CHAPTER THREE

EYES, SIGHT, AND BLINDNESS: LEARNING TO SEE WITH PHYSIOGNOMIC EYES

Thus far we have demonstrated the pervasiveness of what Evans terms the “physiognomic consciousness” in the Greco-Roman world, and we have examined numerous examples of the ancient practice of reading character in physical features. Far and away the most important of those characteristics is the eyes. Ps-Aristotle closes his work by underscoring the importance of the eyes, saying, “In all selection of signs some give a much clearer demonstration of the subject than others. Clearest of all are those that appear in the most favorable positions. The most favorable part for examination is the region round the eyes, forehead, head and face” (814b). Likewise, Polemo devotes the first third of his book to the examination of nothing but the eyes.

This chapter will be devoted to the examination of the eyes in the physiognomic worldview of the Greco-Roman milieu. Not only will we examine the eyes, but in order to understand the function of blindness in ancient literature we must also know something about the feeling toward disabilities in general. The final section, then, will examine the function of blindness in Greco-Roman literature, taking into account what the physiognomists say about the eyes and what the culture in general thinks of the disability of blindness.

In the world of the physiognomists, perfection is ideal and thus disability of whatever sort is almost entirely negative since it falls far short of perfection. Yet one finds a large number of blind characters in Greek literature, and understanding the implications of blindness on their character is essential. This book contends that an ancient audience would not only think of blindness on the literal level—lacking eyesight—but that an audience would also likely think in metaphorical terms, that is, lacking spiritual vision. The essential point is that in a world in which audiences are conditioned to think in terms of physiognomics, in which an audience naturally associates physical characteristics with moral character, it is essential that we as readers move beyond the physical blindness of a character and seek the implications for character that an ancient audience would quite naturally hear in
the text. Hamm asserts that “the use of physical seeing as a metaphor for spiritual insight is a commonplace in the religious literature of the world,”1 and I would argue that such a metaphorical usage of blindness is by no means limited to religious literature either. Before attending to the eyes and to blindness, let us first discuss the place of disabilities in the ancient world, particularly in a world in which such a physical deficiency would imply a corresponding moral deficiency.

Disability in the Greco-Roman World

While this chapter is not a study on disability per se, a rudimentary understanding of disability in the ancient world is necessary in order to understand what an ancient auditor might have thought of a blind character in literature. Many modern studies on disability are available,2 and this work is not one them. Instead, this study is interested exclusively in the understanding of disability in the ancient world, and it leaves to other, more capable scholars the task of teasing out the implications for the modern reader.

Perfection in the Greek world is ideal; disabilities miss the mark of perfection. Therefore to be disabled, in the mind of a physiognomically-

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2 To name only a few, see especially the following: David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, eds., The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), whose introductory chapter also contains extensive bibliography for those interested in pursuing disability studies; Garland, Eye of the Beholder; Donald J. Kirtley, The Psychology of Blindness (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975); and for specifically Christian disability studies, see the following: Nancy L. Eiesland, and Don E. Saliers, eds., Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998); Lynn Holden, Forms of Deformity (JSOTSup 131; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); Felix N. W. Just, “From Tobit to Bartimaeus, from Qumran to Siloam: The Social Role of Blind People and Attitudes Toward the Blind in New Testament Times” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1997); Nicole Kelley, “The Theological Significance of Physical Deformity in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies,” PRSt 34 (2007): 77–90; Kerry H. Wynn, “Johannine Healings and the Otherness of Disability,” PRSt 34 (2007): 61–75. Particularly interesting is Eiesland, The Disabled God: Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), which is a kind of theological primer written from the perspective of disability studies. Drawing on a range of theological methods, including social scientific methods and liberation theology, she paints a picture of a God who is on the side of the disabled and pursues justice and liberation for the disabled. In fact, she even argues that we meet a disabled God in the Eucharistic meal itself, where we find as a central symbol of Christianity a God who brings redemption through the brokenness of his own body.