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed. *The Pulpit Commentary: I Samuel*, 51 vols. (London: Funk & Wagnalls, n.d.; reprint, Bellingham, Wash.: Logos Research, 2004), 314.

⁵⁰ Ben F. Philbeck, “1 Samuel,” in *The Teacher’s Bible Commentary: A Concise, Thorough Interpretation of the Entire Bible Designed Especially for Sunday School Teachers*, ed. Franklin H. Paschall and Herschel H. Hobbs (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1972), 172.

In our social context with its profound stigmatization of mental illness, such a text is troublesome. This is, as Nancy Eiesland writes, one of those biblical texts that are “deeply problematic” and “have been terrorizing for people with disabilities.”⁵¹

III. The Agency of God in Mental Illness

A. *The Deuteronomic Tradition*

This text is problematic, not because it describes behavior that suggests mental illness, but because it offers what sounds to our ears like a “theological diagnosis”⁵² of that behavior: an evil spirit from the Lord. In attributing Saul’s madness to an evil spirit from God, this text evokes a significant strand of Biblical thought grounded in Deuteronomy 28, which lists at length the blessings that come from obeying God and the curses that flow from disobedience to the commandments. Included in the list of curses are many illnesses and disabilities. One curse, in particular, makes us think of Saul: “The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind” (v. 28).

The “dominant critical hypothesis” puts the books of Samuel within the Deuteronomic history, “an extended narrative designed to trace the life of Israel from *land entry* (in the book of Joshua) to *land loss* (in the books of Kings).”⁵³ In the Deuteronomic tradition, enjoyment of the land depends upon obedience to the covenant, and loss follows disobedience. Though some scholars question the fit of the books of Samuel in this tradition,⁵⁴ the rationale for God’s taking

⁵¹ Nancy L. Eiesland, “Barriers and Bridges: Relating the Disability Rights Movement and Religious Organizations,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 217.

⁵² See Klein, *1 Samuel*, 165. Based on his cultural analysis, Esler rejects the proposal “that the spirit’s divine origin means Saul’s suffering is described ‘theologically’ as an anachronistic and ethnocentric imposition of a modern viewpoint on an ancient text.” Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” 248.

⁵³ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 131.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 131. Cf. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Abridged 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006).

the kingdom from Saul, which is marked by the withdrawal of God's spirit and the sending of an evil spirit (1 Sam. 16:14), certainly tracks that tradition.

B. The Madness of Nebuchadnezzar

Attribution of madness to the agency of God also occurs outside of the Deuteronomic tradition. In Daniel 4, a holy watcher from heaven decrees that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar's "mind be changed from that of a human" to "the mind of an animal" until he learns that the "Most High is sovereign over the kingdom of mortals" (v. 16f), because he imagines that he, not God, is the source of his might and glory (v. 30).

There are differences in the symptoms of Saul and Nebuchadnezzar, but the primary theological difference is that Saul's evil spirit is associated with permanent loss of Saul's kingship due to disobedience and Nebuchadnezzar's irrational behavior is associated with temporary loss of authority due to arrogance. In one case, madness is associated with punishment (though is not the punishment itself). In the other, it is disciplinary.⁵⁵ In both cases, God instigates the madness in a context in which God's judgment of human attitudes or actions is at play.

C. Interpretive Neglect

Though there are voices in the Old Testament that contest the association of affliction and loss with disobedience,⁵⁶ it does predominate, and it persists into the First Century.⁵⁷ Against the backdrop of this predominant mindset, some commentators recite the theological diagnosis of Saul's torment uncritically. One states, "Saul's tortured state was not ... a medical condition,"

⁵⁵ "The king has committed no sin for which punishment is due, but he has fallen into a condition in which he needs a lesson." Philip R. Davies, *Daniel*, ed. R.N. Whybray, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1985), 94.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., the Book of Job and Psalm 44.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., John 9:2.

but “a supernatural assault ... brought on by Saul’s disobedience.”⁵⁸ Some, possibly unwilling for God to be the direct source of an evil spirit, regard the evil spirit as “a demonic, satanic instrument” allowed by God.⁵⁹

In spite of the recognized similarity of Saul’s condition to mental illness, interpreters frequently ignore how this theological account of Saul’s torment can affect readers’ attitudes toward people with mental illness or how people with mental illness frame their own condition.⁶⁰ They also disregard its implication that mental illness manifests a peculiar moral or religious defect in the person with the condition requiring either divine punishment or discipline. We may all be sinners, the thinking goes, but people with mental illness must be especially bad and are to blame for their illness. The damage that such thinking (even if subconscious) can do to people with mental illness is incalculable.

IV. Strategies for Negating the Stigmatizing Potential of the Story of Saul’s Madness

How can we read this story as a sacred text that attributes Saul’s madness to an evil spirit from God while avoiding the stigmatizing implications for people with mental illness? The question, to use Melcher’s framework, is how to “de-sacralize stigma embedded within” this text

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 182. See also Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1 Sam 16:14ff; Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, (1873; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 1 Sam 16:14ff.

⁵⁹ Eugene H. Merrill, “1 Samuel,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1985), 448. See also Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, *The Tyndale Reference Library* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2001), 119.

⁶⁰ This has, by no means, been an encyclopedic survey of commentaries, but it does represent a broad sample that includes recent works and older works by diverse authors, conservative and critical, Catholic and Protestant. Other sources consulted, but not cited above, include the following: Patricia K. Tull, “1 and 2 Samuel,” in *Theological Bible Commentary*, ed. Gail R. O’Day and David L. Petersen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 106f; Anthony F. Campbell and James W. Flanagan, “1-2 Samuel,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 150; Gwilym H. Jones, “1 and 2 Samuel,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 208; Steve McKenzie, “1 Samuel,” in *The New Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. David L. Petersen and Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 194.

without “de-sacralizing” the text, that is, “what can biblical interpretation do to lessen that [stigmatizing] power without compromising the authority of the scriptural text?”⁶¹

A. *Some Help from the Exegetes*

McCarter unhelpfully minimizes the issue of mental illness and emphasizes the theological etiology of Saul’s suffering:

We may speak of mental illness if we want – Saul manifests some symptoms of paranoia, others of manic-depressive illness – but surely Hertzberg is correct to stress the fact that “Saul’s suffering is described theologically, not psycho-pathetically or psychologically.” The evil spirit is “from Yahweh” and will play its part in the working out of the divine plan.⁶²

Against McCarter, Esler argues that 1 Samuel describes Saul’s illness culturally, not theologically, citing research finding that belief in “spirit aggression” as a primary cause of mental illness remains nearly universal across the world’s cultures.⁶³ What the Bible expresses in terms of the LORD is a cross-cultural phenomenon that other cultures express in terms of other deities or spirits. It is not a peculiar theological affirmation of biblical religion. For readers who grasp that cultural translation is as essential as linguistic translation for the understanding of ancient (or otherwise foreign) texts, Esler’s argument may eliminate the issue. Other readers, however, may require less complex strategies.

Brueggemann warns against “twin dangers” of (1) reading Saul’s “situation as though it were the result of a supernatural theological verdict without reference to the experiential reality of life ...” or (2) seeking “to banish such supernaturalism by reducing his ailment to psychology.” “We shall,” he writes, “misunderstand ... if we appropriate the sickness as mere theology or only psychology.” Then he pinpoints our difficulty with this text:

⁶¹ Melcher, “Visualizing the Perfect Cult,” 69.

⁶² P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel: A New Translation*, vol. 8, The Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 280f.

⁶³ Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” 248.

Saul's problem is the visitation of an evil spirit It may trouble our positivistic minds that the disorder of Saul is attributed to an evil spirit, and it may trouble us more that the evil spirit is credited to God. We must remember that the world of biblical perspective is a world without secondary cause. All causes are finally traced back to God who causes all, who "kills and brings to life" (2:6). This narrative simply assumes that the world is ordered by the direct sovereign rule of God. All spirits that beset human persons are dispatched from this single source⁶⁴

This approach implicitly recognizes that there is no sharp distinction between the theology and the culture behind the text. More importantly, it affords even the conservative reader an option that requires neither rejection of the theological claim of the text nor acceptance of direct divine intervention to punish Saul with madness. In the broadest sense, God is responsible for Saul's evil spirit, as God is responsible for sunrises, hurricanes, or oil spills: God is the creator and sustainer of the universe; all causes originate in God.

B. What the Text Does Not Say

None of the texts that attribute Saul's madness to an evil spirit from God says that the evil spirit or Saul's terrors are God's punishment for his disobedience. Saul's punishment is the loss of the kingdom (13:13ff; 15:10f, 22ff). There is, of course, a narrative connection between God's rejection of Saul as king and Saul's madness. The vacuum left by the departure of God's empowering spirit, the upshot of God's rejection of Saul as king, leaves room for God's troubling spirit.

C. Identifying the Text's Bias

Melcher proposes that we (1) "face the prejudice in texts," as feminist and liberationist interpreters have taught, and (2) "recast their influence."⁶⁵ Such an approach need not deny that

⁶⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, ed. James Luther Mays and Patrick D. Miller, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1990), 125f. Cf. McKenzie, "1 Samuel," 194: "The 'evil spirit from Yahweh' reflects ancient theology in which Yahweh is the author of both good and ill. Evil spirits were conceived of as being all around, and music was understood as a way of keeping them at bay...."

⁶⁵ Melcher, "Visualizing the Perfect Cult," 69.

the Bible is the word of God, but can accept that God's speaking is incarnated in the words of culturally situated and limited human authors, that those authors reflect the interests of a constituency, and that God's speaking in and through these authors does not erase their humanity, their words, or their context.

The prejudice in 1 Samuel's telling of the story of Saul is not hard to detect. There is an obvious authorial interest in validating David's replacement of Saul as a matter of God's choice and not David's treachery against Saul. This interest in David is evident from the moment the text introduces David and suffuses the narrative.⁶⁶ He, unlike disobedient Saul, is "a man after [the LORD's] own heart" (13:14). Samuel first announces God's rejection of Saul after a single incident of disobedience, *viz.*, his offering a sacrifice to the LORD, instead of waiting for Samuel to do it, but his disobedience is not idolatry, oppression, or brutality. Later, the narrative will be frank about David's sins, notably his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, but that wickedness becomes, not the grounds for his dethroning, but the source of his successor, Solomon. None of Saul's reported sins prior to abandonment by God's spirit match David's, and a point-by-point comparison of Saul with David would not reveal David to be morally or ritually superior.

Still, presumably for good reasons, perhaps weakness of leadership, God rejects Saul in favor of David. The narrative emphasizes God's choice of David and rejection of Saul. The primary narrative vehicle for this emphasis is the mighty coming of God's spirit upon David (16:13) and that spirit's immediate departure from Saul (16:14).

Saul's being terrorized by an evil spirit from the LORD is not an essential consequence of the departure of God's spirit, but the narrative does more than report God's agency in Saul's loss

⁶⁶ See Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 235.

and David's gain. It also insists that, notwithstanding Saul's suspicion, envy, and violence, David persists in his loyalty to Saul and refuses to raise a hand against him. David's replacement of Saul is entirely God's work and not David's. The source of Saul's rage toward David lies outside of David. It is an evil spirit from God.

This analysis suggests that the narrative is intentionally stigmatizing, but not of mental illness in general. It stigmatizes Saul in favor of David, and nothing more. When we identify the bias (or burden) of a narrative and the role it plays and then refuse to generalize beyond the narrative, we honor the text by letting it say what it says without presuming that it says more. Such strict construction of the text allows us to take Melcher's second step.

D. Recasting the Influence of Stigmatizing Texts

1) Listening to countervailing texts

Resisting the temptation to generalize a stigmatizing text prepares us to hear what other parts of sacred scripture say, for instance, about the behaviors that arise out of stigma. In her analysis of texts in Leviticus that exclude persons affected by various impairments from service as priests, Melcher notes the prejudice and then turns to other texts that prescribe appropriate behavior toward people with those impairments:

Leviticus 19:14 instructs us: "You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD." Further on, Leviticus 19:18b reminds us, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." The first verse gives us a different example to follow. It suggests that we should not take advantage of the person who has different physical abilities. One way we can avoid reviling the deaf and putting a stumbling block before the blind is to allow both full access to the altar, to the worshipping community, and to God. One way to love our neighbors is to refuse to devalue them and to resist using Scripture to justify our prejudice.⁶⁷

Her words apply equally to people with mental illness. Regardless of why Scripture attributes Saul's terror to an evil spirit from God or why Leviticus excludes men with impairments from

⁶⁷Melcher, "Visualizing the Perfect Cult," 69.

priestly service, we should read those particular texts in light of the universal commandment to love our neighbors. Stigma and exclusionary behavior cannot prevail in those who love their neighbors as themselves or treat others as they would have others treat them. When we understand love of neighbor to encompass people whom we do not know and our enemies, *i.e.*, others whom our community has excluded and vilified, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, no room remains for exclusion or neglect of people with mental illness or other impairments, Saul and his evil spirit notwithstanding.

2) Listening to the rest of the narrative: how Saul is treated

We need not look beyond the story of Saul to counter its stigmatizing effect. The narrative itself displays responses to Saul's madness that undercut exclusion or neglect. First, he retains his kingship until death. Contrary to our stigma-based expectations, the treatment of Saul is consistent with ancient archaeological and literary sources showing "that people with impairments were present and active at all levels of society."⁶⁸ His court and his family do not suggest that his episodes of madness warrant expulsion from the throne. Instead, they devise a plan for caring for him and relieving his terror in place:

Saul's symptoms, especially his terror, are noted and socially interpreted, with the problem being attributed to possession by an evil spirit, a particular role is envisaged for him – that he will receive therapy inside his house but will otherwise continue as king – and a decision is made to find a fine lyre player who will be able to give him relief.⁶⁹

Moreover, the object of his rage, David, does not use Saul's violent madness as justification for a *coup d'état*. Rather, he remains loyal to Saul and his family past Saul's death and serves, as long as Saul will have him, as one of Saul's caregivers, a music therapist by whose

⁶⁸ Simon Horne, "“Those Who Are Blind See”: Some New Testament Uses of Impairment, Inability, and Paradox,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 96. See also Walls, “The Origins of the Disabled Body,” 13ff.

⁶⁹ Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” 246.

ministry Saul is re-spirited and refreshed (16:23).⁷⁰ The behavior of David, Saul's court, and his family in response to Saul's madness stands in stark contrast to the forms of exclusion and neglect to which our society reverts upon a diagnosis of mental illness, most of which involve no violence at all. Not only do they care for him and accept his continued role as king, but they also include him in the decision concerning his therapy.⁷¹ To exclude and neglect people with mental illness based on 1 Samuel's attribution of Saul's madness to an evil spirit from God is to ignore the whole of the story and the love of neighbor implicit in it.

3) Listening to the rest of the narrative: the paradox of madness

An additional, subtle element can help recast the text against stigma by prompting curiosity about the paradox of madness, an effective antidote to the judgment in stigma. It is suggested by the narrative's use of the same Hebrew word for Saul's "prophesying" (ch. 10 & 19) and Saul's "raving" in his house when an evil spirit from God rushes upon him (18:10). There are questions concerning the meaning of the term when Saul is with the bands of prophets: does it refer to delivering a prophetic oracle, to behaving as prophets behave, or to an ecstatic state or "possession trance"?⁷² In any case, the significant distinction for our purpose is this: In ch. 10, Saul's "prophesying" is, according to Samuel, a sign that God is with him, the newly anointed king (10:7). In 18:10, Saul's "raving" is part of the narrative's account of God's rejection of Saul as king, as is his "prophesying" in ch. 19. In each case, we have the same man, the same ecstatic behavior, the same attribution to God's spirit, and contradictory connotations.

⁷⁰ See Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 126f.

⁷¹ Cf. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 33: "Ethically foreclosed, decisions continue to be made about us, but not with us."

⁷² Esler, "The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31," 225ff.

“The line separating the spiritual leader from the disordered mind could be a very fine one indeed.”⁷³

One wonders whether the attribution of Saul’s madness to “an evil spirit from God” should be taken less as a “theological diagnosis” and more as an acknowledgement of human ignorance of the causes of extreme behaviors like ecstatic trances and insane ravings, comparable to using the idiom “God knows” to mean “no human knows.” This might be a way of interpreting the near universal attribution of illness to of spirits.⁷⁴

Beyond our ignorance is the paradox of madness, which opens us to the gracious working of God even in madness. Horne invites us to reflect on the paradox of disability to which stigma so often blinds us: “In the ancient world, impairment and inability are frequently understood as paradox – within inability is striking capability.”⁷⁵ Saul’s fear and suspicion of David coexist with his love of David and awe (cf. 18:12ff). Nebuchadnezzar’s madness opens his eyes to the sovereignty of God (Dan. 4:34ff), enabling his restoration.⁷⁶

More provocatively, Betcher muses on the implications of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze for our understanding of the role of disability to human flourishing:

While biomedicine insists upon the cure – insists that I (as an amputee), for example, lack health and need to be made whole, Deleuze, refusing to submit illness to the totalizing symbolic of Oedipus (ego), puts out the welcome mat to illness. The schizo imports a little madness, a little chaos, into this all-too-stable because all-too-totalitarian picture of health and civilization....⁷⁷

⁷³ Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 203.

⁷⁴ See Esler, “The Madness of King Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8-31,” 248.

⁷⁵ Horne, “‘Those Who Are Blind See’: Some New Testament Uses of Impairment, Inability, and Paradox,” 88.

⁷⁶ John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, ed. John E. Goldingay, et al., Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 90.

⁷⁷ Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 162.

Less provocatively, we might recognize, with Hauerwas, that people with disabilities give “a gift of vulnerability.”⁷⁸ Their vulnerability brings us face to face with our own:

[D]isability confronts non-disabled persons with their own fragility and contingency. For all humans are only partially and temporarily able-bodied....⁷⁹

We may get an inkling of the paradox when we consider our own suffering and ask ourselves whether we would erase it from our lives. We may be surprised to discover that our suffering is as much a part of our identity as our joy and that the prospect of erasing even the worst parts of our lives stirs apprehension of erasure of ourselves. Thus, the Teacher applies his “mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly” (Eccl. 1:17; 2:12).

E. God’s Preferential Option for the Stigmatized

Liberation theologians have focused us on “God’s preferential option for the poor.” As we reflect on the story of Saul, we might adapt this phrase and ponder “God’s preferential option for the abandoned and the stigmatized.” Moltmann argues that

God is only revealed as “God” in his opposite: godlessness and abandonment by God. In concrete terms, God is revealed in the cross of Christ who was abandoned by God. His grace is revealed in sinners. His righteousness is revealed in the unrighteous and in those without rights, and his gracious election in the damned.... [T]he deity of God is revealed in the paradox of the cross....⁸⁰

If God is uniquely revealed in the abandoned, we might say that Jesus has more in common with Saul than with David. Judged against the model a Davidic Messiah, Saul and Jesus are both un-Messiah’s. Psalm 22:1 sounds more of Jesus and Saul than of David: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

⁷⁸ Hauerwas, “Reflection on Dependency: A Response to Responses to My Essays on Disability,” 196.

⁷⁹ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, 29.

⁸⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 27.

The paradox of the crucified Messiah, or the crucified God, reveals the radical embrace of the Other that is the love of God. Nancy Eiesland extends our insight into this paradox to the disabled God, impaired bodily on the cross, bearing the disfigurement of crucifixion into the resurrection and to the throne of God. The disabled God forever dispels the “conflation of sin and disability”:

The disabled God repudiates the conception of disability [including mental illness] as a consequence of individual sin. Injustice against persons with disabilities is surely sin; our bodies, however, are not artifacts of sin, original or otherwise. Our bodies participate in the imago Dei, not in spite of our impairments and contingencies, but through them. . . . What is the significance of the resurrected Christ’s display of impaired hands and feet and side? Are they the disfiguring vestiges of sin? . . . Or should the disability of Christ be understood as the truth of incarnation and the promise of resurrection? The latter interpretation fosters a reconception of wholeness. It suggests a human-God who not only knows injustice and experiences the contingency of human life, but also reconceives perfection as unself-pitying, painstaking survival.⁸¹

Here, then, is God’s remedy for the stigmatizing effect of the story of Saul or of any other biblical attribution of madness or other disease to God or demons. Whatever interpretive strategies we utilize, the final antidote to stigma is that God joins us in our insane, impaired, and abandoned flesh. “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted” (Isa. 53:4). We might well speak of “the stigmatized God.”

V. Conclusion

This essay does not attempt to justify God or to shelter God from the hazard of creating. It does not attempt an account of the sources, natural or supernatural, of madness. It aims simply at opening our reading of Saul’s story and similar narratives to the non-stigmatizing trajectories within the text and God’s embrace of our stigma in the cross. Read with the strategies suggested

⁸¹ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 101.

in this essay, the story of Saul's madness argues against stigma and for inclusion of and loving care for people with mental illness. Stigma aggravates the inherent isolating effects of mental illness and thereby perpetuates itself, for stigma feeds on isolation. Contact is the most effective remedy for stigma: "The more direct contact there is with people with disabilities, the more positive is the attitude."⁸² Moltmann summarizes the dilemma and its solution:

But the more persons with disabilities are pushed from public life, the less we know about them. And the less one knows about the lives of those with disabilities, the greater becomes the fear of them. It is this fear that is disabled through encounter and through communal life with persons with disabilities.⁸³

We are not called to justify God, but to follow. If God can hazard the cross for the sake of solidarity with God's creation, then let us with Christ hazard the embrace of the mad, disfigured, abandoned Other to take up our cross and follow him. This practice of inclusive embrace is not incidental to our identity as followers of Christ. It is essential.

⁸² Adele B. McCollum, "Tradition, Folklore, and Disability: A Heritage of Inclusion," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 182.

⁸³ Jürgen Moltmann, "Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 113.

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Appendix A: Independent Study Reading List

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Appendix B: Mental Health Resources for Congregations

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General Convention. "Encourage Understanding of Mental Illness and Respond to the Needs of the Mentally Ill: Resolution 1991-D088, Journal of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Phoenix, 1991." The Archives of the Episcopal Church, The Acts of Convention, 1776-2003, http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1991-D088.

Govig, Stewart D. *In the Shadow of Our Steeples: Pastoral Presence for Families Coping with Mental Illness*. New York: Haworth Pastoral, 1999.

Mental Health Ministries: <http://www.mentalhealthministries.net/>

Study guide: http://www.mentalhealthministries.net/links_resources/study_guide.html

Meyers, Barbara F., and Peggy Rahman. *The Caring Congregation Handbook and Training Manual: Resources for Welcoming and Supporting Those with Mental Disorders and Their Families into Our Congregations*. San Francisco: Will To Print, 2005.

Pathways to Promise: <http://www.pathways2promise.org/>

Presbyterian Church (USA) Policy & Study Guide: <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/pcusa-policy-statement-serious-mental-illness-stud/>.

Study document on serious mental illness: <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/serious-mental-illness-seeking-comprehensive-chris/>

Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago: <http://www.miministry.org/>

Study guide, resource binder, etc.: <http://www.miministry.org/support.htm>

Swinton, John. *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000.

Unitarian Universalist Caring Congregation Program:
<http://www.mpuuc.org/mentalhealth/caringconcurr.html>

Mental Health Info for ministers:

<http://www.mpuuc.org/mentalhealth/MentalHealthInformationforMinisters.pdf>