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Autism and Biblical Studies: Establishing and Extending the Field beyond Preliminary Reflection

Grant Macaskill

School of Divinity, History and Philosophy, King's College, College Bounds, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, AB24 3UB, UK

ABSTRACT

This article considers core issues of practice, method and hermeneutics, as they bear upon the development of a scholarly field concerned with “Autism and Biblical Studies.” A small body of scholarship has begun to bring biblical studies into dialogue with research into autism, and to reflect on the pertinent methodological issues; this article acknowledges the preliminary character of this and reflects upon what might be necessary for this emergent area of interest to be established as a mature field of research. The extending of the discussion to incorporate a range of sub-disciplines, each operating with different core “identifications” of the biblical material, is crucial to this, as is the careful use of insights from postcolonial and ideological critical approaches. Pivotal, however, research must also be shaped and led by those who are themselves autistic, so that autism is properly the subject and not merely the object of research.

Introduction

This article was first conceived as a follow-up to an essay published in this journal in 2018, which was, in its own terms, a work of preliminary reflection on how biblical studies (particularly the part focused on the New Testament) might be related to autistic experience (Macaskill, 2018). I had expected this essay to extend the “exegetical” elements of that essay, either by analyzing the texts in more detail or by considering further texts that might be considered relevant. It became clear in the intervening period, however, that there was greater need for a work continuing to reflect on the core issues of practice, method and hermeneutics that might bear upon the establishment of a mature area of scholarly work. My sense of this need emerged after I had published a monograph on the topic (Macaskill, 2019), which offered further methodological reflection oriented toward one

CONTACT Grant Macaskill  grant.macaskill@abdn.ac.uk

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particular task—that of practical theology—and a number of exegetical discussions focused on particular texts. Even during the final stages of publishing that work—copy-editing and proof-reading, et cetera—I was conscious of the landscape of autism research, and the discussion of it on social media, changing and developing. It was now too late to modify the manuscript in significant ways, and I had to allow the work to stand as the product of a particular stage of study, both my own and that of others, but the developments demanded further reflection at a programmatic level. At the same time, I found myself reflecting on a range of further ways in which biblical studies might function within the consideration of autism. My own work on autism will always primarily be oriented toward the practical theological task, which in turn is conditioned by a set of contextualizing theological decisions and identifications of what the Bible is (Macaskill, 2020), but that is only one of the various modes of engagement with the biblical material of potential relevance. I have found myself reflecting on how other modes of engagement that do not necessarily involve commitments to notions of biblical authority (however this may be conceived) might prove helpful to the study of autism and to the experience of advocacy.

It will already be clear from the opening paragraph that this essay will have a somewhat autobiographical strand, as I reflect upon the limits of my own work in this area. This dimension runs deeper for me, however, in ways that need to be articulated early in the essay. I was formally diagnosed as autistic in 2020, though this merely confirmed in an “official” sense what I had known for some time. This is important to the character of my reflections on the topic and its attendant practices; it complicates in important and necessary ways the notion of “objectivity” in research (on this, see also Brock, 2019). That word is often used to give preeminence to a particular mode of knowing and a language system that is associated with it and with its analytical practices. The notion of “objective” research has occupied a particular place in the scientific work of the academy, and has shaped the models in which the phenomena of autism are interpreted. In philosophical research, however, the limits of “objectivity” as a category within the field of epistemology have been probed throughout the modern period; they are rather less expansive and inclusive than scientific discourse has often assumed them to be. Some kinds of knowledge simply cannot be categorized as the justified knowledge of objects by subjects, typically understood in rational terms. Within the last few decades, there has been a significant shift toward social models of epistemology, sometimes connected to the concept of “embodied cognition,” a term that is concerned with the social as well as the somatic aspects of knowledge.

These elements will be significant in the discussion that follows, which will initially consider two areas of widely recognized priority in autism research—the involvement of autistic people in the design of the research and the significance of models in the analysis and discussion of findings—with a particular awareness of how these might bear on biblical research. It will then consider two areas more specifically concerned with the hermeneutical options relevant to biblical scholarship: the identification of different tasks, and their relevance to the study of autism, and the distinctive value of intersectional and postcolonial approaches.

The involvement of the actually autistic in research

All research into autism “involves” autistic people at some level, but there is an increasingly audible complaint about the extent to which the design and execution of research is led (or co-led) by autistic individuals; some of the organizations involved in autism research have made such involvement a priority, but in global research terms, this remains something of a minority stance. Within the autistic community itself, the perceived exclusion of autistic people from this role serves to reinforce the dominance of received descriptions and definitions, and the generally negative representation of autism as a condition of “deficit” rather than “difference.” That last distinction will be considered further in the second section of the essay, but it is connected to the issue of objectivity that I noted in the introduction: autistic people feel themselves to be treated as objects, and what is seen to make them interesting as objects is defined in terms of deficit or aberrance.

In fact, rather ironically, one of the issues around which this revolves is the choice of language. Research literature has typically preferred—or even required—the use of person-first language (e.g., “persons with autism”) rather than identity-first language (“autistic persons”). Yet, in English speaking circles, at least in the U.K. and increasingly North America, most “actually autistic”¹ people prefer the latter (Kenny et al., 2016; Botha et al., 2021) and are often troubled by person-first language and the insistence on its use. To speak of “persons with autism” is to suggest that the autism is additional to their identity and somewhat detachable from it, rather than an essential element of *who* they are. The irony of this lies in the fact that the adoption of person-first language was precisely intended to protect the personhood and status of the individual, to prevent their dehumanization, and reflected the kinds of concerns identified by personalism as a movement around the hyper-medicalization of disabled experience. The adoption of such a language convention without meaningful

and ongoing discussion with the autistic ironically results in a functional neglect of their status. I will return to this point below, however, because the concerns exhibit a significant degree of variation when framed in international and multilinguistic contexts. It should also be noted that the rather basic sketch provided here, which reflects the standard terms of the discussion, scarcely represents the true complexity of the linguistic issues, explored in a sophisticated way by Botha et al. (2021).

It is important then, that autistic people feel represented both as the subjects and the objects of research. That is to say that there should be more research undertaken by those who identify as autistic and that where autistic people are involved as objects—where they are studied through quantitative or qualitative methods, which will not always be the case in biblical research around autism—that they have an opportunity to inform and address the terms of study. That is, even as *objects* of research, they are personal *subjects* and the mode of study should reflect awareness of this important truth. Subject-subject knowledge involves communication, with communicants accommodating the act of self-disclosure that the other embodies within their own interpretative response. That the language I use here is somewhat sacramental in overtone is intentional and begins to hint at how biblical and theological research might open different ways for the researcher to see themselves and how they research. They are *participants* in an act of communication and the extent to which that participation is realized is dependent upon their capacity to attend to and accommodate the truth of the other participants.

The urgent need for the involvement of autistic people in biblically or theologically oriented research is highlighted by the dominance of “deficit-based” accounts of autism in much of the literature to date (e.g., Stump, 2010; McFall, 2016) and a use of autism derived from a fundamentally negative identification. Autism is used in this literature to illustrate what proper human being should *not* look like. Even if well-intentioned, such work essentially dehumanizes autism, in ways that are difficult to imagine would have been possible if autistic people were involved.

The need for this is reflected in my own decision to be open about my own diagnosis. I did not disclose this at the time when my monograph was released because, at that stage, the diagnosis had not been confirmed and for various reasons *of my own* I wanted to wait until it was to do so. I highlight those words because others may not feel the same need to have a formal diagnosis that I did and because the validity of a self-identification as autistic does not finally depend on formal diagnosis, which is necessarily based on criteria defined according to medical models. The rates of diagnosis are far behind the rates of actual incidence of autism, as generally under-resourced systems struggle to deal with the demand

for diagnosis. In some cases, and for some individuals, these difficulties can be overcome through paying to access private services (i.e., those not provided by national healthcare), but this reinforces a general problem linked to demographics: autism representation, diagnosis and awareness is not even across the global population, but tends to be higher within white groups of middle to higher income brackets. I will discuss this further below, but here want to emphasize its implications for the status of autistic people in research whose identification has *not* been dependent on formal medical diagnosis; to exclude such individuals would be to continue the representational distortion of the field. In addition, we might note that the diagnostic experience can vary and some of those involved in the process may use diagnostic criteria that do not fit the experience of those seeking diagnosis, criteria that reflect the very historical descriptive models of autism that are considered troubling by autistic people because of their emphasis on deficit. My own diagnostic experience was excellent, because the staff involved were well-trained in current research and particularly in the sensory dimensions to autism which particularly affect me; it may not be coincidental that one of the clinical staff was themselves autistic and had been recruited because of their awareness of sensory aspects. There are countless stories, however, of people whose diagnostic experiences were very unhappy by comparison and social media often host discussions of the relative costs and benefits of diagnosis under such conditions.

If it is a priority to involve autistic people in the design and execution of research, and to acknowledge openly the place of those who are “self-diagnosed” within this, it is also vital that this is as broadly representative as possible. Here, one of the contributions that biblical studies might make as a discipline to the culture of autism research—and we must call it a “culture,” with all the overtones that this word carries—is precisely its international and multi-lingual quality. While all research is, in principle, international, biblical studies and theology remain broadly and somewhat unusually committed to the practice of publishing and interacting with scholarship in multiple languages, often focused on primary material preserved in a range of older languages. We need to acknowledge that the modern languages which continue to be maintained in publication and presentation tend to be the legacy languages of historical European powers (primarily English, French and German, but also Dutch and Spanish).² The colonial significance of this, however, is widely acknowledged within the disciplines and is interwoven with complex reflections on the way that biblical interpretation has been affected by its associated phenomena. The historical dominance of European and Anglophone American intellectual values, meanwhile, is acknowledged in a swell of recent literature that is

critical of the tacit “whiteness” of biblical scholarship and that articulates alternative interpretative frameworks and cultures.³ Such values have contributed to the *essentially* negative conceptualization of autism and the sophisticated critique of them that is beginning to emerge in biblical and theological studies has much to offer.⁴

Taken together, these dynamics in current biblical and theological scholarship have the potential to facilitate a truly diverse scholarship on autism, shaped by autistic people themselves, that is alert and attentive to the effects of Anglophone cultural dominance. To put this differently, autism research and advocacy needs to diversify beyond white, English-speaking thinkers from middle to high income backgrounds; the resources constituted by the culture of contemporary biblical studies and theology can make an enormous contribution to this.

One illustration of the relevance of this lies in the terminology question discussed earlier: current evidence suggests that the preference for identity-first language is limited to the English-speaking world. This may simply reflect the lack of research into preferences outside Anglophone territories, and there is some evidence beginning to emerge that the preference for identity-first language is held in other language contexts,⁵ but it may also reflect the different linguistic sensibilities that mark languages; language affects cognition, in ways that monoglot people can be naïve to. If the discussion of language preferences is to be truly representative, it must be global, and that means it must be aware of language as a globally diverse reality.

Models of autism and the language of research

One of the concerns that has grown in prominence in autism discourse and advocacy—though not *universally* in autism research—concerns the models by which the phenomena of autism are explicated and the language used within these. Models are not the same as theories: a theory is an attempt to explain phenomena, while a model is an attempt to conceptualize the phenomena and describe their relationships. Consequently, while explanatory theories of anything will vie with each other or will demand to be refined until a truly satisfactory explanation is reached for *why* phenomena occur, it is possible to maintain the simultaneous validity of multiple models, specific to different contexts.

We might qualify this mention of “contexts” by adding that these might also be constituted by “levels” of phenomena that are related through what we call *supervenience* or *emergence*. The social or familial context of love, for example, constitutes a level of reality that is distinct from that represented by the physiological factors that trigger loving sensations, or the

basic phenomena of “bonding.” This is to note something that is an important part of philosophical discussion and that has become a helpful element in some recent biblical scholarship (e.g., Croasmun, 2017): there are certain realities that can only be understood and considered in terms of their emergence from underlying realities, and the language used to speak of each level should not be confused. When that confusion takes place, there is typically a kind of linguistic reductionism, within which the phenomena of the emergent or supervenient level are identified without proper distinction with the elements or mechanisms that underlie them.

There has been some important discussion of this tendency to reductionism in the context of the social sciences, notably by Christian Smith (Smith, 2010), but also more widely in the various parts of the loosely defined movement known as “personalism.” This work has been particularly concerned with how the concept of “the person” is understood in relation to the biological (including neurological) properties of the individual. The concept of “emergence” is invoked to acknowledge that personhood—and the associated particularization of this in personality—cannot be reduced to the constituent biological elements of the individual in question. Personhood is a distinct reality, occupying a level that is necessarily identified as *supervenient*. This does not mean that it is unconnected to the underlying level—quite the opposite⁶—but the thing that emerges can never be reduced to those things from which it emerges, without ceasing to be that thing. The word “level” here does not imply importance, but rather simply acknowledges the extent to which certain realities exist because of combinations. Importantly, the word “person” should be used with an awareness of the level of reality to which it pertains, as should words that are properly “personal” in kind.

I have noted the significance of this kind of reductionism for the study of autism elsewhere (Macaskill, 2019). It is exemplified in the confusion of mirroring phenomena with “empathy” and the consequent labeling of autistic people as “empathy deficient” or “low empathy.” This has been a key element in the Cambridge “autism quotient” and the identification has led its pioneers to compare autism with psychopathy and to articulate the differences. Quite aside from the growing evidence for a different kind of autistic mirroring or identification of affective state (different, rather than deficient; see Milton, 2012), the whole approach reflected in the Cambridge paradigm involves the confusion of a concept that linguistically describes an emergent phenomenon with one set of elements and mechanisms that may underlie it. “Empathy,” as a word, labels the condition of recognizing and responding to the affective experience of another, so as to participate with them in that state. This is not the same as mirroring, even if mirroring might contribute to it. In fact, it involves a range

of factors that combine, one which is the identification of narrative. Reading fiction, for example, supports the development of empathetic instinct and, indeed, shapes particular kinds of empathy (Gaiman, 2016, p.12).

To confuse the levels of reality that a word may signify introduces fundamental problems to the discourse, with truly de-humanizing consequences for autistic people. That Baron-Cohen felt the need to account for the difference between the autistic and the psychopathic, having identified both as conditions of zero empathy (Baron-Cohen, 2011), is indicative of the essentially negative associations that the language generates. Even more significantly, however, the labeling of autistic people as deficient in empathy results in their being categorized as sub-personal. Peter Hobson uses the language of Dennett to indicate that the autistic individual simply does not meet the “conditions of personhood,” unless they are trained into acting as a person through interventions (Hobson, 1993; Dennett, 1976; cf. the discussion in Birnbaum, 2018). This way of considering autism runs closely together with interventional approaches such as ABA, widely advocated for the “treatment” of autism and a matter of enormous concern for many autistic people themselves, who consider the practices of ABA to be essentially violent.

Sensitive awareness of models and their relationship to context and level has the potential to transform positively the discussion of autism, particularly in holistic terms that seek to engage with the whole person. Biblical scholarship shaped by social scientific research has an established history of using models as a means of analyzing phenomena in the texts. The use of models in social scientific biblical research has not gone without criticism (cf. Horrell, 2000), but the discussion and debate around this means that many biblical scholars are well positioned to engage with their significance to the field of autism research with less naivete than some of those currently operating within it, who often work unaware that their own language is actually determined by the tacit adoption of a particular model.

In fact, there have already been sophisticated reflections on biblical material and disability that identify deep issues of language and value in the biblical material (Lawrence, 2013) that might be extended to the discussion of autism. Further, the awareness of “emergence” as a category and the recent sustained engagement with questions of personhood (Eastman, 2017; Croasmun, 2017 and, somewhat differently, Meech, 2006) is promising as a basis for serious consideration of the place of models in shaping the language used in autism research and consequently the actual cognition of autism among researchers. This scholarship is typically well-versed in both philosophical and theological issues, further facilitating exchange between the disciplines.

Here, though, we encounter a history of research that exemplifies the problem and demands a fresh approach. Some of the key works in theology that have engaged with autism research have basically assumed the validity and legitimacy of the medical model, and have extended its language of deficit into their own theological accounts (Stump, 2010; McFall, 2016). The labeled deficits of autism are used as a means to highlight “normal” relational capacities and their often-overlooked significance. The perception of autism is intrinsically negative and the word itself comes to be used in fundamentally pejorative ways: the lack of proper relationship to God is described as “spiritual autism” by some who take this approach (McFall, 2016). Proponents of this approach might claim that they are using autism metaphorically, but all metaphors work by building upon the literal meaning of the image they deploy. Only by assuming a fundamentally negative, *deficient* understanding of autism can this approach do what it does.

Such approaches can rightly be challenged using the research that has highlighted the problems with the use of evidence and research design of the studies that have claimed deficiencies in autistic people (e.g., Milton, 2012). But that challenge needs to be supplemented by a critique of the adoption of the medical model in fields beyond which its terminology ought to be considered applicable. Already, some important theological critique of this sort has begun to emerge (Leidenhag, 2020). If biblical scholarship is to contribute in a constructive way to the discussion of autism, it must ensure that the place of models in driving the discussion is kept in view.

The Complex Tasks of Biblical Studies: Theology, Religion and History in the Experience of Autism

The first two sections of the essay have considered general desiderata in autism research and have, in a limited way, considered how these might be relevant to biblical studies and to the theology with which it is in dialogue. In the next two sections, I want to flip this, to focus on biblical studies as a complex discipline and the particular areas within this that might be especially fruitful for research into autism.

My language of “complex discipline” is intended to highlight that what we label “biblical studies” is not a simple discipline that performs only one task, linked to one particular identification of its object of study, but is really a composite of different approaches that consider the biblical material and its contexts in various different terms. Much biblical studies approaches the material as historical artifact, or as curated collections of such artifacts—depending on the scope of study—and sees its task as

recovering historical realia of some kind, whether this involves reconstructing the world behind the text, the intent of the author(s) or redactor(s), or some other historical truth to which the text somehow gives access. Other practitioners of biblical studies will engage in the study of religion, seeking to understand how the biblical material might be read as particular witnesses to human perceptions of religious experience or to their mythic construction of the world and its actors (Segal, 2020). Religious studies of this kind analyze the phenomena of the biblical writings from the outside, as it were, looking for patterns of phenomena in anthropological terms and for disruptions to those patterns but without sharing the commitments of the authors or communities from which the texts arose. Theological approaches, in contradistinction, consider these phenomena from within, engaging with them critically, but according to a critical apparatus consciously shaped by the traditions themselves. Such approaches have become vital to current, post-secular, approaches to cross-faith conversation, such as Scriptural Reasoning, which do not seek to ignore difference and to build on limited commonality, but rather to build relationship through “generous particularity,” the open encounter of rooted and exclusive traditions with each other. Here, the identification of the biblical writings as Scriptures, acknowledged to have sacred and authoritative status for their receiving communities is vital. These various identifications are not mutually exclusive, and in practice they are often integrated, but they are not essentially identical and their distinctive identifications of their object of study need to be recognized (Macaskill, 2020).

My own work on autism has primarily focused on the theological identification of the biblical writings, though with their historical locatedness playing a key role in this. That is, I have been interested in how the biblical material might resource thinking about autism within the context of communities that consider that material to be their Scriptures. The historical qualities of the writings inform that task, but are not, in the end, the matters that I have sought to investigate. As such, my own work has been particularly focused on issues of theological ethics and practical theology. The principles that I articulated on the reading of the Bible in relation to autism (Macaskill, 2019) were defined by this particular task and its associated identification of its object.

Even given this identification, I have to acknowledge that at every point, that work has been marked by the inevitable limitations of any attempt to open a new conversation: both the method and the conclusions are likely to be criticized, to some extent, by others seeking to do constructive theological work and probing the questions around how it might be done best. This is as it should be. Within this edition, the essays by Eastman

and Sloane represent further examples of theologically oriented approaches, seeking to consider how the biblical material might be read responsibly in relation to disabilities not named as such in the biblical material.

My intention here, though, is to consider the approaches methodologically different to my own that might be distinctively helpful in moving scholarship on autism and the Bible into a more mature, complex space. I want, then, to note some of the approaches that do a very different kind of work to that which I have undertaken myself and to reflect on how they might contribute to the study of autism.

In the context of this journal, the first of these observations will hardly be a novel one, but its pertinence to the study of autism should not go unnoted. Those contributions to biblical studies that are interested in the phenomena of “religion” help to illuminate the ways by which both difference and disability are understood by those who think religiously. This does not obscure the ways in which particular texts or traditions might react against other ways of thinking religiously—i.e., it does not necessarily flatten out the range of characteristics visible across religious groupings. What it does highlight, however, is how human communities that are shaped by religious values conceive difference and disability in religiously determined terms. In the context of contemporary secularism, this is particularly important. The problem with such secularism is not (as is sometimes assumed) that it is essentially atheistic, but rather that its permission for religions to continue to exist is ideologically compartmentalized; religion can continue, but is not considered to have any legitimate place in public or political thought or to have a significance that embraces every aspect of life.

Consequently, the secular view of religion itself presumes that the religious thought of a person or group can be separated from other parts of their experience or value. In relation to autism, this means that religious commitments are seen as something that might be attached to the condition—rather like a Lego block—but without fundamentally affecting what the condition is understood to be or to constitute. Medical approaches to autism are essentially characterized by this approach: while its characteristics will vary from person to person, according to where they are located on the autism spectrum (by clinicians), the category of autism is not considered to be *essentially* shaped by religion. But for people who are religious, this is simply and straightforwardly untrue. Autism is always an embodied experience: it happens to people who live within communities, and the religious character of those communities will affect how it is viewed. For the person whose religious beliefs and community resource an essentially positive view of difference or disability, autism will be an *essentially* positive thing; for the person whose religious community

considers these things to be curse, judgment or the work of the demonic, it will be an *essentially* negative thing.

Much of the study of the bible that is informed by anthropology and the study of religion or myth has drawn attention to the dynamics around this within the communities from which the texts emerged. Within this special edition, the articles by Jones and Soon survey the work done to date and highlight the place of anthropology in the field. The importance of these works from a religious point of view is that they highlight the ways in which bodies are “porous” and “saturated” with significance, to use Taylor’s language (Taylor, 2007) or are *always* located within myth, to use Segal’s (Segal, 2020). Segal’s work, in fact, highlights that this mythical quality is visible even in secular societies; it is simply that the myths are secularly shaped ones (2020, chapters 10–11). Strength and beauty, understood with respect to a standard of expectations, function mythically for all. For our purposes here, though, the primary value of this is in highlighting the *religious* saturation of the body and its significance.

Research into such phenomena take on fresh importance when we consider the global statistics around religion. The various publications of the Pew Research Centre⁷ highlight just how unrepresentative secularism is of global populations, even if it is politically dominant in some countries of international leadership. Where, for example, around 21% of people in the U.K. will consider religion important (a higher value than much of Europe), the figure in Ethiopia is closer to 98%. The shape of recent politics in the U.S.A has demonstrated how influential religion continues to be, even when it is technically considered to be excluded from the sphere of political authority.

As well as highlighting the need to allow the religious dimension of experience to inform holistic models of care for autism, these observations highlight its importance to autism awareness and advocacy in a global context. It is widely recognized that autism awareness and representation is most visible in white communities of middle to upper income. Where there has been serious advocacy work among Christians, it has generally (though not exclusively) reflected the characteristics of these communities. As Christian groupings, these are often characteristically white and affluent in their values, with theologies that are more heavily shaped by their contextual values than they realize. For serious progress to be made in global autism awareness and advocacy, the significance of religion to its experience needs to be understood.

Within this, the religious study of the biblical material might be relevant on two levels. First, and very simply, it contributes to the body of research that considers both contemporary and historical phenomena in the representation of disability and difference. In this regard, it sits alongside the

study of other historical texts and artifacts and alongside the study of contemporary religious groupings through anthropological and social psychological research. At the risk of belaboring the point, such work draws attention to the fact that it is secularism that is the oddity, with a characteristic compartmentalization of religion that is not representative of global populations. Second, it provides resources by which the dynamics of religious understandings can be addressed. Here, religious studies and theological ethics work together in the reading of the biblical material, identifying the resources that are utilized in excluding or denigrating attitudes as well as those that function to challenge or redirect these.

In this, of course, the engagement with the biblical material in terms defined by religious studies is essentially dependent on the careful historical and philological work done by the majority of biblical scholars. This is true also of the more theologically oriented work that I have done. The point I seek to stress here is that none of these connected but distinct engagements with the biblical material by itself exhausts its relevance to the contemporary study of autism. Taken together, they have the capacity to make a rounded and coherent contribution to research that the wider research community cannot afford to ignore, if it is to act in an intellectually responsible way.

Receptions, intersectionality, and ideological criticism

I turn in this final section to consider some areas of biblical research that I think should be particularly important to the study of autism. These areas make their own distinctive contribution to the complex field of biblical studies, but are often treated as peripheral to the central tasks of historical exegesis (on this point, see Soon's article in this edition). The issues that characterize them, however, make them especially valuable for the study of difference and disability, and autism in particular.

The first is the study of biblical receptions. Reception histories can appear to be concerned with something other than the texts themselves; they are interested in how these are read or interpreted. Certainly, it is possible to do this in ways that are principally interested in the surface features of the new works of interpretation, whether these are new texts or artistic objects. It is also possible, though, to see this as a study of the original text itself, probing the character of its effects or its agency upon those who receive it (as with Luz, 1994). Approaches to reception of this kind can be thoroughly theological, as they consider these effects in properly revelatory and economic terms (e.g., Bockmuehl, 2006) or they can represent a particular way of thinking about literature and communication, one that recognizes the event of meaning to take place in the encounter

between a work and its readers or hearers.⁸ Whether the effective history is understood theologically or not, however, studies of this kind highlight the function of biblical material in the generation of attitudes toward disability and difference, and those categories together are particularly significant for the study of autism.

Some of these studies will contribute constructively to the study of the function of the Bible in resourcing and provoking positive attitudes to disability and difference through the Christian tradition; this emerges, for example, in the important reader edited by Brock and Swinton (Brock & Swinton, 2012). The fact that the *functional* meaning of Scripture in such readings does not accord with the one identified in standard historical-critical exegesis should not be invoked as a reason to reject or critique such readings; rather, it might serve as a comparator of sorts, casting particular light on the interpretative dynamics within the theological traditions that generate such positive readings.

The reception history of the texts might also exemplify negative appropriations of Scripture, however, used in service of ideologies or values of which we would be critical. The concept of the image of God, for example, has been read in ways that identify it with particular color or with particular levels and kinds of abilities—i.e., in ways that we might consider both racist and ableist—and the phenomena of healing that are encountered in Scripture are routinely cited in support of an eschatological hope that the world to come will be free of disability. Subtly, the metaphorical use of disabilities for spiritual “impairment” of some kind or another—blindness and lameness—might have an intrinsically ableist twist that is difficult for us to affirm. Again, comparing such interpretations with the supposedly objective meaning of the text—the one extracted by our exegetical methods—cannot simply be a matter of holding that meaning up as the authoritative one, but of asking more complex questions about the dynamics that generate vicious readings. It is essential to this that we recognize that the encounter between reader/hearer and text always generates meaning; the qualities of the reading will always be shaped by the qualities of those reading.

This provides a useful segue to our second promising area for reflection. There has been a growing interest within biblical scholarship in the broad concept of “intersectionality.” This term labels a broad range of approaches, of both analysis and praxis, that are collectively alert to the complexity of power relations. As one standard text summarizes:

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually

shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p.14).

I need to be careful in drawing this into our discussion. Intersectionality, like the postcolonial approaches I discuss further below, is not a simple thing: the word labels a variety of approaches that are collectively, but not identically, interested in the complexity of power relations. The underlying assumptions or ideological decisions at work in these approaches will vary from study to study and these may affect the detail of the analysis and the conclusions reached. Those seeking to utilize insights from specific intersectional studies may find the detail distinctively analyzed therein to be valuable to their own projects, though they may disagree with the overall conclusions reached; they may also consider some studies to be shaped at the analytical level itself by values with which they disagree. In addition, intersectional work will not necessarily address the philosophical thinness or fragmentation that has been more widely identified as a problem in discourse about identity and inclusion,⁹ particularly when it is content to terminate its work with the discussion of social and power relations. It must be stressed that we should offer similar cautions about all methodological approaches, including the supposedly neutral ones of historical critical exegesis, but because I here seek to advocate the use of intersectionality, I consider it important to identify specific points where care is required.

The incorporation of intersectionality into the study of autism should be made carefully, then, with a critical attentiveness to the various ideological decisions that may underlie particular studies; this may involve the affirmation of some, but not all, findings. With such care in place, however, the explicit awareness of “complexity” in social and power relations that the approach brings is valuable. Autism is always experienced “intersectionally” and the approach focuses particular attention on the entanglement of identity issues.

If this sounds abstract or just complicated, we can illustrate it with respect to the interest in “whiteness” noted earlier. Whiteness is seen as a category of power and entitlement, but many whites share the experience of systemic disadvantage or denigration with non-whites, linked to particulars of gender, class, income, disability or sexual orientation. This can lead to an alignment of concerns: many autistic people feel a strong sense of identification with others whose identities are systemically disadvantaged, so that autism self-advocacy will often be closely wrapped up advocacy of black rights and LGBTQI+ rights. The Black Lives Matter movement itself reflects this phenomenon of entanglement. Those elements of identity, moreover, might align *within* one individual, who faces multiple points of

systemic disadvantaging over their color, gender, orientation and/or disability.

They will also occur in ways that generate less straightforward power relations. I might use my own case to illustrate this. I am a white male, which is a category of dual entitlement. But my whiteness is also associated with my status as a member of a minority language group—Gaels—who are generally considered to have suffered appalling cultural and economic abuse within the power dynamics of the British empire; my own family background is one linked to fairly significant poverty (my father was born in a “black house” in the Western Isles, during the Second World War, without running water or electricity). Some will contest the narratives of power, suggesting that the history of the Clearances for example has been politicized and exaggerated or that the social and political conditions that underlaid the land-related uprisings in the 19th and early 20th centuries were not as bad as they have been made out to be. This itself aligns with some of the dynamics in the discourse around race and disability, where systemic factors are often downplayed or dismissed, but even if those claims were proven to be correct, the phenomena of marginalization would remain and their relevance to the politics of experience. My involvement with the “Islands and Islanders” group at the Society of Biblical Literature—a group mainly focused on the Caribbean and Pacific Islands—highlighted the remarkable parallels in the identities and experiences of islanders from very different cultures: all exist in the margins of colonial economies to which they are both useful and unimportant (Havea et al., 2015).

I say none of this to play down or to deny the reality of my entitlement as white and male, but to highlight that these power relations are embodied in complex ways, entangled with culture, language and disability. The fact that my disability is often regarded as a “hidden” one complicates this still further.

As an insight brought into the practices of biblical studies, intersectionality opens nuanced ways of analyzing the issues of identity and the associated power-relations at work within the texts. Moxnes (2010), for example, uses a “locational intersectionality” to destabilize readings of the gospels that consider the qualities of Galilee to be derived in primarily religious terms, arguing that other elements of identity linked to power would play a more significant role in establishing solidarities and divergences through the region and that much of the evidence has been read without adequate attention to the distributive factors at work. The archaeological evidence for extensive Jewish ritual observance, for example, he considers to have been interpreted too bluntly, failing to take into account its particular connections to wealthier strata and the variegations of religious sensibilities across social contexts. While I am not fully persuaded

by Moxnes's arguments on the character of Judaism and Judean culture in the region (contrast, for example, the work of Freyne, 2004), the kind of questions he asks are precisely the right kind, particularly in relation to the popular use of gospel material and the Jesus tradition in advocating for inclusion. The claims made about the gospels and Jesus often turn on simplistic understandings of the religious culture of the time, and equally simplistic representations of Jesus' relationship to it; in the end, as we will see further in a moment, they often become essentially anti-Semitic in their representation of Judaism and Jesus' purported critique of it (Tonstad, 2015; see also Bockmuehl, 2011). By allowing the complexity of the identity issues and power-relations to emerge, we may find a picture of the Jesus movement within Judaism that is less tidy and less amenable to contemporary values, but is all the more radical for it. For those seeking to use it with some kind of contemporary moral significance, it may not so much affirm our present values as expose their limits, pressing us toward a more thoroughgoing (and less comfortable) task of destabilizing values in order to foster belonging.¹⁰

As a corollary of this, and one that bears on interpretative praxis itself—as the interpreter deals knowingly with their own contribution to the event of reading—intersectionality allows us to see how the power relations at work in the diversity of autistic experience may be more complex than participants recognize. Those who are disempowered and marginalized in certain respects may be privileged in others. Recognizing this can help to generate true sensitivity to the complexity of the issues in which we ourselves participate: a consciously intersectional praxis invites us to reflect on our participations in power. It invites us to recognize our entitlement, even as we identify the ways by which we are disadvantaged.

With its attentiveness to the complexity of identity issues power and relations, intersectionality helps to contextualize and balance the findings of the various approaches categorized under the label of postcolonial hermeneutics. This term functions as an umbrella for a range of reading strategies that are shaped by critical reflection on the values of colonizing peoples and of those colonized, and on the ways they narrate their identities; by extension, criticism of this kind reflects on all kinds of power relations and identity issues, so that it has given rise to particular forms of feminist and queer thought. Postcolonialism and intersectionality are not entirely different things; intersectionality is really a recent development of postcolonial thought that is particularly attentive to complexity. But I turn to postcolonialism as a wider and longer established category here because it has a longer history as a critical movement and has developed some particularly relevant approaches, which are linked in helpfully explicit ways to the politics of interpretation.

In their strongest forms, postcolonial approaches will operate with a thoroughgoing “hermeneutic of suspicion,” treating the biblical texts as complicit with the values of empire,¹¹ though maintaining some witness to older and healthier traditions or to countering strategies. Many will be uncomfortable with appropriating such strategies, since they can appear to be at odds with the status of scriptures as “Word of God,” but while this may hold some back from *practicing* postcolonial critical approaches in a fully determined way, it is a mistake for anyone to neglect the insights generated by postcolonial interpretations. No theological approach to scripture should ignore its historical particularity, or the organic involvement of placed human beings in its composition; consequently, none of us should expect Scripture to be aloof from the day to day manifestations of empire and power. The value of the postcolonial approaches is that they draw together insights from a range of disciplines, including philosophy of language, to press beyond the surface detail of texts and to consider the values at work within or behind them.

With respect to autism, perhaps the most obviously relevant stream of the postcolonial approach has been that of queer theory. This approach is relevant on one level because it operates by “leaning in” to the labeling practices typically used to oppress or marginalize and by revalorizing the words and concepts, often by seeking to destabilize the binaries that empower them and the values underlying these. Hence, the word “queer” is transformed from a pejorative term to a proud one and is embraced, rather than rejected. This parallels some of the issues and practices in autism advocacy: the word “autism” is revalorized from a negative to a positive, partly through the destabilizing of deficit-related terminology and the demonstration of a proudly neurodiverse community. Similarly, while it is a little less popular now, the word “Aspie” (from Asperger Syndrome) is used widely as a positive self-identification. This itself is part of the visible alignment between autism and LGBTQI+ advocacy: the communities do similar things with similar phenomena of power and marginalization. In addition, though, it is also the case that there is a higher proportion of LGBTQI+ people within the autistic population than in the general population. So, the issues align on two levels that bear in important ways on questions of inclusion.

Queer approaches, in particular then, have an obvious relevance to the practicing of biblical studies in relation to autism; even if scholars do not consider themselves to be practitioners of a queer approach, they will find elements in queer analyses of the texts that will be invaluable. There are, however, some points at which caution needs to be exercised, something noted by critically careful practitioners of the queer approach. In a recent article, Linn Marie Tonstad has probed carefully the issues involved in using queer readings of the New Testament and Christian tradition to

advocate for inclusion (Tonstad, 2015). Tonstad identifies several factors that can cause such approaches to go astray from their intended path, ultimately resulting in their being “anti-queer” and actually exclusivist. I focus here on her first two criticisms because their relevance extends beyond the queer approaches with which she is concerned to popular efforts to read the bible inclusively.

First, Tonstad notes a tendency to fall back on distortive representations of Judaism, an issue we have noted already in our discussion of intersectionality (especially in relation to Galilee and the Jesus tradition).

The most worrisome versions make use of common anti-Semitic tropes. Although such tropes are infrequent, their seriousness justifies examining them first. They appear primarily in discussions of Jesus as transgressive, gender fluid, and radically embracing of the economic, religious, sexual and social other. Such descriptions are understandable: love for Jesus often survives profound Christian disillusionments on the part of LGBTQ persons, and the inclusive Jesus offers a way to claim the central figure of Christianity for queer ends. Their shadow side, however, is uncritical repetition of fundamental tropes of anti-Semitism, particularly emphasis on Jewish ethnocentrism, legalism and patriarchy. The exceptionalism of Jesus, when plotted against the background of his time and social location, figures the universalist, fluid, “Christian” and queer Jesus against the fixed, heteropatriarchal “Jew.” (Tonstad, 2015, p.3).

While such tropes may well be “infrequent” in queer scholarship, they are paralleled widely in popular discourse about Christian inclusivity. In fact, this is one point where non-queer discourse about Christian inclusivity—often in the context of popular apologetics—is most obviously in parallel with it. Both can turn on an approach that represents Jesus’ contemporaries within Judaism in wholly negative terms, preserving the kinds of representations that were common in the starkly anti-Semitic scholarship of the past, and notably in its language of *Spätjudentum* (for discussion, see Schmid, 2020). Such representations have fed through to popular conceptions of Jesus’ interaction with other Jews (notably including scribes and Pharisees) and also Paul’s relationship to his own past values. While many will explicitly reject a reading of this material that affirms LGBTQI+ values, they will employ parallel strategies to queer theory by setting Jesus and Paul over against their contemporaries on, for example, their treatment of women and the religious values that might lie behind this. Tonstad notes further examples of scholarship treating Judaism with either basically negativity or “implicit supercessionism,” such as in the representation of the Lord’s Supper as “radicalizing” the Passover Seder (Tonstad, 2015, p.4). Again, while these may occur within queer approaches, they can also be paralleled in non-queer/conservative readings of the text that seek to affirm the superiority of Christianity.

These approaches are often at odds with historical evidence and its interpretations. Few scholars today, for example, would want to argue that

the Pharisees were principled legalists of the kind that they have been portrayed to be or that Judaism should be understood in the terms of *Spätjudentum*. Recent scholarship highlights the diversity of early Judaism and its own complexes of identity.

The approaches also, though, characteristically regard religious exclusivism and narrowness as someone else's problem, and use the identification of the "other" in such terms as a basis for dismissal and exclusion. This is one of Tonstad's most useful insights into the ways in which queer approaches can sometimes fail to reach their intended goal. My own point on the back of this is that the issue transcends the particularities of queer approaches and extend more widely to strategies for asserting inclusion and to some ways of representing faith itself.¹² I might add, as a specifically theological-ethical observation, that it tends to neglect one of the features visible across the discourse of the New Testament writings. What we often too lightly label as "legalism"—the tendency to "normalize" certain features of identity and moral performance to a particular cultural pattern, and to make these definitive of "faithful" identity—is near-ubiquitous as an identified problem in the New Testament. It is the problem *within ourselves* that the texts should prompt us to be most concerned about, and the one most likely to disguise its own presence with the language of faithfulness. To put this in blunt terms: the New Testament writings lead us to expect that all Christian groups will be marked by a tendency to normalize identity in ways that need to be challenged, even those that consider themselves to prize diversity. It is because of what Paul calls "the flesh": the human constitution will always generate ugly attitudes toward difference and will seek to implement ugly strategies to contain it. The problem with the approaches that Tonstad categorizes as "anti-Semitic" is that they identify this problem in a formal way with Judaism and its structures or practices, rather than identifying (as Paul does) a basic human issue to which Jewish people are no more immune than anyone. This is a significant part of the logic of Romans 1–3.

Tonstad's second observation is that many queer approaches can fail to understand "the affective life of binaries" (Tonstad, 2015, 5), and how powerfully they operate in conceptualizing value. Tonstad is concerned that strategies to destabilize binaries can fail to take seriously enough the "associative relationships" by which these binaries actually live, the cross connections between binary pairs (e.g., the male/female and the rational/non-rational) that keep them in play even when a particular binary is destabilized or made fluid. Tonstad applies her insight critically to a range of examples within queer approaches and I need to be candid in saying that I do not have sufficient expertise in that literature to either agree or disagree with her criticisms. But her insight into the extent to which binaries are present and the character of the associations between them

is vital to the analysis of their function within the biblical texts. It is very clear that binaries and dualities are encountered across the biblical writings, and much has been written on this in my own sub-field of New Testament. It is also clear that many of the writings employ strategies that appear intentionally to complicate or destabilize these, often by utilizing binaries themselves. Paul's language of the "weak" and the "strong," for example, revalorizes the significance of the words, partly through attaching them in surprising ways to non-binary things: divine election or the multi-membered body of Christ. Much of the scholarship generated by queer approaches to the Bible is attentive to these dynamics, and even those who do not agree with the queer approach can draw upon (or debate) its findings; Tonstad's work, however, suggests the need for an even greater awareness of the depth and complexity of these dynamics, both in the text being read and in the reader themselves.

Conclusions

This essay has been a work of reflection on how we might move from a preliminary interest in bringing biblical studies and autism research together to a more established and rounded field of activity. As someone who has worked in this area, I have sought to reflect upon the limits of my own work to date and to think creatively about how these two constantly developing fields of research might be brought into constructive interdisciplinarity. Always, of course, the challenge with achieving true interdisciplinarity is that we reach juxtaposition but not integration: discussions are placed beside each other, without properly speaking to each other. My goal in this essay has been to show how specific areas within biblical scholarship might truly integrate with autism research, in ways potentially transformative to care and advocacy.

Ideally, attempts to integrate biblical studies and autism should be led by scholars who identify as autistic. This need not involve formal diagnosis. Many of the problems with current research into autism can be traced to the treatment of autistic people as objects, rather than as communicative or participant subjects. As a relatively new sub-field within biblical studies (and theology, for that matter), we have an opportunity to establish the importance of autistic leadership in the very identity of the field. Once this is done, the sub-field in biblical studies will have an opportunity to testify to wider scholarship the truly international and linguistic diversity of autistic experience in religious context.

A central aspect of the contribution of biblical studies to the study of autism is the sensitivity within the discipline to the concept of models and the use of terminology within these. There are various models used to

conceptualize the phenomena of autism, but the medical model is typically dominant and often used without much awareness of its intrinsic values. Some of the early theological work on autism has itself assumed the validity of this model as an *essential* account of the condition and has developed theological extrapolations that many consider disturbing. A mature contribution of biblical scholarship to the study of autism can engage with the conceptual aspects in a way that is informed by its long history of evaluating models; it may, in fact, play an important role in challenging the hegemony of the medical model, working in partnership with other fields that have utilized different models to describe the condition.

Much of the work in biblical studies will be oriented toward the practical theological or ethical task, engaging with the Bible in its identity as Scripture. My own work has been of this kind and will continue to be. But ours is a complex discipline and I have suggested in this essay that both religious studies and historical studies have a role to play in shaping our understanding of autism, not necessarily by identifying examples of autism, but more widely in showing how historically located religious people think about difference and disability.

In the final section of the essay, I considered some of the aspects of current biblical scholarship that are particularly relevant to these tasks, particularly the interest in intersectionality and postcolonial (especially queer) studies. These approaches are generally sensitive to the dynamics of power and identity within the literature and one need not be a committed practitioner of their methods (or to agree with all of their underlying value system) to derive benefits from their insights. In fact, the approaches are internally varied and self-critical, so properly always invite a critical uptake of their findings. Generally, these approaches are interesting as a basis for considering the phenomena of inclusion and exclusion, but intersectionality gives us a particularly important development of this, interested as it is in the complexity of identity issues and power relations.

Notes

1. This designation reflects a trope in autism advocacy, visible in social media and its use of the tag #actuallyautistic.
2. Other languages are used in publication, of course, but function less commonly as international languages of exchange.
3. See, for example Horrell (2020).
4. I am grateful to the editor, Professor Brian Brock, for directing me to Carlson (2009), which examines the underlying philosophical values with such care.
5. The various interview perspectives shared in this article, for example, exemplify this preference in a Nordic language context: <https://psykologtidsskriftet.no/2018/11/autisten-i-oss>, retrieved February 27, 2021. As one contributor (Ragnhild Iveranna Hogstad Jordahl) writes, “Formuleringen «... med autisme» får det til å virke som

- at det autistiske er noe som er separat fra mennesket – et slags tillegg som man kanskje kan tenke seg å fjerne. Det gir ikke et korrekt bilde.”
6. A central theme in Croasmun, 2017 is that there is, in fact, a “downward causality” involved in emergence. Person-level experience exercises a shaping influence on the elements in lower levels. In Croasmun’s thesis, this becomes an element in his exploration of Sin as a person-identification, a real identity *who* is generated by (or emerges from) the agency of individual people and in turn affects (by downward causation) their moral state.
 7. Notably: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/23/americans-are-in-the-middle-of-the-pack-globally-when-it-comes-to-importance-of-religion/>
 8. While not strictly an example of this, I feel compelled to note Barclay (2010), as an exploration of the category of “event” and its philosophical significance for philosopher Alain Badiou, as he reads the gospel story.
 9. See, again, Reinders (2000).
 10. On this, cf. Reinders analysis (2000) of the liberal values that have underlaid inclusivity discourse and their intrinsic deficiencies; they are not adequate to the task of generating a true culture of belonging. The surge in anti-inclusive values and the often-vicious dismissal of “wokeness”—both played out in recent populist politics—reflect the kind of cratering that such superficial discourse can face.
 11. This may be true even when a text rails against the values of a current empire; even the protest can be shaped by the values of empire. This is an important theme in the relevant scholarship.
 12. By this, I mean that “Judaism as religion” is often contrasted with “Christianity as faith” (or as “relationship”) and Jewish commitment to law is often identified as the opposite of pursuing righteousness by faith. Few scholars would today agree that this is a fair reading of the New Testament material.

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