

Nourished by God to Heal the Nations: Biblical Models of Caring with Divine Authority

*Summary of Dr. Barry R. Huff's Talk,
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The opening chapter of the Bible calls us to care with divine authority as the image of God (Gen 1:26). The author of Genesis 1 tells exiles, who have been deported to Babylon, that they are not dominated prisoners of war. They are the image of God, and they have dominion (Gen 1:26). Mesopotamian texts describe the king as the image of a god to designate the king as “a special representative of the god or gods, possessing a divine mandate to rule” and divine power.ⁱ So, in addition to the concept of image as reflection, another nuance of image is the agent of God, appointed and empowered to do God’s will in the world. The author of Genesis 1 draws upon the royal traditions of the ancient Near East to assert that all humans are created as God’s royal agents in the world, “the kings and queens of God’s estate,” responsible for caring for God’s good creation.ⁱⁱ

Subsequent books of the Bible reveal that each of us is called and able to care with divine authority due to God’s greatness and grace. While Moses initially says, “Here am I,” when God calls to him out of the burning bush, as soon as he receives his job description, Moses’s “Here am I” turns into “Who am I?” (Exod 3:4, 11 RSV). “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exod 3:11 NRSV). God’s answer: “I will be with you” (Exod 3:12 NRSV). In other words, we are competent because God is present.ⁱⁱⁱ Moses continues to raise numerous concerns about his “awesome new vocation,” but while Moses’s objections often point to the past, each of God’s responses “moves Moses to a new future.”^{iv}

Several biblical texts portray nursing as grounded in God’s grace. Ruth shines as a model of steadfast love in her care for Naomi. Paul portrays himself as a nurse, tenderly caring for the Thessalonians, working night and day, and proclaiming God’s word to them with purity, uprightness, blamelessness, and gratitude (1 Thess 2:7-13). Isaiah 40:11 and Job 38:8-11 even depict God as a nurse, feeding the flock, carrying the lambs in God’s bosom, gently leading those that are with young, and swaddling the infant sea. Inspired by this gracious model of divine nursing, the basis of Job’s care changes from retribution to grace, from sacrificing in case his children have sinned (Job 1:5) to praying for his accusers (Job 42:15).

Jesus cares with divine authority and compassion in his healings of the hemorrhaging woman and of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:21-43). Jesus disregards social standing, stopping to talk with a ritually unclean woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years rather than racing past her to reach the twelve-year-old daughter of the synagogue’s leader who lay at death’s door. By addressing the hemorrhaging woman as “Daughter” on his way to heal Jairus’s daughter, Jesus shows that each patient is God’s cherished daughter (Mark 5:34). Defying levitical laws that ban him from touching the ritually unclean, Jesus makes contact with both daughters. He refuses to allow cultural customs to

prevent anyone from feeling whole. Then, when confronted by a report of the death of Jairus's daughter, he proclaims, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36 NRSV). Arriving at the house, he removes the mourners and takes the girl by the hand, empowering her to arise.^v The one who called the unclean, "Daughter" (Mark 5:34), stands as a model for us to free others from the labels that drown their identity by speaking to and cherishing each individual as a child of the most High. The one who proclaimed, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36 NRSV), even when faced with a report of death, stands as a model for us always to believe in God.

The Bible's final vision portrays life-giving waters flowing from the reign of God and nourishing the tree of life with "leaves for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:1 NRSV). From beginning to end, the Bible calls us to care, and it promises us that we can care properly because God will be with us. All that is necessary to embark on this adventure of Christian care is willingness. You may not yet see an opportunity to care, but that cannot stop you because God is placing a burning bush on your path. You may not know what to say, but that cannot stop you because God will put the words in your mouth. Your path may take you from a reliable routine into a wilderness with no supply in sight, but that cannot stop you because God daily delivers manna. As the stuttering fugitive who liberated slaves and the former persecutor of Christians who spread the Christian gospel throughout the Greco-Roman world both demonstrate, each of us is called to care and is able to care, not due to the quality of our credentials, but rather due to the greatness of the God we reflect. Therefore, each of us can join Mary Baker Eddy in uttering through our words and our works, "I am able to impart truth, health, and happiness, and this is my rock of salvation and my reason for existing."^{vi}

ⁱ Phyllis A. Bird, "'Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation." *Harvard Theological Review* 74.2 (1981): 143.

ⁱⁱ Ralph Klein, *Israel in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 127.

ⁱⁱⁱ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation Series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 61-62.

^{iv} Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 713.

^v Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark*, Interpretation Series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 110.

^{vi} Mary Baker Eddy, *The First Church of Christ, Scientist and Miscellany* (Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1913), 165.