

***Theology and the Experience of Disability:
Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under***
A. Picard and M. Habets (eds) (2016)
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This volume emerged from a conference, ‘Theology, Disability, and the People of God’, co-sponsored by Carey Baptist College and Laidlaw College in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2013. The book presents an uncommonly broad range of topics and perspectives on disability and theology, including contributions from persons with and without disabilities, and disciplinary perspectives ranging from biblical studies, pastoral theology, social ethics, ecclesiology and personal narratives about living with or caring for persons with disabilities. The book is divided into three sections. The first, ‘Theology, Disability, and Being’, looks at the ways in which theological reflection on disability contributes to how we think about being human and being Christian today. The second, ‘Theology, Disability, and Belonging’, focuses on the transformative potential that persons with disabilities might bring when churches move beyond shallow notions of inclusion and truly provide places where all persons belong. The third section, ‘Theology, Disability, and Becoming’ looks to the future – both our immediate future and the eschatological horizon – to imagine the possibilities of how a disability perspective can open up new futures for the church and the world. Although there is some interpretive value to this way of dividing the essays of the book, this review will analyse the contributions of the volume in three groups: the chapters concerned with thinking about disability in

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the Bible and theology, those that present personal narratives of disability experience, and the practical/sociological studies of disability and church life.

The chapters dedicated to exploring the place and meaning of disability in the Christian Bible provide some of the most engaging essays in this volume. It is only in the recent past that biblical scholars have adopted a critical disability perspective as a lens through which to read and interpret what the Bible says about impairment, disease, stigma and other conditions that would fall under the category of ‘disability’ today. The Bible speaks with many and conflicting voices on this topic, and the authors of these chapters approach the issue with great sensitivity and insight. One such example is Kirk Patston’s essay, ‘Disability Discrimination in the Book of Job’. Patston discusses how Job uses discriminatory language and tropes against persons with disabilities (the ‘senseless, disreputable brood’ who mock Job in 30:8) in his final speeches to God. In contrast to Job’s ridicule towards persons on the margins of society, Patston argues that God’s final speech provides a challenge to Job’s ableist attitudes. God’s wild, subversive speech shows that God is a God of those persons on the margins, and so part of Job’s conversion involves challenging his ableist moral mindset.

Rod Thompson similarly undertakes a constructive rereading of the Bible in ‘Mephibosheth at the Table: A High Point in Davidic Kingship – 2 Samuel 9:1–13’. In this essay, he draws attention to how David honours his covenantal promise to Jonathan by welcoming his son Mephibosheth into his house. This is striking not only because Mephibosheth is ‘the enemy’, a member of the house of Saul, but also because the text emphasises that he is ‘lame in both feet’ (9:13). Attention to this story challenges the idea that disability was always understood as divine punishment in the Bible, and offers a moving account of covenantal kindness and radical hospitality towards persons with disabilities. These two essays nicely demonstrate the contribution that a disability perspective makes to biblical and historical scholarship: an endlessly interpreted text such as the book of Job can be read in new and provocative ways, and an often overlooked figure such as Mephibosheth can be appreciated for the way he reveals a striking example of hospitality shown to persons with disabilities in the Bible.

The second major category of essays in the volume presents the perspectives of persons with disabilities, and counts as one of the significant contributions of the book. Much of the existing disability theology literature features persons writing *about* people with disabilities, and so this book helps develop a theology *with* and *for* people with disabilities. One particularly illuminating example is Manuele Teofilo’s essay, “‘He’s My Mate’”: Cerebral Palsy, Church, and the Gift of Friendship’. Here, Teofilo

speaks candidly and powerfully about the experience of living with cerebral palsy, and the ways in which he has been welcomed and included (as well as disrespected and excluded) by friends and churches. He offers insights on the ways in which churches can embrace difference and challenge regimes of normalcy in their communities. In her essay 'The Silence Surrounding Psych Wards,' Christine Welten challenges stigmas surrounding mental illness that still linger in many churches, and her reflections on living with schizophrenia deserve to be read and taken seriously by pastors and theologians. Because discussions of mental illness are all too often ignored in theological conversations, her essay provides an important contribution to the volume.

Although there is much to be commended in this portion of the book, it is worth noting that certain voices are more present than others, and the book reflects the current challenges of finding ways to incorporate the perspective of persons with intellectual disabilities. This challenge is addressed in a chapter by Charles Hewlett, which records a transcript of him speaking to his son, James, a 21-year-old man with profound intellectual disabilities. Due to James' non-verbal capacities, we only ever hear Charles speaking to and about him, and so the reader is reminded of the need to find more creative ways to incorporate and represent the voices and perspectives of persons with intellectual disabilities.

The third group under which I am addressing the essays in this volume concerns practical and sociological issues facing churches in Australia and New Zealand. This portion of the book highlights one of the peculiarities of this volume – its geographical specificity. As the title of the volume indicates, nearly all of the authors in the book come from Australia and New Zealand, and the practical studies of churches included here come exclusively from those countries. One such example is 'Disability in the Australian Church: Results from the 2011 Church Life Survey' by Jason Forbes and Lindsey Gale. This essay analyses the results of a survey on the presence and inclusion of persons with disabilities in Australian churches, and ends with several recommendations on how churches might be more welcoming to persons with disabilities, and how future surveys might better address questions of disability in church life. Similar issues are addressed in Carol Fearon's 'Welcoming and Including People with Intellectual Disability: A Report on a Study of Five Churches,' which studies the approaches of five churches from four different denominations in New Zealand. In both cases, members of religious communities from a variety of backgrounds will have much to learn, although the utility of the essays are somewhat limited beyond the contexts out of which they emerged.

Despite the variety of issues and perspectives found in this volume, the book serves better as a resource on particular topics rather than a general introduction to disability theology today. Although there is some diversity of perspectives in the text, the reader should be aware that most of the contributors are writing from a shared Protestant theological milieu. This is not a criticism of the book per se; there can be great value in investigating a topic within one particular tradition of religious thought and practice. But those hoping to find a representation of voices from across the spectrum of Christian denominations will not find that in this book. As a result, the book is at the same time extremely wide ranging, but also somewhat narrow in its outlook.

There are signs of a more dynamic engagement between Christian theology and disability studies in Amos Yong's essay towards the end of the book. Here, Yong elaborates the contribution that a disability perspective brings to theological education today. He helpfully challenges the opposition between the church and secular culture that plagues much theological reflection on disability, and he challenges theological educators to be open to the insights from critical historiography and disability studies in order to revitalise theological education. His seemingly modest suggestion that churches be open to movements in society and politics (without giving up a critical posture towards them) would be well heeded by many church communities.

In the end, the eclecticism of the book is both a benefit and a drawback. The great diversity of the essays collected here helpfully illustrates the variety of ways in which attention to disability can contribute to the practical and intellectual life of the church – but it also means that few readers will find the entirety of the book relevant to their interests. There are several groups who will find some or many of the essays worthwhile, however: pastors, theologians and care workers from Australia and New Zealand will find within the book a helpful account of the state of persons with disabilities in their Christian churches. Biblical and historical scholars engaged in disability studies will find several essays illuminating for their work, and many will learn from the testimonies of persons with disabilities included in the book. For these reasons, we can be thankful to Andrew Picard, Myk Habets and all of the contributors for bringing this book together.