

#### **Panelist:**

Candida Moss (Presider), Candace Buckner, Chris de Wet, Louise Gosbell, Eric Harvey, and Isaac Soon.

**Candida Moss:** Hello and welcome to this webinar on disability criticism and the state of the conversation in biblical studies and the ancient world more broadly. This was organized by the Society Biblical Literature. And this panel would not have been possible without the initiative of Benny Liew and the work and technical support of LaToya Leary. My name is Candida Moss and I work at the University of Birmingham in the UK. My pronouns are she, her, hers. And in addition to working on disability in ancient texts, I am also disabled. I want to begin by giving just a little bit of background for those curious, who may not be familiar with disabilities studies. Disability studies and critical disability theory emerged roughly 40 years ago in departments of literary criticism among scholars shaped by feminist studies and Marxist philosophy. It was buoyed by activist whose work reflected the sheer diversity of human experiences that count as disability and often focused on the distinction between a physical impairment and its reception in wider society and culture. It trickled into our own discipline in the past two decades. Thanks to the pioneering work of scholars like Rebecca Raphael, Jeremy Schipper, Hector Avalos, Nyasha Jr., and many others, there is now a growing conversation about, and ever burgeoning interest in the representation and categorization of disability in ancient texts, the archeology of disability, the intersection of gender, disability, and race in our sources metaphors of impairment in our traditions, and theology and the ways that traditional interpretations of scripture marginalize and assert power on people in the present. Simply noticing the presence and interest of differently abled individuals really changes how we read the Bible and and literature. The importance of these questions to me has perhaps never seemed more relevant than right now during a global pandemic that has revealed systemic ageism and ableism in society at large, and even in the corridors of the academy. As some, namely privileged, healthy, mostly white Americans and Western Europeans, begin to declare an end to the pandemic while others, mostly but not only, in the global south remain at risk, it is apparent just how much our definition of ability is shaped and formed by geography, politics, social status, and privilege. I am enormously grateful to this group of thoughtful and talented speakers for their willingness to volunteer their time and in many cases sacrifice their sleep to be here today to share their insights as leaders in this field. I'm going to introduce them briefly before we get started with our conversation.

I'd like to welcome:

- Candace Buckner, who holds a PhD in Ancient Mediterranean Religions from UNC Chapel Hill and teaches at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State university in the United States;
- Chris de Wet, who obtained a DMin in Ancient Greek from the University of Pretoria and teaches at the University of South Africa;
- Louise Gosbell, who holds a PhD from Macquarie University and is based at Mary Andrews College in Australia;
- Eric Harvey, who obtained a PhD from and continues to work and be based at Brandeis University in the USA;
- and last, but not least, Isaac Soon, who earned his PhD from Durham University in the UK and is about to begin teaching at Crandall University in Canada.

I should know that while we respect and honor the academic degrees and titles that we have all learned, for the purposes of creating an egalitarian compensation, we have agreed in advance to address one another using first names. And with that, we'll finally get down to that. So I want to begin by putting aside

the kind of academic fiction that, we're these sort of disembodied minds that work in these little vats on this topic and ask you all about your journeys to this point. So I wanted to know how you came to focus your scholarship on what I'm broadly calling disability studies and biblical interpretation. What was the field like at the time? What kinds of questions or experiences helped you focus your onset and what attracted you to it? And I want to begin with Candace Buckner.

**Candace:** So, it's actually really funny because I started this journey, I think, years ago when I was an undergraduate and I was working under Professor Michael Roberts who is now retired from Wesleyan University. And I wanted to work on saints' lives and so I started writing a final project on that topic and I realized by the end of it that I didn't want to stop writing it or stop writing on the topic itself, and that led me to apply to, you know, graduate school. And then fast forward into, I would say, 2017 when I was working on my dissertation... which as anyone knows, is, you know, a pit of all the things... and I was reading The Coptic Letter of Aphou and I got to this quote, "how can you say of the Ethiopian man that he is the image of God or of someone who was leprosy lame or blind," and I was just like, "that seems very problematic. What has anyone said about this?". And then I was fascinated because I went, you know, something that I was like, "Well, I need a footnote on this because I can't talk about this piece of literature without mentioning how these discourses on disability and race and ethnicity have suddenly collided as if they're the most common categories in the world to put together and we should all just accept it". And so I went looking and I realized that by in large, people had just been like, "Yeah, you know, the ancients, that's what they do. These are all really similar, let's talk about the other things from the text." And I was just like, "but I want to talk about this... we should be talking about this." In part, because...for one as a modern reader, it's jarring. On the other hand, we can see how they sort of discourses remain relevant to us today. This is the beginning... I'm reading at the beginning, right, of the black lives matter movement. I'm reading at a time when people are debating about disability's status, not only its place in the academy, but also what we should do about legislation. This is also during a time when we were getting to a point where there's an administration, who's very critical of giving people their access based on disability rights. And so I'm like, wait, we should. You know, this is a moment where we can say, "Hey, there are sources from the ancient world that talk about these problems and talk about the ways in which we think about bodies that remain relevant for now". And we should be talking to our students about this when we should be writing about this. And so that's what really brought me to this topic. And then it was like, "Oh, this is a side project that is not a part of the dissertation; this is bad." But then I was like, "We have to do what we have to do."

**Candida:** Thank you so much. I really appreciated that. I think you hit a lot of things that resonates with many of us and I loved your emphasis on the relevance of "the what" today, which I think, even if people aren't invested in the ethics, there's the fact that many of our departments are under threat. So even if you don't have good feelings about this, staying relevant it's surely just on a pragmatic level important to you. I wanted to follow this by asking Eric Harvey for his story also because he has this beautiful website where he engages many of these kinds of questions you were just talking about Candace.

**Eric:** Yes, thank you and I just want to say, like Candace, a lot of good things come out of footnotes grown too large, and that's sort of my story too... I never intentionally set out to engage biblical texts through disability criticism, or core critical disability theory, but, after... when I was one or two years into my coursework, my PhD, I received a diagnosis of retinitis pigmentosa and learned that on some unclear nebulous timeline, I was going to lose my vision and become blind. I had always been low vision in the sense that I had had a visual impairment that had restricted some privileges; for example, I've never...I've never driven, but was not...never hit the legal threshold of blindness until about 2014. Then I really started realizing that this was something that was going to affect how I researched and how I lived and

how I identified for the rest of my life. And so I set upon this, this journey of discovery and started really reading all sorts of blindness literature and disability theory. Everything from academic work to memoirs to political activism and advocacy, advocacy texts. At the time, I was reading the works of people like Georgina Kleege, and Stephen Kuusisto, and John Hull, Martin Milligan just for my own personal journey of grappling with what this transition in embodiment and identity meant. And at the same time I was writing my dissertation... so this is several years on now in 2017, 2018... writing my dissertation, which is a transmission history of the Egyptian Hallel Psalms across about 2000 years of history from their origins in ancient Israel through the end of the manuscript period in early modern Europe. And within this section of Psalms there is the famous line, “They have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear.” And as I disentangled the many occurrences of this line through not only those psalms, but other parts of the Bible, you find that this line recurs freely often and means wildly different things. And, and there... and there was only one occurrence where... in Isaiah 43, it has changed from, “they have eyes, but do not see”, but it says, “bring out the people who are blind, though they have eyes.” And so I started, you know, disentangling and, and, and pulling the threads apart of meaning here in terms of what changes in the different contexts of this line and what changes in the different formulations of this line. And it really made clear to me that most of them had nothing to do with disability per se, but were often sort of imprecisely or, you know, without much consideration, analyzed through the lens of blindness and deafness as disability, whether it was appropriate to the context or not. And that led me in two directions that were, okay like Candace, not particularly relevant to the larger dissertation, but you know, you have to do what you have to do with some of these rabbit trail projects. That led me into looking historically across the reception of this line and the ways in which later developments in its interpretation and use were read back into the original formulations and occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. And then, you know,... what... looking elsewhere in, in the ancient near east, for example, and looking at the metaphorization of blindness specifically across culture in Mesopotamia and Egypt and really finding, surprisingly that for example, in Mesopotamia, blindness is out used as a metaphor for anything almost at all, which considering the ubiquity of blindness as a metaphor in contemporary usage, really, in every language family on earth, presents something of a surprise and, it's something that I'm now working on in a new project on blindness as lived experience in the ancient Near East and as it existed in “decided imaginary” in the ancient Near East.

**Candida:** Thank you so much. That was so interesting. I definitely want to return to some of the issues you raised there. I too, didn't write my dissertation on this and then got led astray, like Eric and Candace, but some of those participants did write dissertations concretely on disability. And so I want attended them. Louise, perhaps you'd like to come next.

**Louise:** Sure. Thank you. It's lovely to be part of the panel; thank you for having me. So for me, I became interested in disability through personal experience. So in Australia, here in Sydney where I'm based, I had done a three-year theological degree and I was about to commence a one year honors thesis. And at that time, I was trying to decide a topic to write on for that thesis that I thought would sustain my interest for a whole year. And in the middle of this contemplative process, I received a phone call from my mother-in-law and she was quite distressed at the time because my 16 year old brother-in-law had been I stepped down from ministry and his church because he has down syndrome. So while the previous minister of the church was supportive of my brother-in-law's participation and his role in serving -so he would do things like welcome people at the door or carrying candles for liturgy - a new minister, when he started said that people with intellectual disabilities are unable to identify themselves as followers of Jesus because they don't have the capacity to understand the Bible. So his reasoning was that people with intellectual disabilities shouldn't be allowed to represent the church in any kind of way, even if that's just welcoming people at the door or carrying in candles. So I realized that in three years of doing a

theological degree, not once was disability mentioned. And I find that staggering really, in retrospect, given the global statistics on disability. And so I started to look into this topic and I thought, I think this is what I'm going to do for this research paper. Literally thought I would race through this; plow into a PhD straight away. Didn't quite happen. Thought I would move on to a different topic, but I just find even all these years later, we've moved forward in a lot of respects and disability studies and the Bible, but we still have a very long way to go, so I'm still very much committed to this topic.

**Candida:** Wow. That was... There was a lot to unpack there. Just watching your Chris's face was quite the treat, I have to say. And yeah, that's... I don't think... the irony is that most of us couldn't understand the Bible, so, you know, I guess we're in great company. Isaac, perhaps you'd like to go next.

**Isaac:** Yeah, sure. It's great to be here. I'm a relatively recent kind of addition to the field of disability studies so I feel, especially as a newly minted PhD a little bit, like it's still new to me. But, I think, I kind of stumbled into the topic and into the field, into taking seriously the lived experiences of people with disabilities in 2015, when I moved to England to pursue graduate work. I had just kind of become a father, and being at Oxford and being a new dad in a new country, you know, there was a lot of balancing those types of things had a huge effect on my body. I started gaining a lot of weight. I started losing all my hair. And so for me, I had come to Oxford wanting to explore aspects of epistemology and... or theories of knowledge in the New Testament, and in relation to specifically Paul's visual appearance in his body. But when I started reading, I was frustrated by how much people would kind of use aspects of Paul's body or the work of other people, or the work of...or the figures of early Christianity kind of as just a launching point to talk about other things like Eric was talking about before with the metaphorization of disability and it kind of being a waypoint actually talk about... well, what's really important or kind of these social values or things like that. But I had remembered... actually Louise and I shared the same supervisor, so Jim Harrison and who helped her as well... and so I remembered her work and so I kind of started exploring the way that scholars in biblical studies had approached embodiment in the body and the first kind of thing that I came across with disability studies and of course, Candida, your work, and numerous people that you mentioned earlier on. And so as I started kind of reading more into the field and, and reading the work of different scholars I realized how epistemological and how not just useful, but just how powerful the stories and the thought and the philosophy from people with disabilities was for understanding how knowledge is generated. And yeah, so, I mean, I...when I came to my PhD, I decided to continue my work there with Paul and epistemology, but this time kind of shifting... well, what if we think about... everyone talks about Paul being a disabled apostle, but what does that mean? And so my supervisor at the time, Jane Heath, she suggested, well, what about a disability? And of course, by this point Louise had finished her PhD and, you know, Candida, you were working on your book on divine bodies and so of course Louise Lawrence's work on senses in the Gospel... and so there's a kind of a rising tide, albeit small in New Testament studies... we're thinking about disability. And for me, I realized, well, actually, this... using and thinking with the various disability studies literature out there, thinking with this literature with Paul, I've found it to be really, really productive with Paul in a very, not just a fruitful way, but a way that kind of re-embodies Paul, not just kind... as a kind of a walking brain who kind of spouted off theological things, but just as a, as a person kind of reconstructed or constructed, whose body had significant things to tell us about their identity, but then also could be useful for critiquing our own... our presuppositions about the text and ideal bodies today.

**Candida:** Thank you. Chris would you share your story?

**Chris:** Thank you. Yeah, I feel, I feel a little bit out of my depth with all these wonderful scholars to doing such wonderful work on disability studies. And I'm glad to hear that I'm not the only person who did not do a dissertation or a book on disability per se. So my interest in disability studies ancient health

issues overall actually came via my research on slavery, which was very interesting because when one works on slavery... so my approach to slavery is very much influenced by French liberal philosophy, particularly Michel Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and Bourdieu, and several other French philosophers and one of the questions when one deals with slavery, of course, is you have questions of freedom, of autonomy, of corporeality, and bio politics, and citizenship... all of these issues. And what's interesting is as I progressed in my work on slavery, the issue of disability kept coming up in some way, so much so that when one reads the text from these perspectives that you cannot... and I think this might've been the case of many of us... that you cannot ignore... you cannot ignore it...so, and specifically, my interest was on aging and old age and ageism, and how that intersects with a disability. So, it just really, it was really via that and wrestling with concepts of freedom and corporeality and embodiment, and it's interesting and it's significant enough, I think, to point out that that many of us have been almost...I don't want to use the word "naturally", but we've been sort of related into disability by the way we approach our texts by what we read, and what we do, and the questions we asked, and I think that's a significant point to make. And I find it very interesting that because I sort of fought myself to be a bit of an outlier because I gave him in via slavery, but it seems that many of us has done that. And what I seen is that many of us are doing, what Foucault calls writing a history of the present and writing histories of the present, approaching our histories and historiography with really very important issues for today. And, and so, that's how I got into it as well.

**Candida:** Thank you so much. I, I hear some emerging themes already that we could touch on during the rest of our conversation. I said, I want to return to something that Eric said about discovering that blindness is not used in this metaphorical sense in every community. And it seemed to me that one of the things that he's doing in this new project is disrupting the "instinctive metaphors," I heard someone say recently, with which people think. And of course metaphors aren't instinctive. That's not a thing. And that's one of the ways that I think disability studies can contribute to our fields in our present, as Chris was saying, by kind of disrupting the normalcy about, kind of, bias and prejudice. And so Eric, I was wondering in thinking about that, you know, what is your sense of what's exciting, you know, other than your own work... what do you find exciting in the field right now? What do you think is limiting as you work on this project?

**Eric:** Yeah. I mean, I think one of the things that is exciting about the...thinking through biblical texts with some of these very thoughtfully and rigorously produced definitions and frameworks of disability is that it does help disentangle, you know, very different uses of, you know, not only whether something like blindness appears as a metaphor, but, it's specific metaphorical entanglements because neither of those two things is necessary or straightforward or self-evident, even though, you know, that that phrase "instinctive metaphor" is... even though, you know, it as you say metaphor is not instinctive, but it can be very intuitive to the level that we, almost cease to interrogate it... and we, we can think of some of those metaphorical entailments as necessary and trans-historical. But really, you know, I really very much resonate with what Chris was just saying about writing history of ideas, because, you know... or rather what I've sort of done and what I'm working on right now is writing the history of a certain phrasiology as it, as it passes through different contexts and helps create different ideas and work to inform or reinforce or challenge certain ideas. And I think this is one reason... this is one area of where biblical studies is particularly important in that writing of the history of the present and in... it can be at a very important site to challenge sort of some of those, those knee jerk or, or intuitive uses of scripture that have been central in meaning-making for so many people. And you, you could find so many cases where one particular interpretation of a text is taken as straightforward and self-evident when really you can trace this pattern...this process of...this line that I'm talking about, "They have eyes, but they do not see. They have ears, but they do not hear", starts in Jeremiah, moves through the Psalms and Isaiah, then Jesus picks



it up and really rifts on it in a very innovative interpretation, let's say, and then, that is then picked up in later Christian interpretation, in particularly in the medieval period in the construction of this anti-Semitic trope of the blindness of the Jews in terms of their resistance to conversion to Christianity. And then you, you still see vestiges of this or, you know, not so well hidden vestiges of this, in critical scholarship when you see discussions of the moral or spiritual blindness of ancient Israel. And, and so, understanding, you know, disability theory as it intersects with metaphor theory, as these texts travel through time can help us understand when certain anachronisms are being read into the original Israel later Judean context and can sort of disrupt some of those easy and problematic associations between disability and anti-Semitism and racism and all of those things that still tend to plague our contexts of scholarship.

**Candace:** Yeah Eric, I also think that there's a certain amount of like ubiquity of familiarity happening because we are familiar with one text and we're familiar with the language of that text, we might assume when we look at something else, for example, like the New Testament and we've talked about Jesus and his healings, right, we might assume that this might be the standard by which we should understand all other such healings later on, and then you realize, wait a second, we live in different contexts, we live in different moments in history, so we are taking for granted that someone in the ancient world, from my perspective, would think the same way that we do. And we just know that's not true, right? We know that's not true... and would use language in the same way that we do, even though they're reading... they might be some of the same texts, they're certainly not reading them in the same world. And so my... I think, part of what we have to do is break... acknowledge that we as modern people are familiar with the language and so that obscures us to what might actually be happening in the text. And so that's part of, I think one of our, you know, jobs as scholars is to say, this is written in a historical moment, we, ourselves, have our own history of reading or understanding, and how does that confront the realities of this ancient text?

**Isaac:** That's a great point, Candace. I mean... oh, sorry, Eric, do you want to continue?

**Eric:** Oh no, go ahead Isaac.

**Isaac:** Well, I was just thinking, like one of the most difficult parts of working, I guess, with disability studies and biblical studies right now is, you know, because the language, ancient language can be so difficult to, kind of, critique a lot, oftentimes when I'm presenting to people who aren't specialists in the field, I'm constantly having to prove first principles, you know, what defines disability, you know, kind of having to self-justify, like why this approach in the ancient world isn't anachronistic, you know, things like that. You know, even some basic things that within, I guess, disability studies or the disability community more widely would be taken for granted. For example, the relationship between disease and illness, you know, thresholds of disability, how chronic does an illness have to be to be considered a disability or something like that. And so I think, yes, it's we... you know, we've got to remember that we're living in two different horizons with the entire world and not assume just because we translate a word as disability or impairment or things like that where various... according to various medical taxonomies, that we're not necessarily talking about the same thing within the same framework. But one, one thing that I find limiting right now in the field is that just kind of constantly having to redefine or define for other people, you know, 'cause we're, we're both having to shed light on the ancient texts, but then also changed the way people think about bodily ideals and bodily norms, and what, as Candida was talking about, what seems... what some people will think is kind of instinctive.

**Louise:** I find it interesting. When I first started my PhD, I had to do my first presentation at uni to let people know where I was up to. And I found it ended up in this whole discussion exactly as you've said, Isaac, about why we should even be talking about disability in terms of ancient texts. And it was

fascinating actually, how many people said to me, things like, you know, this is a 20th century concepts of course it's not there in the biblical text, or the Bible doesn't even have anything about disability in it. So it's really fascinating, the pushback that I got. I agree with you about why you had to justify looking at this topic, how it was legitimate part, or why it should be a legitimate part of biblical studies at all. But it was really fascinating as well then to see overtime scholars come back to me at the university and say, oh, now I realize how many references to disability there really are, wow, or things like, I didn't realize how much it impacted the way we think about other references to the body throughout the biblical texts. And those assumptions that we have, that every reference to a body is a normative kind of body. And that's, what's so helpful about disability studies: that it does help us to incur interrogate those assumptions that we make about representations of the body in the biblical text. So I think one of the great things and the exciting things, going back to your question Candida, is to see that progression in biblical studies and to see it being able to end up in dialogue with a whole lot of different other areas and not just sitting as this distinct category on its own, as it, as it keeps moving forward. That's been a lovely thing to watch, I think, over a period of time.

**Chris:** Yeah. I think... agree with everyone. I think, on the one end, what's exciting about biblical studies is that we are seeing slowly, but surely, some wonderful methodological innovation and multidisciplinary... because disability studies is, as many of you have shown your work, is in essence, a multidisciplinary aspect of study or field... it's multidisciplinary and it's also an intersectional. It's also highly intersectional. That was something I picked up in my work with slavery and seeing disability and ageism- is that you really can't to see it on its own. It always intersects with gender, it always intersects with race or ethnicity. It always intersects with something that makes it even more multidisciplinary, which makes it complex. But I think in biblical studies, there is on the one hand, these methodological innovations taking place and one can see it in scholarship; but on the other end, I think the limiting aspect is the other side of the coin that I think there is still... and I'm hearing what Isaac is saying about the frustration of language. Isaac, I mean I had that experienced with slavery that I felt that there are these things that frustrate us, you know, and I pick it up when I teach, because I teach at University, but also at churches and other venues, and people, you can see something's bothering them, but they don't have the language, they don't have the discourse. And it was like that with slavery and I sense that something with disability, as you're saying. So... And in biblical studies, I think what is still a little limiting is that there is still a lot of what I would call methodological foundationalism that that tends to hamper us a little bit... it tends to hold us back and it becomes a structural and almost an essential problem of language in the school so I really, I feel your pain. I really get it.

**Eric:** Absolutely. And I think in the vein of, you know, having to convince people that disability existing in biblical texts or the biblical texts have some concept of disability, you know, there's... I think the study of disability in antiquity does really offer some important ways to, you know, nuance and complicate the 20th century history of the development of the term and the discourse around disability, in terms of, you know, what holds disability together as a concept, why was it formed in the context of industrial liberal, democratic society, and what things hold and don't hold across history. So...while on one hand, we may feel a little like we're pressed to defend applying disability criticism to biblical texts; on the other hand, you know, you find these situations where the theory as developed in disability studies proper doesn't quite fit the ancient conceptions because they really don't share those industrialized liberal, democratic milieu that informed the creation of disability as a category and as a political coalition. I think, on the one hand, yeah, it can be frustrating to have to defend that; but on the other hand, there is also room to show how the ancient texts can inform a broader, more nuanced understanding of disability.

**Candida:** What I'm hearing you talk about that, Eric, is sort of the ways in which thinking about disability, which it feels like it's frustrating, we're still needing to have to explain what this is.... And it's, enlightening that people say that they don't see disability in the text, but then they do apparently see race and gender in unproblematic ways, you know. That's a really interesting contrast to me. And I'm hearing you are excited to talk about what we contribute to this discipline, what it allows us to discern and attend to that we otherwise might not discern to send an attended to, and is there more to be said about that? I'm hearing a lot of people talk about intersectionality: Eric, in your work on anti-Semitism; Candace, your watch has been so important to me in thinking about the intersection of race and disability; and of course, Chris, in talking about enslavement... talking about that kind of social status, and disability, and age, and the ways in which they include one another. But I sort of want to direct this question to Isaac because your work on circumcision sort of highlights the intersection of disability and ethnicity in the ancient world too. I was wondering if you had more to say about what we contribute to the field?

**Isaac:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I can get us started. With my work on circumcision though, in my thesis I argue that circumcision from a Greco-Roman point of view can be understood as an impairment and disability. And something that I realized early on, like a lot of you was how intersectional disability was, and as a way of kind of holding together numerous different things like ethnicity and also gender. So when I was working, I had a colleague at King's College, Grace Emmett, who's working on Paul and masculinity, and we kind of... you know, our research kind of converged when we're talking about Paul's use of gendered language and ethnicity and, you know, male physiological traits...male genitals. And we kind of realized, well, disability studies and gender studies, but kind of both, talking over each other, but not necessarily realizing that they were in the same conversation. And so I think one aspect of disability studies is that intersectionality in the way of holding together a lot of different concerns, you know, gender concerns, ethnicity, queer concerns, post-colonial... I think there's a lot of potential there. And I think two other aspects that I can think of, I mean, Eric has already mentioned it, one in his own work is kind of critiquing the kind of ableist or ableist biases in questions and interpretations that arise from particular texts. So, you know, as a relatively recent kind of public ally for people with disabilities and disability studies as a field, you know, I'm very conscious of the ways that I reproduce that kind of ableism and the stigma and, you know, the kind of barriers towards people with disabilities. So I think with disability studies and in biblical studies, one of the things that it's helped me, I mean, I've been recently reading through *Disability Visibility*, a kind of edited volume by Alice Wong, and, you know, just reading every single day, a single story, a lived experience of the struggles and the victories and the agency of people with disabilities, it's reshaped... it reshapes the way that I think about ancient texts and it not only critiques my own biases and the kind of things that I bring to the table, but it also,... I mean I look back on some interpretations of various disabilities or physical aspects in the New Testament and I'm sometimes just absolutely mortified, like, oh my goodness.... Like, how can we actually think like that? And I think that, you know, that's something that Eric brought up before. One thing in my own work that I kind of emphasized that disability studies brings to a biblical studies is kind of this move beyond kind of diagnosis and only mute merely viewing disability in the New Testament as kind of, you know... what kind of ancient medical condition was this, for example, with Paul's thorn in the flesh. You know, scholars, mine, you know, every tiny little aspect, you know, of this word, this sickness, this encounter in Galatia, you know, this angel is saying... you know what is this? And so many different theories- it's malaria, it's epilepsy. And it was kind of focused on diagnosis. And I think there's nothing necessarily inherently wrong with that, because I think for people with disabilities today, you know, part of their life is kind of navigating this kind of medicalized discourse... the kind of medical hegemony that bears on kind of classifying their bodies. But what I witnessed in New Testament interpretation, at least with diagnosing disability, is that the interpretation stops at the diagnosis 'cause that's all that's fruitful. Well,



we know what Paul's condition is, you know, let's kind of move on. But I think that's obviously very reductive as a lot of you have talked about in a lot of your own work. It's actually, you know, the impact and the kind of agency that these conditions and these bodily differences actually have on the very texts that we're reading and the effect that they have on us as interpreters, even without people realizing that it's happened. So I think those are just some of the ways that I see the contributions of disability studies and disability theory to biblical studies.

**Candace:** And that's also Isaac really important in the sense that because I do slightly later, so late antiquity, when it's becomes even more prevalent when you think about the fact that we live in... that we're talking about a world where most people don't read, right? Their encounter with these texts is always filtered through someone else's voice in some way. So, if you think, for example, about John 9, the story of the man born blind from birth, and how that gets then picked up by later people like to Jerome and Chrysostom, and others in their homilies, which they would have been giving to congregants who more than likely would have been living with their own bodily conditions that would have impacted their lives, and then realized that this is the sort of thing that they would have heard, time and time again. Every time they stepped right into a church in the ancient world, they would have heard a sermon that at some point would've talked about a bodily condition in a way that metaphorized it, allegorized it, and yet, been living with someone, you know, or this condition themselves, or on top of that, they would have looked around and seen the program... the artistic program at the church, and also seeing those stories retold about healings, about how to understand these bodily conditions within this context. And then you realize there's an whole entire society of people who are told how to read their bodies, how to understand them, how then they should interpret their own daily bodily experience when, you know, Chrysostom says that we should just deal with pain because this is us dying at the daily martyr until we actually die and then are rewarded with no pain. What does that... how does that translate to his audience? How does that work? Who, you know, as I like to say, he's always involved in the hard sale... Who is convinced? How does that reintegrate the way that they interpret their own daily experiences of life? And I think this is one of the great things about thinking about the biblical studies and reception history. You know, how the story began and then you can see how the story gets used, you can talk about how that shifts, how it changes, and how that impacts the way in which people daily move through the world.

**Eric:** Wow, those comments by Candace and Isaac... there's just so much good stuff in there that I wish I had time to talk about everything. But there's a thread there that's coming up to me about representation of reality that really ties into the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thompson in her book, *Extraordinary Bodies*, and some of her later ruminations on feminist disability criticism and talking about how, you know, representation seeks to convey reality, but it also interns structures reality, and then thinking through issues of gender and disability. And Garland Thompson, I think, interacting with Audrey Lord's work talks about the rolelessness of disabled women in texts often. And this is something that I struggle with in my interpretation of biblical texts since so many of the discussions of blindness in particular occur only in the masculine and, you know, there is this lack of awareness in the text, even of women who can be disabled in ways other than barrenness. But there's another thing also about representation that is... I've been working on in the Mesopotamian context because one of the really spectacular things about the Mesopotamian textual record is that you uncover not only literary texts that were copied and recopied because of their, you know, literary value, but you uncover these massive archives of entirely quotidian documents, financial records, ration distributions, agricultural records, you know. It's like, you know, someone in several thousand years digging up ,you know, an accounting office from the 1950s or something where everything's in paper and filing cabinets. And you find these details of real lives and lived experience and how that... you know, you could start to connect how that reflects or doesn't reflect the representation of disability in literary texts. And, you know, so there's this, there's this fascinating

dynamic in Mesopotamia, where you find blind people living and working in all parts of society, all these different sorts of jobs, and yet they are largely absent from literary texts, sort of with the with the exception of this one famous myth called the *Myth of Enki and Mimma*, which deals with the creation of humanity and then, two gods get in a drunken argument over, you know, whether, you know, if one of them creates a disabled human, if the other one is clever enough to think of a position in society for it. And so, you know, it goes on like this and they find, you know, jobs for all of these people in society. And, you know, it's a strange story and it's unclear whether it's supposed to be comic... it comes off as comic in a way that's kind of troubling, but at the same time, it points towards something that we don't get in many biblical texts, which is the productive place in society for people with disabilities. That is that there is a possible good future, a good life, for them that does not involve the possibility of a cure. So, yeah, I just wanted to bring up those points on how representation both reflects, but then also, structures or fails to reflect realities of lived experience. And also to put in another plug, as Isaac mentioned for the book *Disability Visibility*, it's an excellent, excellent volume.

**Louise:** I think one of the other ways that disability studies generally contributes to biblical studies is that it pushes back against a lot of, you know, existing stereotypes that exist. And I think it pushes back against, a predisposition towards the erasure of disability in translation and interpretation. You know, I think, you know, Jeremy Schipper's work on the imagery of the eyes... servant and the eraser of that disability language in our translations is really helpful in that respect. You know, I wrote about the parable of the banquet in Luke 14 as part of my PhD dissertation on my Mohr Siebeck volume and what I found fascinating about that passage is how quick interpreters are to jump to the language of the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame as being metaphorical language. And, you know, when I've talked about this in lay context in churches, but even in the academic space as well, people are so quick to say, this has nothing to tell us about disability at all because this is clearly metaphorical allegorical. You know, everybody knows that this is the case. How could you even try and think that this might have something meaningful to say about the place of people with disability, you know, historically, or in the church today? And, you know, I've tried to say to people, what reference is there for using disability to refer to Gentiles because that's the way it ends up being allegorizing or that it's just that's how they've talking about the Gentiles, the nations. Everyone knows that this is the case, but what reference is there? There isn't actually anything from the Old Testament or there's no precedent to give us a concept of that's the way a first century hearer of Luke's gospel would have heard those texts and said, oh, clearly this is an allegory about the Gentiles, but it fits our narrative of our interpretation of Luke's gospel... this kind of a replacement theology... it fits our narrative, this, so it, we wanted and read into this, this metaphorical interpretation. I think disability studies forces us to look more concertedly at imagery of the body and imagery of disability and makes us think differently to actually interrogate it for what it says rather than jumping to this idea of raising it or making it become a metaphor or an allegory. And I think there's so much depth that we can get from our biblical texts, because we then ask a range of different questions from the text than we do if we just kind of swallow the traditional interpretation of these passages.

**Chris:** I think, what I'm, if I'm listening to everyone and what I'm hearing...and this is also my thoughts, I think. So, so we would say that reading the Bible through the lens of disability... well, let me say reading the Bible and reading biblical scholarship, because it's not only about actual texts, but the scholarship needs some deconstructing and revision that I think is a big thing that a big false that lies ahead of us...but the reading the biblical text and the legal scholarship through the lens of disability studies, it helps us to almost read against the grain, doesn't it? And when we approach these texts and the scholarship about the texts from disability studies, we can perhaps clearly see some of the normative and normalizing strategies in ancient society, sure, as I think Candace was pointing out. But inevitably when we do that, we also see these expositions of power, these fissures in society, these social insecurities in

our own society. And I think that's why people become uncomfortable and why people get nervous because it becomes a bit of a mirror also to us, I think. And that's why it's such a valuable tool. I remember when I was undergraduate theology, Louise, similar to your experience, I was thought in New Testament 1 that you must always perform exegesis and never perform eisegesis. You must always read out of the text, never read into text. Nowadays. I teach the opposite. I tell people to do eisegesis, please. You know, bring everything you are into the text, everything you have, all your baggage. It doesn't mean we must do anachronistic readings. It doesn't mean we must do irresponsible readings. We have some guidelines, but we must bring our bodies essentially into these texts and then perhaps we could see scripts that we usually didn't see. My experience was one of the moments that was sort of a moment of clarity for me was when I started working on asceticism, and I think Candace would be able to relate because we work on similar concepts in late antiquity, is that disability is a top of an acidic script in a lot of these ancient geographical depictions. And what to do with that is fascinating. It's quite challenging. And so I think that's really the value. I mean, the question is, could we ever do biblical studies without... biblical studies without disability studies. That is perhaps for me the main thing because it will not be the same again, I think, after this.

**Louise:** And I think too, just adding to that. Chris, I absolutely agree with you. But you realize as a New Testament scholar, you think about how significant body-related language is to the presentation of Jesus and the Jesus followers. How can you possibly consider that language of the body without actually thinking about the images of disability? You know, you think, for example, the whole message of the incarnation is about God dwelling amongst human beings in a human body. You know, we talk about the resurrection of the body of Jesus, the resurrection of believers in the body. Paul describes the church as the body of Christ, so we've got so much body-related imagery that's so integral to the New Testament that I think it makes so much sense for us to, as you say, that language of reading your body into the texts, which I think we've undervalued in the past.

**Chris:** Yeah. Yeah. If I can just briefly say, I mean, it's so true. And we've been speaking about metaphors quite often, but I think we should remember there's no such thing as a mere metaphor. These metaphors do things. You know, they have very tangible effects in society. You know, it's very relevant.

**Isaac:** Oh, go for it Candace.

**Candace:** Okay. I was just going to say, I also think it's interesting that we're talking about reading our bodies into the text. I think historically everyone already has. We just haven't acknowledged it. This is part of... and I think this is part of the issue, right? We read this text and we're like, well, why did so-and-so look over this? And so-and-so looked over it because it didn't matter to their experience. And I think that is also a part of this. It's like the acknowledgement that people already, historically scholars already historically, have written themselves, has centered their concerns in these texts, and we talked about it as if they haven't. And that's something that we need to like actually confront also in scholarship... this idea that somehow we are disembodied minds who write about things when in fact we're not and that has to lift another legacy and way in which we as scholars have approached texts, or try to like push back against the text.

**Isaac:** And I think when we problematize reading only a singular type of body out of those texts, and I think that's what it can feel like it's reading against the grain, but I feel like a lot of interpretations that approach or take disability seriously in biblical texts actually come up with better exegesis. I mean, I'm thinking of Candida, your piece on, you know, the woman with the flow of power. I mean, if there was ever like a lightning bolt moment for me that completely changes the way that I read a text, it was that article. And that was for me a huge kind of turning point to thinking, oh, actually, well this is not just, I

mean, yes, we're reading ourselves into the text, but this is not kind of eisegesis, this is actually a really, really good, a good reading of the text. And I think that's something significant there too.

**Eric:** Yeah, I think both of those contributions were very important. And I want to just add on top of that, that not only have people who are able-bodied read their own bodies into the textbook, but due to sort of the hegemonic nature of able-bodied interpretation, it has also trained people with disabilities often to read an abled body into the text as well, and sort of to elide or dismiss parts of their own experience that really caused sticking points with those aspects of textual interpretation, where really taking seriously those embodied lived experiences do, as I said, lead to better exegesis. And so I think, you know, one of the things that disability studies has done for me is it has given me language and sort of an awareness of areas where, you know, I might be tempted to elide my own experience in reading the texts and to comply with a prevalent able-bodied interpretation of a given text. So I think just reading a disability studies has freed me up and given me new capacity to engage myself in the text and to point out areas where, you know, I can ask things like, why am I not in this? And where do I fit in this text? You know? Reading, you know, some of the utopian visions of Isaiah and saying, you know, is this utopia inherently eugenicist if there are no blind people there, or, you know, the work of Jeremy Schipper... they're comparing that with the in gathering language of Jeremiah and other parts of Isaiah, you know, bringing the blind in the land in from exile with the rest of the people. And then of course Candida's work on disability in the resurrected afterlife. There are those questions that just pop up now that are unavoidable as I read. Where am I in this text? What is this? What does this imply for me? Does this text have a position for me or for people with other disabilities?

**Candida:** Thank you so much. This is such a rich conversation. And if I may, like sort of insert a kind of new thing for us to think about... In listening to Eric and all of you talk about centering able-bodied and able-bodied meetings and the kind of despotic tyranny of these kinds of readings, I wanted to... I think it's not only the case that disabled people are being themselves out of the text, but the way that we encounter these texts and the way you think about disability might to be occluding and erasing other kinds of marginalized bodies. In particular, I think about the ways in which the use of enslaved workers as prosthetic devices in antiquity sort of erases some of the disability, but the disability sort of erases their body. So I was wondering if we could, even though we're trying to sell the world or at least the academy on thinking about disability... think about the kinds of bodies that we might be releasing in our readings that's not too challenging your questions raised in this context, I don't think it is, knowing some of all of your work.

**Louise:** I can.

**Candida:** Chris... necessary given all of your work.

**Chris:** Yeah. Candida, I think that is really a very relevant point, particularly well with enslavement and how slaves, I mean, particularly building on some of the work of Jennifer Glancy and the wonderful work that she's done on slaves as bodies, but slaves also become sort of surrogate bodies. So, yeah, their bodies tend to represent the bodies of the owners and the effects of what it comes at a cost in terms of our reading and interpretation and what we are erasing from the text is a very interesting question. With regards to slavery, one of the major challenges that I had just in working with slavery is that people say, well, you know, it was such a natural thing...it was such a natural practice. Everyone accepted it. They couldn't think outside of the scheme of enslavement, you know? And in my first book, I sort of challenged this idea to say that, well, ancient people could not think, you know. They weren't unable to see slavery as immoral because it was so natural to them. I came under criticism in some reviews because people said, well you're too hard on the ancient people because they couldn't think differently. And I

wonder whether, we don't face similar challenges with regards to disability. That some people could say, well, almost everyone had some sort of disability in antiquity, whether it was from war or whether it was from poor healthcare. I mean, if you break an arm or relate today, you go to the hospital, if you have that privilege, not everyone has that privilege, and they fix you. But I mean, in some of the "fix", you know, but in some of the developing countries, bones of children are broken on purpose at a young age in order to make them disabled so that they can beg and raise money for the poor. So I'm sometimes a little worried that this sort of... this type of erasure that sort of saying that everyone was disabled so almost no one was disabled, that is a challenge we have with slavery. And I'm not saying it is the issue with disability, but I wonder whether it could not also be an underlying problem that it might be so common and so natural that we tend to miss it. I don't know if that answers the question; that seems like rambling from my side, I apologize. Maybe others have better questions.

**Isaac:** I think you're touching on to an important point there, which is that, you know, sometimes disability can seem so broad where it's well, it's like what, it's obscure, right? How can we do it? I find a little bit of the opposite sometimes maybe coming from spending some time in the classic literature, which is that the eraser happens because people approach disability and impairment in the ancient texts from only kind of medicalized categories from the kind of things that we've considered disabilities today. So, I think the thing with enslavement in the ancient world is that well, we think, well, you know, that's not a disability today, so then... it's widely thought that it's not today, so then why would it be in the age of world? But I think when you under understand the kind of social and cultural effects and dynamics with bodies which are made deviant, which are de-normalized, to use the word of a Anne [inaudible], I think that starts to expand our categories beyond just kind of the medical categories that we consider today... the conditions that we consider to be disabilities today. And of course it comes under criticism to say, well, you know, isn't it just so, as one of my examiners said, wouldn't it have just become so saturated that, you know, the time... it becomes useless as a kind of analytic category. But I would say, you know, I'm willing to put up with saturation if it means that we can, we can think about these bodies that are really really on the margins of the margins and to help us critique our own biases. But then also, as Eric offered early on in our discussion that the ancient world and the discourses of disability there have a lot to offer contemporary discourses and definitions and frameworks for how we conceive and conceptualize disability.

**Chris:** Yeah. Just to add very briefly. The notion of... in slavery studies, the notion of utility has become quite central. I mean, we speak of ability and ableism and ableness. I mean, ancient slaves were according to popular ideas, not able to be virtuous. Does that make them disabled? I don't know. That's something we can talk about, but in slavery, it's also a matter of you. It's a matter of usefulness, of utility. And what is the saddest things I read was a story about a slave, an old slave, who had worked so hard for many years that he had through labor, he had become disabled and he couldn't work anymore. And the natural thing for the ancient writer to say was what do you do with this life like that? You get rid of it.

**Eric:** Yeah. That intersection that Chris brought up, but...the intersection between disability and aging, it is one that I think is generative...I'm working with a little bit right now in terms of there's a dynamic that I've seen both in ancient texts and in modern contexts, which is that aging is correlated very highly with disability. You know, I saw one activist talk about, you know, ageism, in particular elder care and elder care institutions, are a disability issue because nobody goes into an elder care home just because they are old, they go in because they are disabled through age. And so you see these there's, there is this deep connection, not entirely necessary, but a deep connection between aging and disability. At the same time as you find not only in modern contexts, but also in ancient texts, sort of a reticence to use disability identity language to describe disabilities acquired through age. And this is true for blind. For blind people,



you know, people who lose their vision through age often have a lot of trouble identifying or shifting their identity to being a blind person or using language of blindness to describe themselves. And, you know, this is something that happens in biblical texts too, where you find circumlocutions for age-related vision loss that don't involve use of, you know, the Hebrew word 'iver for "blind" or any of its derivations. So there's that intersection that... where the use of different language reflects the intersection of two particular identity locations.

**Candace:** I think that comes up, particularly with the, which texts get picked, picked up an antiquity as something that are worth exegesis, right? The man born blind is picked up in part because we expect, right, when people age for them to lose their sight to some degree. But the man being born blind, t's not simply a medical crisis, it is an ontological one because the question becomes, then how can he know God. There's a hole at least in the minds of late antique interpreters. And so this moment where people are navigating or attempting to navigate these identities as they collide become moments of, I think, textual frustration. And we can also see this, at least in my text, when you have the idea like, oh, later on when they get older, it's not so much an issue, or if this is an issue, if you're of a certain class, as Chris has pointed out, you get a slave, right? A slave will now do your reading, right? A slave will do your writing. I now have a slave who can help me with my mobility issues. What does that mean? So now there's a world in which we have enslaved prospects who then help people navigate their daily lives. And this is something that if you read the literature, we sometimes get little inklings of like, when we read *Paradise Lost* and when you're aware that someone has written this text, at least the end of it, because the author himself has gone blind. He's no longer able to see. And so, thank you Milton. But like, this is, this is one of those moments where it's... we get inklings of that when they're mentions of how certain people get help, but then there's the reality. Okay. What does this mean for the enslaved person as they age? What does it mean for people who cannot afford slates or not a certain class to have slaves? What does it mean for the person who, for example, there is a lovely article and I'm blanking on the name right now, it was written by someone who was talking about basically someone in Roman Egypt who was partially blind. And he was a land owner, but his neighbors started picking off areas of his land because he was partially blind. So then he petitioned the government to get his land back and he talks about how, you know, his neighbors have set upon him and other things. And then eventually this particular scholar followed this guy after he got permission from the government to get his land back and all of these things, but eventually he does go fully blind as a result of age. And we're left. We don't know what happens after that. We don't know if his neighbors, who were kind of predatory, stole the rest of his land, if he was able to maintain, or any of these things. We're just kind of left. And on. Besides that we get no indication of how he navigated his daily life with his partial blindness and then his full blindness later on. And so there's no...and so in this since we do get that kind of erasure because we want to know both the outcome of what happened. I will say in the interim, in the middle, the government was like, you should get your land back. This is unacceptable. So we can say that, but at the very least, we still don't know like what happened in the middle, how this man navigated his life on the daily basis, and how that changed as you guys point it out as he aged.

**Candida:** That's a really interesting example. I love that kind of set up for papyri and the way that the papyri letters see glimpses of people's lives in that way. And I wonder what it would tell us about something like the paralytic, who's borne by four people to see Jesus. They dismantled the roof, which seems like a pretty aggressive thing to do, let the man down and Jesus says, take up your mat and walk. Like he wants you to, he wants him to carry it. Is that because he's wealthy and the people who bring him in, slaves? How does that contrast with the man by the pool of the Bethesda in John, who can never get in the water in time because he has no one to help with him? And so you, kind of like, have these sort of contrasting models that people aren't really thinking with, but the, the example that you just gave time,

this was like really intimidating. One of the things that I've heard a number of you mention is that when we were in grad school, we didn't, we didn't make dissertations on this in part because we didn't know that we could. I personally didn't know that disability studies was a field. And that gives me the wonder that like, how can the field of disability studies sort of find its way in biblical studies. How can we be more intellectually inclusive? How can we be practically more inclusive in welcoming people into the guild? And how do we want to see this, the field move, like, over the next decade? And I was wondering what Louise, who does a lot of administrative work and probably thinks about these kinds of practical questions thinks about this in particular.

**Louise:** Yes, I'm definitely wearing my Dean of Students hat when I'm answering this question here. As I was contemplating this question, I think the step for me really is thinking back about the way that we do education across the board. You know, I think I've definitely seen a growth and development, at least here in Australia, in terms of greater diversity in biblical studies. You know, I've certainly seen more scholars of color and more indigenous scholars. I think there's been a few more disabled scholars here in Australia. But it's a really slow process. And I really do think that the way that we teach theology, the way that we teach biblical studies is very one size fits all. And what ends up then happening is the kinds of people that are coming through theological education, coming through graduate school, fit this one size fits all approach. And they're the ones who become biblical scholars. So we're just reproducing scholars that look like the scholars that they've learnt from. And at some point, if we're going to make a difference about who ends up in the guild, then you actually have to change something somewhere along that lines. And I think the starting point has to be what we're doing in theological education. We have to move past a one size fits all way, I think, of teaching that allows for people with vision impairments or someone with mental health condition or whatever it is to be part of that classroom and fully immersed and fully inclusive, which then will have an impact on who graduates, who goes on to do PhDs, and ultimately who's writing in the field of biblical studies. So I feel really strongly that we need to move past a, we stand at the front and we lecture at students kind of approach to education. That is really the standard approach to all tertiary education. But what happens when we shift away from a one size fits all approach and we want to say, let's, let's look at pedagogical models like universal design for learning, which is about saying let's be more inclusive. So let's alter the way that we teach to try and be, you know, to think about the fact that we have people of different learning styles and abilities within the classroom so that we can cater to all of those, including the people on the margins, instead of just saying, well, this is the way that I do it, and if you don't fit in my box, well, obviously you're not cut out for it. Because I think there's lots of people who have the potential to go on and be great scholars, but who don't fit the box that we have in theological education, so we're just, we're cutting off a pathway. And I think if we open up that pathway from the time of tertiary education, then we can have an impact in who's going to end up in biblical scholarship. So I think it starts much earlier than just who's doing PhDs and who ends up writing, but I think it has to happen at, you know, right from the beginning of who's actually doing theological studies in the first place. And dare I say it, perhaps we need to dismantle our ivory towers a little bit. You know, I think we have this really precious approach to, well, unless you can write a good exegesis and a good essay, you can't be in our field, you know. But, and so if you take away some of that, if you ask your students to write more personal reflections, then you're not going to have the same kind of academic rigor. And I don't think that's necessarily the case. I think, research being done in universal design for learning is, is really critiquing those ideas just because you do something differently, doesn't mean it's wrong. It's just that we've got to think differently to the way that we've always done. This particular model of, of tertiary education and theological education in particular. So I just had a chapter published on universal design for learning and theological education for students with and without disabilities. And so this is

where I'm really tuned in at the moment in trying to think about how can we do this differently as we're actually teaching our students.

**Candace:** I guess speaking from a US perspective, I would say that like, by the time you get to college, at least undergrad, if you're doing things like ancient and biblical studies, it's a little late, right? You, if we think about the, just the linguistic rigor that we ask our students to have and how many, you know, secondary schools, high schools have access to say Latin or Greek. Right? And then you get people coming into undergrad and they, for the first time, get to choose what they want to learn, and maybe they want to learn things that represent them, which hasn't been promoted in K through 12 education. And so this is actually a question of what do people have access to? How do we, as a field, model what we have to offer? How do we change the sorts of requirements that we think are completely necessary to participate in the field? I mean, how do you convince someone that, okay, you've not had access to ancient language or any language in K through 12, now that you're here I need you to learn Latin Greek and then maybe Hebrew, or maybe Coptic or maybe Syriac? How do you convince them of this? Instead of say, oh, I'm speaking as a person of color, I don't want to take the African-American studies course on the 1950s, that talks about something that say black soldiers's involvement in Korea. That was my grandfather's life. How do you, how do you model a classroom experience that says to the student that they're going to see themselves in what you're teaching? And I think that's one of the things that's really difficult and can be really hard, especially when you, when students look around and they see a model and they see that, that model isn't them.

**Eric:** Yeah. This is a question that I could really talk about for hours, because there are so many levels to the creation of a, of a more inclusive biblical academy. On, on the very basic level of research, there is, there is the problem facing, you know, blind scholars in particular blind students have access to information. You know? And this is, this is something very relevant to me as someone who read his entire dissertation never looking at a page of print. I haven't read print on a page since 2015, I think. And so, you know, a lot of the arguments that go on about print collections versus digital collections have increased stakes to me as someone for whom the print collection is totally inaccessible. You know, up until a few decades ago, they talked about this phenomenon of the book famine for blind people because the production of braille books in large quantities is, is cost prohibitive and space prohibitive. And you can't stock libraries with them in the same way you can with print books. And, and so the improvement of digital technologies has made life totally different for blind students and blind scholars in terms of access to digital books, in terms of text to speech. There were, there were several very successful blind scholars in, in biblical studies and theology in the last generation. But, but they had to have any book they wanted read and recorded for them on cassette tapes. So...and there, there are still a lot of practical problems to solve in terms of distributing and accessing information through, through different types of technological mediation, you know? There, there are these problems of digital publication standards and citation that, that are relevant to everyone in the field. As we, as we start to read more, EPUBs, you know, they don't have standard pagination and make us sort of reconsider these very basic questions of, you know, why is it our convention to site informational structure by the structure of a normative artifact, you know, which made sense when you had huge print runs, but it doesn't make sense when you have books as, as repositories of information being transmitted simultaneously through multiple media. So there, there is increasing work to make scholarship accessible to students who want or need it. I think there is a lot of cross disability solidarity work that's necessary because just as able-bodied academics or administrators or people, you know, in broader society, don't understand a disabled scholar's particular access needs, you know, there's no guarantee that someone with a certain disability will intuitively understand the access needs of someone with a different disability. And if this shows up occasionally and divide between, you know sensory disabilities and motor disabilities, which have different sets of access needs. And then, you

know, there are other types of disabilities as well, including your hypersensitivities or cognitive disabilities or chronic illnesses, chronic pain that lead to different sorts of barriers and access needs. Another thing I think we need to discuss, and this is relevant really broadly outside of disability but intersects with it in important ways, are academic labor conditions and labor standards writ large and especially the way that precarity intersects and interacts with disability, in terms of, you know, how being precarious makes life hard on disabled scholars without access to healthcare. And then often how precarious labor conditions can cause or exacerbate nascent disabilities in, in scholars and enter the academy able-bodied. We need to talk about the, the, the parameters and frameworks of academic positions and the expectations, the cult of, of productivity and academic labor. All of those things need to be reassessed and radically restructured to make an academy that is more inclusive to people with disabilities and people from a wide variety of different backgrounds and with different needs and abilities and, and, and contributions to make, to scholarship.

**Isaac:** I think Eric's point about employment opportunities for biblical scholars with disabilities is a very, very important one. I mean, I have a number of colleagues who, you know, even if they live in countries, that offer healthcare, the, you know, the, their disabilities, you know, have, have restricted, you know, the kind of impossible publishing parish goals required for academic positions these days. And, you know, we do need a serious solution. I've heard about, you know, kind of co-teaching positions, which I think is a really interesting way to think about it, you know, dividing a singular position amongst two different people to kind of, to, to accommodate and to remove the barrier because it's, you know, I, I read a Twitter thread from a disabled humanities professor last night. And they're saying, well, you know, the few of us who go through graduate programs, you know, we make it through in spite of the system it's not because the system enabled us. And then by the time we graduate, there's a whole other barrier, which is trying to get employment. And then if we do get that employment, you know, that's a miracle in itself. So I think those thinking about the barriers that people with disabilities face in biblical studies with employment, I think that's, that's a really, really serious thing that I would like to see SBL address. Another thing I think is also just the economic layer to this aspect, which for, for, for graduate students, especially living in the US, in country or in countries that don't offer the same kind of healthcare as other countries, you know, t, it, it is prohibitive and restrictive to constantly be offering exclusively scholarships and things like that, to, to able bodied people. I mean, it's... So I would love to, I would love to see, you know, kind of an SBL scholarship or something like that to set up, to, to really fund up and coming scholars with disabilities who are working in biblical studies, but it doesn't have to necessarily be even disability studies, but just... If we're serious about inclusion and diversity, and the importance that, that having different perspectives in our society is about that, I think, putting our money where our mouth is, is an important aspect. Another layer, if I can just take a bit more of your time is just the architectural layer, which is... So my study in the UK, I mean both at Oxford and Durham, you know, prestigious places, but I distinctly remember in Oxford literally climbing the spiral staircase up to my supervisor's office, literally climbing the ivory tower and wondering how is a wheelchair user, you know, for example, supposed to access this office. And then someone might say, well, they could just meet them in a different place. But, you know, if you're studying at Oxford, you're studying biblical studies and every other student from undergrad to master's to PhD is meeting with this one professor, who is the head of the, you know, the whole department in this area, in their office and having tutorials there and having discussions there, you know, that's an access problem. And that that's a serious issue. Even in Durham, I remember, you know, the, the New Testament seminars that we would have there, they were great places, but they weren't accessible. I had pushed for space to, to, to make the room bigger because there was literally not even enough space for the people for, for, for able-bodied people coming to the seminar. And, but, but people wanted to keep it exclusive, they wanted to keep it tight. And so there was, there was barely enough room to fit a mother

with her child, let alone, a wheelchair user or someone else who needed a little bit more space. So I think for me, the architectural layer of that in UK universities, of course, there's heritage buildings and all that types of stuff. But I think if you really are interested in inclusive, inclusivity in biblical studies, we need to make those spaces not only economically viable and ethical with regards to their career trajectories, but also spatially accessible and inclusive.

**Chris:** Yeah, I think what, what, what has been said is, is, is really very relevant, particularly Isaac and what Eric is saying. I think, I think from my perspective, my challenge is to identify those mentalities in the field, over the, the mentalities, the attitudes these what we would call attitudinal practices, that structure our field and our discipline. A lot of it is, is very subversive. A lot of this is very invisible. There's a very interesting concept that Bruce Caren, I'm sure you would be aware of it. Bruce Caren has developed a notion of "orthoposture". I don't know if, if, if you know of the idea of "orthoposture", but it's quite interesting. And I need to give a shout out to one of my colleagues at the University of South Africa, Pieter Botha who has done some interesting work on, on, on developing this idea of orthoposture in relation to disability and also slavery. So, so, so Caren understands "orthoposture" as this as, as it's the compliance and the compliance of individuals, whether able-bodied or not, to, to sort of, you know, almost willingly submit to and participate in relations and conditions that hierarchy and authority generates. That's really, and again, I, I, I need to recognize my colleague who sort of made me aware of this. I think the first thing is to, we need to, we need to get distance from these required attitudes and mentalities. It sounds very theoretical, but, but I mean, something very simple would be for instance, what Candida and Meghan Henning did previously with the SBL meeting, and, and giving us a space to also have an opportunity to also have virtual meetings. So, and it links up with what Eric said: that we need to really rethink about the conceptual and structural changes in our discipline. What counts as a research output? You know, in in South Africa that's the main thing because we get subsidized per research output. It means we live... I mean, you get money and our departments survive because of, of government subsidy for research outputs. But for instance, an academic audio book, you would have to really fight hard and motivate something like that to be a, a sort of an acceptable and a compliance research output. And I'm not talking about writing a book at and having it transformed into an audio book because that's, that's not enough... that you know, we should not simply accommodate. We should not simply try to always comply with, with these with, well, with "orthoposture"... with the dominant "orthoposture". We need to resist that a little bit and think differently about how we disseminate our research, how we disseminate our findings in terms of something, you know... I mean it's expected in, in meetings of, of conferences that you stand in front of the podium in front of a lot of people and you speak, but just think about all the mentalities behind that. And Isaac, you were saying climbing the stairs at Oxford. I mean, I know those stairs very well. I mean, I have to, if I, I love attending the SBL, but, but I need to travel from South Africa to the US and I love traveling, and I, I can't wait to travel again, but it's, it's taxing on, on my body and I am able bodied person sitting on an, on the Delta flight from Johannesburg to, to Atlanta for 16 hours in an economy seat. If I can't do it... it's so difficult for me. I often found myself having needing to climb stairs where there is just no other option, you know, because the elevator is not working. So if it's, if it's such a challenge for me, yeah, I think we need to, we need to really stop complying with certain things. And that's why I really appreciate what Candida and Meghan did in terms of the SBL meeting because we should simply resist as well. It's, it's very important. We need to come to a point where we identify mentalities and resist them.

**Candida:** Thank you so much for those really powerful responses and practical suggestions. I'm not really supposed to be speaking, but I would like to share a story I think... some of the issues of compliance and the issue of the job market you were raising. When I was in graduate school, I was encouraged to model myself on faculty members my discursive practices, my behavior, and tacitly



encouraged to pretend I was not disabled. And I saw enough faculty members talking about job candidates as, oh he reminds me of me, as a way of talking about how the academy replicates itself in the ways I think Candace was gesture too. When I applied for jobs, I was put through this gauntlet, this like physically difficult three-day gauntlet of meetings that were exceptionally long. And just in order to do that, I had to adjust medications in ways that were extremely dangerous for me in order to put up with the appearance of being able-bodied. The sort of system conspired to make me do this. And of course it was a great privilege that I could conceal my invisible disability, that I could do that. But it felt to me like it was important that I do that in order to get this position. And, you know, it's a situation, I hope that no one would have to be in again, but I also know that if the situation was corrected, if more rest time was built in, that that would benefit, not just people with chronic illness, but nursing mothers, people traveling from abroad, as Chris mentioned. Universal design, as so many people have said, it's not just for people with disabilities; it's for everyone. And when we talk about disability, and we've been talking in this group about what's important, I think what's at stake is not just disability, but all of us and the future of the guild. And so I really want to thank you all for participating in this conversation, for sacrificing your own sleep and your own time. It was enormously generous. And I am grateful to the SBL for being willing to spotlight this issue in this way. And I hope that this and the shift to a semi hybrid conference would just be the beginning of a series of changes that will affect not just SBL, but all of our institutions and the academy at large. So thank you so much for your participation.