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Presenting the Issue:

Reading Biblical Texts in Conversation with Disability Studies and Health Humanities

Themes touching various aspects of health, illness and disability abound in the Bible. We have the narratives in Genesis about the matriarchs' struggles with infertility, Isaac's blindness and Jacob's limp. There is Saul's illness (1 Sam 16), which many interpreters throughout the ages have tried to diagnose. Also in the David narrative, there is the figure of Mephibosheth and David's complicated relationship to him. Further in the Hebrew Bible, we have of course Job, the quintessential sufferer, as well as the prophetic descriptions of the bodily infirmities of the Lord's suffering servant (Is 53:13-15). In the New Testament, the healing stories in the gospels have a long and contested history of interpretation. For example, theological questions around the bodily perfection or imperfection of the body in the resurrection have been discussed in connection to these New Testament passages. The bodies of central figures such as Jesus and Paul, however, seem to defy normative standards of ability: Jesus displays a beaten and suffering body in the Easter narrative, and even his resurrection body seem to bear the marks of his lived experience (Luk 24:39-40; Joh 20:27). Acts narrates Paul as someone who has experienced the disability of blindness (Acts 9:8-9), and in his own letters he refers to his body as weak and non-normative (e.g. 2 Cor 11:24-29; 12:9-10).

Over the past few decades biblical scholars have approached biblical texts drawing on insights from the emerging inter-disciplinary fields of disability studies and health humanities. These perspectives offer a critical lens that gives space to the lived experiences of people with disabilities, as well as the cultural and historical aspects of any given perception of the notion of health. These scholars' readings have offered fresh interpretations of the passages mentioned above, but have also brought attention to other passages in the Bible, previously neglected, that may be fruitfully read with this lens (Avalos, 1995, 1999; Avalos et al., 2007; Baden & Moss, 2015; Gosbell, 2018; Henning, 2021; Laes, 2018; Laes et al., 2013; Lawrence, 2013, 2018; Marx-Wolf & Upson-Saia, 2015; Melcher et al., 2017; Moss, 2011; Moss & Schipper, 2011; Olyan, 2008; Raphael, 2009; Schipper, 2006, 2007, 2011; Solevåg, 2018; Soon, 2023; Upson-Saia, 2011; Upson-Saia et al., 2023; Yong, 2011; Zucconi, 2019).

In this volume, we have collected contributions from biblical scholars who are in conversation with these adjacent fields. The various articles give valuable new insights on the biblical texts as well as their various uses through history. They also expand our understanding of what it means to do biblical scholarship. By bringing in interdisciplinary perspectives they add new tools to the toolbox of the biblical scholar and others who are engaged with the interpretation of biblical texts, such as pastors and preachers in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Laura Zucconi studies temple architecture in ancient Greece, Egypt and the Levant asking questions about mobility and access. Drawing on insights from disability studies and mobility design she rereads archaeological evidence and biblical texts in search of the lived experiences of the disabled. She argues that mobility impairment was quite ubiquitous, including not only people with disabilities, but also the elderly, pregnant women, and small children. Moreover she points out that even the gods — as they appeared in the temples through statues — were mobility impaired and required assistance to move about the temple. Zucconi's article acts as proof of concept that ancient temples

and shrines can be read for disability if archaeologists understand the theology behind the construction of the various religious sites.

The David narrative in 1 and 2 Samuel is the object of analysis in the two following contributions.

Kirsty Jones focuses her attention on the passage in 2 Sam 5:6-8 where it is stated that “the blind and the lame shall not come into the house”, because they are hated by David. She surveys previous exegetical approaches to the category of the “blind and lame” in this passage, exposing ableist biases in many commentaries. In her own reading of the narrative, she argues that the figure of the blind and the lame is used as a destabilising and disturbing element in the story. Although blindness and lameness is linked with weakness in some passages in the Hebrew Bible, other passages rather connect disabled bodies with what is out of place, what is misfitting, rather than what is weak. She argues that the blind and the lame in the above passage refers to lame and blind among the enemy army which are perceived as *more* of a threat because of their disabilities, not *less* of a threat. Mephibosheth personifies the unpredictability of disability: can he walk unaided? Is he an ally to David or is he an enemy within?

Hulisani Ramantswana reads the same story from the particular contextual position of postcolonial Africa. Armed conflict in the modern world are sites of production of disability as well as sites where people with disabilities are at risk in numerous ways. Disabilities are exacerbated through lack of access to health services, and people with disabilities are at risk of becoming targets of warfare as well as of being abandoned. Bearing in mind the disabling effects of armed conflict, which continues to trouble the African continent, he reads the figure of Mephibosheth as a child who has become disabled through an imperial war tactic. According to Ramantswana disability functions as a symbol of terror in the David narrative. The story has an imperialistic agenda, and what is presented as David’s act of kindness towards Mephibosheth has a troubling flip side. Mephibosheth seems to be kept under constant check, and at various points in the narrative he is set up for failure. Both injury and benevolence can be used as imperial tools for subordination and domination, and the David-Mephibosheth story reflect this imperial ideology.

Chris de Wet examines how John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407 CE) interprets the Sarah and Hagar narrative in his sermons. He argues that fertility and infertility operate as social, moral, and theological discourses in Chrysostom’s texts. Abraham is constructed as the ideal husband, both socially and morally. Sarah is the ideal wife, and by implication, Hagar is exegetically constructed as the stereotypical deviant slave woman. De Wet points out that this reading of Sarah and Hagar would have affirmed the oppressive values and practices of late antique slaveholding. But Chrysostom’s preaching also had repercussions for Christian relations with the Jewish minority. De Wet shows how Chrysostom uses the Sarah and Hagar narrative to create a theological understanding of slavery as something more than social status — it is in fact an ontological state. This ontological state is then projected onto Jewish identity.

Why does early Christian walking matter? This is the starting point for **Louise Lawrence**’s investigation. She identifies cultures of walking as a lacuna in New Testament studies. Despite the fact that Jesus and his disciples were itinerant, and Paul’s missionary movements were largely by foot, these practices have not really been studied as everyday lived practices. Lawrence examines how early Christian bodily ‘movement’ has variously been perceived and culturally-appropriated within European and North American scholarship. Through her analysis she brings out how differently scholars have perceived able-bodied walking in contrast to the disabled bodies, commanded to ‘walk’ in the Gospels’ healing narratives.

The final contribution in this issue is by **Marianne Bjelland Kartzow** and **Anna Rebecca Solevåg**. The authors investigate the Lukan Jesus saying about who to invite and who not to invite when hosting a meal (Luke 14:12-14). They read these verses with an intersectional perspective particularly attuned to masculinity and disability, and argue that the ancient symposium setting is the context within which this saying should be under-

stood. They suggest that the four groups not to invite, “your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours” (v. 12) all represent hegemonic masculinity. They have belonging and reciprocity in common, and it is these aspects of upper-class male privilege that the saying wants to challenge. The four groups that should be invited instead, “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (v. 13) are not opposites, nor are they mutually exclusive. Yet, they belong to various groups characterised by social exclusion and visible otherness. The article draws out some of the grey zones in the saying, asking about what happens when some of these categories intersect (e.g. what of a blind brother, or a lame relative?), As well as asking about categories, and social groups that remain invisible in these verses (what about women, or slaves, or the ethnic other?).

The various articles in this volume draw on quite diverse perspectives, and insights from a number of scholarly fields. They also deal with different biblical texts and themes. Yet, there are some interesting connections and overlaps. One such red thread is a critique of readings and interpretations that are ableist (e.g Jones, Lawrence, Kartzow & Solevåg). Another is the particular attention given to texts dealing with characters and terms connected to disability (e.g. Jones, Ramantswana, de Wet, Lawrence, Kartzow & Solevåg). A third connection among several articles is the interest in looking at trajectories of inclusion and exclusion over time (e.g Zucconi, de Wet, Ramantswana). Each of these contributions move the scholarly conversation around the intersections of disability, health and the Bible forward. I hope they will encourage, inspire and provoke further explorations at this fascinating crossroads.

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