

# HOW DO WE INTERPRET THE DISCOURSE OF JESUS' HEALING OF THE DEAF-MUTE (MARK 7.31-37) FROM A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE? A DISCUSSION ON THE NECESSITY OF A KOREAN SIGN LANGUAGE TRANSLATION

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## 1. Introduction

While investigating the trends of globalization and Bible translation, we must consider the challenges of Bible translation in a postmodern period. The translation of the Bible into Sign Languages (SLs) of the Deaf<sup>1</sup> is being rapidly taken up as a new objective by UBS translation teams. We are beginning a new era in SL Bible translation. Much of what has happened has a positive message for those of us who are working with the SL translation projects of the future. There are now many projects already underway or in the planning process all over the world, including Spain, Costa Rica, Australia, Finland, Sweden, and the USA. Those involved in these projects are sharing insights and questions from their experience.<sup>2</sup>

Korean churches also have long been interested in reaching the Deaf community, and pastors have been using SL in an effort to make the Bible accessible to people whose primary language is SL. Despite these efforts, the Deaf community in Korea is limited in its ability to deeply understand the Bible because there is no Korean SL Bible translation and very few in the Korean Deaf community are capable of reading the Bible in the written language.

According to Statistics Korea (a government agency), in 2010 it was estimated that there were about 277,610 deaf people in Korea and only about 7,000 (or 2.5%) of these are Christian. The majority of the Deaf community is beyond the reach of evangelical churches, and there are only about 150 Deaf churches around the country, which are served by about 180 Deaf clergy (Yu 2007). For the Deaf who use only Korean SL, the Bible translated into Korean is just like another Bible in

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1 In this article, we try to follow the current English convention of using “deaf” to refer to a physical condition and “Deaf” to refer to a community and culture that identifies itself as Deaf. —Ed.

2 That this topic was the focus of an entire issue of *The Bible Translator* (59.2, 2008) is evidence of the new global attention to the subject. In addition to this, at the UBS Triennial Translation Workshop in Bangkok in June 2009, Sign Language translation was the focus of a working group consisting of translation officers both of the UBS and of various national Bible Societies.

a foreign language.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to translate the Bible into Korean SL to help the Deaf overcome biblical illiteracy.

This paper will demonstrate the need for a SL Bible by explaining the needs of Deaf society, a community that is little known to the general public. Specifically, it delineates what is possible by applying postmodernism as a critical approach to biblical study, offers a critical analysis of the discourse of Jesus' healing of the deaf-mute (Mark 7.31-37) from a postmodern perspective, and clarifies the relationship between Jesus' ministry and SL Bible translation. Finally, we will also argue for the necessity of the Korean SL translation project in a postmodern society, through the hermeneutical reinterpretation of the new role of the deaf in Jesus' ministry.

## **2. A biblical reading for the Deaf community in a postmodern society**

Colin Greene and Martin Robinson have analyzed the issue of disabled people as a social revolution which, over the past twenty-five years, has brought about an imaginative reappraisal of what it looks and feels like to be a disabled person (Greene & Robinson 2008, 45). According to their analysis, disabled people, including those who are deaf, were largely invisible, marginalized from mainstream society, disempowered and effectively silenced in modern democracies. Recently, attitudes towards the deaf have changed significantly. From seeing deaf persons as the passive recipients of charity, society has come to recognize the legitimate demands of the Deaf to have equal rights in the postmodern world. The Deaf are no longer invisible, marginalized, disempowered, and silenced. They can change the whole nature of the discourse that has been used to designate or signify just what disability of hearing actually means. However, traditional preconceptions and long held prejudices still prevail. In particular, the traditional interpretation of deafness as presented in the Bible offends rather than heals through the Good News.

Accordingly, it will be helpful to use one crucial aspect of postmodernism, namely, the rediscovery of the place and power of narrative, not just in contemporary storytelling but also in codifying and encrypting what has been referred to as narrational worldviews. Stories have to be continually retold and reinterpreted, because every retelling, reconfiguration, and reappropriation creates a new story. For as long as society has been aware of the phenomenon of deafness, it has represented that phenomenon by telling a story of deficit and deficiency, and has put up clear barriers between deaf and hearing communities (Greene & Robinson 2008, 50, 52).

The reinterpretation of the discourse of Jesus' healing a deaf-mute (Mark 7.31-37) will be a remarkable example of how a Deaf community is able to reimagine their situation and tell another powerful story about their hopes and aspirations. We will carry out this reinterpretation by underlining the factors that define the nature of cultural transition, which Greene and Robinson (2008, 49) have called

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<sup>3</sup> The first written Korean portion, *The Gospel according to Luke*, was published already in 1882, the first Korean New Testament in 1887, and the first Korean Bible in 1911.

“metavista,” the age of imagination, because at its core lies “the ability to effect dramatic change from the bottom up, rather than from the top down.”

We will do a new thing, one that has scarcely been attempted before, that is, an interpretation *for* the Deaf. However, such an interpretation must offer persuasive readings of, in this case, the actual classical text. We will read the story from the perspective of the deaf man whom the text has marginalized. This is, however, not to say that we might not be faithful members of our religious communities, but rather that we recognize that our role as biblical exegetes and Bible translators is to influence the flow of traditions in the direction of justice (cf. Pechansky 1995, 89). In terms of the postmodern perspective, we can: first, reinterpret the identification and role of the deaf man, κωφός, in Jesus’ ministry; second, uncover the relationship between Jesus’ healing gestures and sign language; third, compare the difficulties of SL translation with the misunderstanding of the disciples; and fourth, show the necessity of a Korean SL translation.

### 3. Reinterpreting the discourse of the healing of the deaf-mute man (Mark 7.31-37) from a postmodern perspective

(1) *The traditional interpretation of κωφός and his new role in Jesus’ ministry*

In Mark’s Gospel, this is the first occurrence of the healing of a deaf person. Mark says that the man brought to Jesus was κωφὸν καὶ μογιλάλον (v. 32). The lexical meaning of κωφός is described in the lexicons as follows:

1. *unable to articulate or speak, mute* Matt 15.30-31; of Zechariah, Luke 1.22; with special reference to demonic interference, Matt 9.32-33; 12.22; Luke 11.14; 2. *deaf* Matt 11.5; Mark 7.32, 37; 9.25; Luke 7.22.

(Gingrich 1983)

strictly *blunt, dull*, as a weapon; (1) as incapable of speaking *mute* (Matt 9.32); substantively (Matt 15.31); (2) as incapable of hearing *deaf* (Mark 9.25); substantively (Matt 11.5).

(Friberg and Friberg 2000)

radical sense, blunt, dull, obtuse . . .

1. *dumb, mute*, . . .

2. after Hom., of men, *dumb*, Orac. ap. Hdt.: *deaf and dumb*, Id.

3. *deaf*, Lat. *surdus*, h. Hom., Aesch., etc.

4. of the mind, *dull, stupid* . . .

(Liddell 1996)

Κωφός occurs twelve times in the synoptic gospels. In four of those passages (Matt 9.32; 12.22; Mark 9.25; Luke 11.14), κωφός is related to a demon or unclean spirit.<sup>4</sup> However, it does not mean that all those described as κωφός are possessed

4 The four passages related to a demon or unclean spirit are as follows: (1) ἄνθρωπον κωφὸν δαιμονιζόμενον (a mute man possessed with a demon, Matt 9.32); (2) δαιμονιζόμενος τυφλὸς καὶ κωφός (one possessed with a demon, blind and mute, Matt 12.22); (3) τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἀκαθάρτῳ λέγων αὐτῷ,

with a demon. Rather, someone possessed with a demon can be described as incapable of speaking and hearing. Κωφός is used more specifically in our passage as “deaf” (Guelich 1989, 392), and implies someone with severely impaired hearing (cf. 7.37; 9.25; Mann 1986, 323).

The traditional interpretation has been, however, influenced by the prejudice that the deaf person of Mark 7.31-37 may be possessed with a demon. New Testament scholars like William L. Lane (1974, 267), Robert A. Guelich (1989, 394), and Morna D. Hooker (1991, 186) have said that the healing description “[his] ears were opened, his tongue was loosened” (Mark 7.35a) is exorcism language. This interpretation follows the evidence cited by Deissmann (1927, 307-10) equating “binding” with the demonic and alludes to the demonic for this passage as well (Guelich 1989, 394). However, we must recognize that Jesus communicates with him in his own way, different from exorcism. Mark 7.35, “his ears were opened, and the bond of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly,” only gives the results of Jesus’ healing based on the condition described in v. 32.

Some interpretations of the saying, “he has done all things well” (v. 37), also reflect negative prejudices against the deaf-mute person. Guelich (1989, 398) assumes that this declaration may reflect the hope of “the restoration of fallen creation” as an echo of the words of Gen 1.31 regarding God’s work at creation (see also Witherington 2001, 234). However, the interpretation is based upon an inaccurate premise that a deaf-mute person is a fallen creation.

Rather, the role of the κωφός is completely subverted in Jesus’ ministry. At the beginning of the discourse, the κωφός is acted on, as an object. “They brought to him a deaf man . . . they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him . . . put his fingers into his ears . . . touched his tongue . . . his ears were opened [passive] his tongue was released [passive]” (Mark 7.32-35, NRSV). It is only after he has been healed that the deaf-mute man becomes the subject, “he spoke plainly” (v. 35).

In fact, the κωφός can be seen to become the main character, bringing the blessing associated with the time of God’s promises in OT prophecies such as Isa 35.5-6 (Matt 11.5; Luke 7.22).<sup>5</sup> The rare word μογιγάλος (“mute,” v. 32) occurs only here in the entire New Testament, and only in Isaiah 35.6 in the LXX.<sup>6</sup> It does not mean totally unable to speak but having a speech impediment, speaking with a stutter—“could hardly talk” (v. 32, NIV).<sup>7</sup> The man in our story was either completely mute (cf. ἄλαλος, 7.37) or had a severe speech impediment—perhaps as a by-product of his deafness (cf. ἐλάλει ὀρθῶς, 7.35; Guelich 1989, 392). Now a man without hearing is enabled to hear the voice of Jesus directly, and so to speak of what he has heard (v. 35). It is also possible that he was among those who were instructed by Jesus not to speak to anyone about what happened, the

Τὸ ἄλαλον καὶ κωφὸν πνεῦμα (the unclean spirit, the mute and deaf spirit, Mark 9.25); and (4) δαιμόνιον [καὶ αὐτὸ ἦν] κωφόν (a demon [that was] mute, Luke 11.14).

5 Hurtado 1983, 120; Wessel 1995, 83; Witherington 2001, 233.

6 Hooker 1991, 186; Guelich 1989, 392; Mann 1986, 323; Wessel 1995, 83; Lane 1974, 266.

7 Witherington 2001, 233; Hooker 1991, 186; Hurtado 1983, 119; Wessel 1995, 84.

ones who, “the more he ordered them” not to share, “the more zealously they proclaimed” (v. 36).

What is clear is that the κωφός himself becomes a sign of Jesus’ healing acts. The people were astounded beyond measure, saying, “he [Jesus] has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak” (v. 37, NRSV). Through the deaf man, then, God’s promised sovereign rule has come into history, and this was made known in Gentile territory (v. 31). The new role of the κωφός in Jesus’ ministry can thus be described as a sign of the Kingdom of God advancing through Jesus’ power.

## *(2) Jesus’ healing gestures and Sign Language*

Most of Jesus’ actual healings take place through his authoritative word, but this time he uses special gestures for the healing of the deaf man. The gestures, in which Jesus “put his fingers into the man’s ears, and he spat and touched his tongue” (v. 33b), are related to the deaf-mute’s condition. As if words would have been inadequate, Jesus touches the deaf man’s impaired organs to establish contact and summon healing.

From the perspective of a deaf person, however, it is not necessarily easy to understand the unusual intimate gesture. If he could not understand the meaning of Jesus’ gestures, it would be possible for him to escape quickly from Jesus, since he had taken him aside from the crowd when he touched his ears and tongue. However, the deaf man must have been somewhat aware of the significance of all of Jesus’ gestures. His actions were a kind of sign language designed to show the deaf man what Jesus intended to do for him, perhaps to encourage his faith. According to sign linguists, gesture is one of several elements of SL; there are sign words, finger spelling, gesture, and sign markers (see Suk 1989). Through sign language, the identity of the deaf man is changed from a passive object to an active agent, as we observed in the previous section.

In fact, at the beginning of this discourse, with no regard for the will of the deaf man, people bring him to Jesus, and they beseech him to lay his hand upon him (Mark 7.32).<sup>8</sup> The people had expected not healing but blessing from Jesus (Lane 1974, 266). However, Jesus acts toward the needy person (7.33-34). Touching the man’s ears and tongue might mean that Jesus intended to deal with these needs.

“Looking up to heaven” (v. 34a) combined with “sighing” (v. 34b) also introduces two other gestures. Of these two, “looking up to heaven” is best understood as an attitude of prayer (cf. John 11.41; 17.1), and perhaps it was a way of showing the deaf man that God was the source of his power (Guelich 1989, 393; Witherington 2001, 234). Thus, the deaf man was invited to go aside with Jesus, who prayed with him and for him through sign language.

The act of healing itself was accomplished with the word of liberation addressed not to the defective auditory organs but to the man as a whole person: *epphatha* (“be opened”; Lane 1974, 267). The deaf man could probably understand

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<sup>8</sup> The request for the laying on of hands (cf. Mark 5.23; 6.5) indicates the presence of Jews or of Gentiles who were familiar with this Jewish practice in connection with blessing (Lane 1974, 266).

what Jesus carefully mouthed. The most widely shared view is that *ephphatha* is Aramaic (although some scholars disagree, suggesting it is Hebrew; see Hurtado 1983, 120; Lane 1974, 267). But the most important thing is that Jesus is not using gibberish or unknown words or nonsense syllables to perform a healing, but rather intelligible speech for a deaf person.

Jesus' method of cure is thus efficient for the deaf man. Some scholars have compared Jesus' sign language with typical elements of magic of the period (Hooker 1991, 186; Hurtado 1983, 118), but the actions are accompanied by his words of healing for the deaf. This incident seems not only to give a new example of Jesus' healing miracles but also to disclose the significant role of the deaf in Jesus' ministry.

*(3) Who is a real κωφός in the Gospels? The misunderstanding of the disciples and the difficulties of SL translation*

Both the deaf and the disciples of Jesus feature in Mark's Gospel, but their respective roles are fraught with ambiguities. While this deaf man reveals a kind of faithfulness and spiritual understanding of Jesus' ministry (Mark 7.35), the disciples betray (14.42-45), take flight (14.50-52), and deny Jesus (14.54, 66-72; see Liew 2009, 111).

Jesus personally called (1.16-20; 3.13), individually named (3.16-19), and designated the disciples collectively as "the twelve." They are described as Jesus' special companions and representatives (3.14-15) who are privy to Jesus' private instruction (4.33-34; 9.28-29; 13.3-4; Liew 2009, 112). Jesus also instructs his disciples to demonstrate formally their rejection of those who reject them in their mission (6.10-11). However, when a disciple, Peter, rejects Jesus' first passion prediction, he instantly becomes "Satan," since he does not share the mind or obey the thoughts of Jesus (Mark 8.33; Liew 2009, 114). The disciples in Mark's Gospel are also depicted as confused, misunderstanding, "deaf," "blind," and "hardhearted" (Mark 6.45-52; 7.17-18; 8.14-21; Guelich 1989, 399). Talking to his disciples, Mark's Jesus makes a statement that also aptly describes their downfall: "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (10.31; see also 9.35).

The deaf man, whom Jesus took aside from the multitude (Mark 7.33) and instructed privately through sign language (vv. 33b-34), becomes a sign that the promised intervention of God is taking place in the ministry of Jesus (v. 37). Based on his understanding about Jesus' ministry, he won freedom and liberty from social and religious restraint, and was able to hear the voice of Jesus directly, after understanding the sign language of Jesus.

Likewise, through SL, members of the Deaf community would be able to understand what Jesus says to them in the Bible. Through the printed Bible, they have trouble understanding the basics of the Christian faith. As Jesus was well aware, SL is language that differs from any spoken language. SL is used not only by deaf people but also by a number of hearing people just like Jesus.

There is, however, a significant obstacle to SL translation, because the hearing environment usually misunderstands the nature of SL. Many hearing people still

doubt the legitimacy of SLs or presume deaf people to have a high degree of understanding of the written form of the spoken language of the hearing community. With this presumption, it is almost impossible to start a translation project into a SL since these people do not know that a Deaf subculture exists in their own country or even in their own neighborhood.

If the hearing population is ignorant about Deaf cultures, the members of a Deaf community face difficulty in contacting hearing people. The consequence is difficulty in cooperation between translation organizations and Deaf communities and churches. Hearing people then become the unenlightened disciples who do not share the mind or obey the thoughts of Jesus, and become the real deaf who misunderstand the method of Jesus' ministry. In order to participate in the ministry of Jesus, we have to understand Jesus' healing method toward the deaf: sign language. It is the best way to translate the Bible for the Deaf community because the nature of SL is properly understood by the Deaf community.

#### **4. Jesus' healing ministry and the role of Sign Language translation in a postmodern period**

The deaf were hapless victims and misfits in the traditional patronizing interpretation of the biblical text. However, we can retell the story from the vantage point of the deaf person in the healing incident of Jesus. The sociological reality of power and vested self-interest has become a decisive factor in much biblical interpretation nowadays (see Greene & Robinson 2008, 56). Deaf people have become politicized and have been able to argue successfully for their rights, including the right to have the Scriptures in a language they understand and a format they can use.

Recently the Deaf community in Korea has subverted the dominant ideology which assumes that a deaf person is able to read the Bible just like hearing people (see Greene & Robinson 2008, 56). The users of SL need to hear—or should we say, see—the gospel, God's powerful saving message. Through seeing the message, the Deaf community is no longer discouraged, demotivated, and dispirited.

In Korea, Christians have recently begun to perceive a shift in mission from seeing the deaf merely as an object of charity, to seeing them as agents of evangelism, with the deaf themselves evangelizing other deaf people. In some cases, it has simply been that Christian people, both deaf and hearing, have learned of successful SL Bible translation in other places and realized that they could do it too.

We propose that this approach offers more possibilities for faithfully bringing the Bible into the present era, characterized as it is by postmodern features. It is an imaginative approach. Our biblical reading from a postmodern perspective re-examines the identity of the marginalized deaf man, and puts his new role in Jesus' healing ministry at the centre of the interpretation. The deaf man has been overshadowed and marginalized by the traditional interpretation, but ought to be important and central as a co-worker in Jesus' ministry as shown in our new interpretation.

Hearing people are still unfamiliar with the idea of embracing the perspective that “the deaf are members of the socio-cultural community” (Ahn 2007, 113). An enormous amount of hard work and campaigning for SL translation need to take place before ignorance, prejudice, and unhelpful stereotyping are overcome in contemporary attitudes toward the Deaf.

Instead of acknowledging hearing disability as a handicap, we need to accept the Deaf as they are, namely as people using SL for communication. What has already been achieved, however, adds up to a complete reimagining of how the Deaf live, move, and co-exist in our world today.

## 5. Conclusion

The reality is that most deaf people in Korea are still outside the realm of the written language, and thus outside the realm of the gospel. The need for a SL Bible for the Deaf has barely been brought to the attention of hearing Christian communities. Accordingly, using insights provided by a postmodern perspective, we have reinterpreted the identification and role of a deaf man, κωφός, in Jesus’ ministry, uncovered the relationship between Jesus’ healing gestures and sign language, compared the difficulties of SL translation with the misunderstanding of disciples, and claimed the necessity of a Korean SL translation.

The traditional interpretation has been influenced by the prejudice that the deaf man of Mark 7.31-37 is possessed by a demon and is “a fallen creation.” However, from the perspective of postmodernism, the role of the κωφός is completely subverted in Jesus’ ministry. The κωφός becomes the sign that is to bring the blessing associated with the time of God’s promise in Isa 35.5-6.

The healing gestures of Jesus can also be interpreted as a kind of sign language designed to show the deaf man what Jesus intended to do for him, and what Jesus carefully mouthed, i.e., *ephphatha*, was helpful for the understanding of the deaf man. As the result of the healing, the deaf man himself became a sign of the kingdom of God advancing through Jesus’ power. In contrast, the disciples of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel are depicted as confused, misunderstanding, “deaf,” “blind,” and “hardhearted.”

We may also be unenlightened disciples if we do not share the mind and heart of Jesus, who used sign language with the deaf man. In order for deaf people to understand what Jesus said in the Bible, and to become key characters in advancing the kingdom of God through Jesus’ power, the Bible should be translated into Korean SL in the near future. Even if it takes a long time to finish the whole Bible, it will be important to break the invisible barrier, not only between the Deaf community and the gospel, but also between deaf people and hearing people in our postmodern society.

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