

## "Ephphatha": Recapturing Jesus' Voice For The Rights Of People With Disabilities ( Mark 7:31-37)

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### **Abstract**

*Different categories of people have variously viewed disabilities in humans through the millennia of human history and existence. From the ancient brutal killing of invalid children to the contemporary exclusion of disabled people in society, it is evident that disabled people are considered the scum of the earth. Though there have been some improvements in how people with disabilities are treated recently due to technological advancement, breakthroughs in medical science, and better theories and advocacies by experts in different fields, challenges still confront people with disabilities, particularly in the area of inclusion in society. Also, the recent noticeable improvement varies from one culture to another, with those nations with solid legal institutions taking the lead while developing countries are at the lowest ebb of the spectrum. It is indisputable that people with disabilities are among the vulnerable and marginalized in the society. Yet, children with disabilities form a significant part of this category of people. This fact requires proper attention to promoting the rights of people with disabilities. While doing this, we must give particular attention to children with disabilities as well. This paper adopts the historical-grammatical method and stresses that Jesus' treatment of the deaf and mute man in Mark 7:31-37, through his pronouncement of "Ephphatha", sets the ground for promoting the rights of people with disabilities. It is instructive also to imbibe the attitude of those who brought the disabled man to Jesus.*

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**Keywords:** Disability, Rights, Marginalization, Discrimination, Inclusion

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### **Introduction**

Throughout history, people from different categories have held varying perspectives on disability and how to relate to people with disabilities. From the cruel practices of infanticide of disabled children in ancient times to the present-day exclusion of disabled individuals from society, it is evident that people with disabilities occupy the lowest strata of the social community. Although there have been advancements in the treatment of people with disabilities in recent times due to technological progress, breakthroughs in medical science, and improved theories and advocacy efforts by experts in various fields, numerous challenges still confront individuals with disabilities, especially regarding their inclusion in society. Yet, the improvement in the treatment of disability is inconsistent across all cultures; nations with solid legal institutions lead the way while developing countries lag while the recent advances are also coloured by considering people with disabilities as people needing society's pity. Mary Lou Breslin describes the mistreatment of individuals with disabilities in the early 1900s, including persecution, segregation, and marginalization through pseudo-scientific justifications that supported these actions and tragically

led to the mass extermination of disabled individuals in Germany before World War II.<sup>1</sup> Despite ongoing efforts, people with disabilities still encounter limitations, prejudice, and paternalistic treatment today. It is humbling that disability affects people of all races, ages, religions, ethnicities, nationalities, classes, genders, and professions. Today, there are many people with disabilities, with the current figure close to a billion.<sup>2</sup> More humbling is the fact anyone can become disabled at any time and ought ordinarily to spur the non-disabled to respect people with disabilities.

In light of the above, this paper seeks to renew calls for promoting the rights of people with disabilities through a theological perspective by accentuating Jesus's voice and gesture in the healing narrative of Mark 7:31-37 where Jesus healed a man with multiple disabilities. The man's physical disabilities resulted in some social disabilities, limiting his functionality and hindering his community participation and overall well-being. Because the man could neither hear nor speak clearly in a manner that everyone would understand, he was vulnerable, excluded from most activities around him and dependent upon other people for most of his actions. Such a situation is typical of people with disabilities then and now, and the situation becomes even grimmer when communities are indifferent to the plight of people with disabilities. The narrative has a profound message of how "He [Jesus] has done all things well by making even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak" (7:37). Therefore, this study emphasizes that recapturing Jesus' voice and gesture of relating to people with disabilities for the contemporary period would mean that a society is doing well if and when it accepts people with disabilities as having equal dignity and human rights as their non-disabled counterparts and creates an environment that makes disabled people do what their disabilities would not allow them to do. This study touches on the following: disability, human rights, interpretive analysis of Mark 7:31-37, implications of the research and conclusion.

### **Disability**

In recent decades, there has been a significant and ongoing discussion on defining disability and addressing related terminological issues.<sup>3</sup> Still, the vast interest has not reached a consensus regarding the appropriate language to describe individuals with disabilities due to the broad scope and fluid nature of disability, which contributes to the difficulty in getting a generally acceptable definition.<sup>4</sup> Sophie Mitra notes that the word disability is puzzling because it has an undesirable undertone through its prefix, 'dis', meaning lack or nullification, and that conceptualizing disability is also challenging.<sup>5</sup> As a result, there is debate about the right word to describe persons with disabilities. Different terms, including "physically challenged", "handicapped", "impaired", "special people", and "differently abled", have been put forward, but many now accept the word "disability" above every other term. Yet, the present hegemony of "disability" faces challenges because the scope of disability is expanding due to the welfare state. As such, the term has grown more ambiguous and unstable in meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, studies about disability have deployed different approaches to understand and present the phenomenon of disability. Such efforts have resulted in various models of disability definitions. Broadly, this paper identifies four models of disability: the medical or individual model, the social model, the human rights model, and the human development. The medical (or individual) model of disability locates the problems of disability in the person concerned while neglecting the crucial role of physical and social environments in conceptualizing disability.<sup>7</sup> It thus identifies the cause of the problem (disability) as disease, injury or other health conditions, which require prevention intervention or medical care in the form of treatment and rehabilitation.<sup>8</sup> In response to the alleged shortcomings of individual models, the social models of disability emerged to press the point that disability is a social construct that perceives disability as a challenge

that stems from society. Proponents of the social model of disability believe that discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and injustice occasioned by this construct require legal and political responses to enable people with disabilities to live well in society.<sup>9</sup> So, instead of altering or repairing individuals with disabilities, the primary objective should be to eliminate or improve social and environmental obstacles that hinder their complete inclusion and engagement in social, physical, occupational, and religious spheres.<sup>10</sup> The social model distinguishes impairment from disability, which refers to body/mind condition, while disability stems from societal/environmental response.<sup>11</sup>

The human rights model, considered by its proponents as distinct from and above the social model, claims to give moral principles or values as a foundation of disability policy, unlike the social model, which merely explains disability but does not give ethical principles or value as a foundation of disability policy.<sup>12</sup> The human development model is "an interactional model where well-being results from the interaction between the health deprivations, personal factors, resources, and the environment (structural factors)".<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there is a growing emphasis on recognizing the dynamic nature of disability. Sharon N. Barnartt asserts that many prevailing concepts and models (both medical/ individual and social models) of disability portray it as a fixed condition, thereby disregarding the fact that disability can be transient, fluctuating, and subject to various other forms of change that show its fluidity.<sup>14</sup> Disability "is more fluid than most other forms of identity in that it can potentially happen to anyone at any time, giving rise to the insiders' acronym for the non-disabled, TAB (for temporary able-bodied)".<sup>15</sup>

### **Human rights**

Human right is a well-known term that virtually every profession now employs, perhaps because it concerns every human being. Yet, its usage or perception varies depending on the person or context, giving rise to unclear connotations. However, a legal doctrine and practice would perceive Human rights as rights closely associated with human existence in dignity and freedom.<sup>16</sup> The basic understanding of human rights is premised on the human person having rights because he is a person (human being). Tomuschat explains that the earliest conception of human rights viewed them as "a complex set of norms calling not only for remedies against state arbitrary interference but also for state action in favour of indigent [weak] members of society".<sup>17</sup> However, the growing complexity of human rights makes it very difficult to find a suitable definition that covers all the practices branded as human rights at the moment, and this renders most meanings today ambiguous and inadequate.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between law and disability has grown over the past few decades, particularly in how the introduction of human rights laws and disability discrimination legislation has changed the landscape for people with disabilities.<sup>19</sup> The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is a significant step forward for people with disabilities and the international community.<sup>20</sup> It is a landmark treaty established in 2008 "as a development priority for nations, changing attitudes and approaches to disabled people".<sup>21</sup> It acknowledges that individuals with disabilities are valuable members of society who are rights holders like the non-disabled.<sup>22</sup> In Nigeria, the CRPD was ratified by lawmakers in 2018 when they passed into law the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (DPDP or Prohibition Acts or Nigerian Disability Acts).<sup>23</sup> Theresia Degener argues that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) presents an alternative to the social model of disability. According to Degener, the human rights model derived from the CRPD is an advancement over the social model and codifies a human rights model of disability as it serves to enforce the CRPD.<sup>24</sup>

### **Interpretive Analysis of Mark 7:31-37**

The narrative about the deaf and mute man is unique to Mark's Gospel, and it is pertinent to note a few points about it. First, there is unresolved scholarly debate about the exact location of the story of the deaf and mute man of Mark 7:31-37. Some commentators, including Mary Ann Beavis, think that the event happened in the Decapolis, a gentile territory, as Jesus took a detour to Sidon.<sup>25</sup> However, Robert H. Stein contrarily argues that the event did not occur in Decapolis, and as such, interpreting this account alongside the healing of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20) and the Syrophenician woman's daughter (7:24-30) to make a "proleptic example of the future gentile mission stumbles over one should interpret 7:31".<sup>26</sup>

Second, Luke omits the deaf and mute man narrative in his Gospel. The omission interests many interpreters who accept the Markan priority hypothesis (that both Luke and Matthew used Mark in composing their Gospels) as to why Luke, who closely followed his Markan source, did not include it. Kenneth L. Cukrowski has argued that the resemblance of some aspects of the story to magic was likely responsible for Luke's omission of the story because he wanted at all costs to prove that Christians had nothing to do with magic as he defended Christianity in the first century AD.<sup>27</sup> According to Cukrowski, the elements having magical resemblance include 1) Jesus' secrecy by taking away the man from the crowd of people to perform healing on him (7:33); 2) Jesus' engagement in some ritual by putting his fingers in the man's ears, spitting and touching the man's tongue (7:33); 3) Jesus' sighing or groaning, an action sometimes connected with magic (7:34); 4) Jesus' use of the word "Ephphata" could quickly be convicted by non-Christians as a magic word (7:34); 5) Jesus' attempt to keep the healing secret, with a warning not to broadcast it (7:36); 6) no mention of God in the narrative.<sup>28</sup> A few comments may be necessary here: Jesus' taking the deaf and mute man away privately to heal him is not peculiar to this story. There are other accounts of Jesus' healing where he did not permit the presence of crowds (Mark 5:37). Also, Cukrowski's identification of "no mention of God" ignores Jesus' looking up to heaven [God] in verse 34.

Third, several interpreters see a subtle rebuke of Jesus' disciples' lack of understanding and stubborn hearts in the story of the deaf and mute man. John Paul Heil submits that "this man who is physically 'deaf' and 'mute' thus functions also as a symbolic representative of the disciples who are spiritually 'deaf' and 'mute' with their non-understanding and hardened hearts (7:18; 6:52) not having 'ears to hear' (4:9, 12, 13), despite Jesus' special revelations and explanations of his more profound identity".<sup>29</sup> David B. Peabody echoes the point stating that the story alongside that of a blind man Mark 8:22-26 "serve as counterpoints to the profound misunderstanding of the disciples depicted in Mark 8:1-21".<sup>30</sup>

The structure of the story adopts the conventional phases of a healing account, which begins with the request (7:32), followed by the realization of the healing (7:33-34), its verification (7:35), and the applause that it engenders (7:37).<sup>31</sup> An expanded structure of the healing story is as follows:

- a. An unspecified number of people brought a deaf and mute man to Jesus.
- b. Jesus took the deaf and mute man aside from the crowd.
- c. Jesus put his fingers into his ears.
- d. Jesus spat and touched the deaf and mute man's tongue with his saliva.
- e. Jesus looked to heaven with a deep sigh and said "Ephphata" to the deaf and mute man.

It is crucial to press the point that an anonymous group of persons, probably his relatives or friends, brought a deaf and mute man to Jesus, asking that Jesus lay his hands on him, an indication of seeking healing for the man because laying on of hands is a known healing method of the Markan

Jesus (5:23; 6:5; 8:22-23) and typical of a miracle story. But laying on hands in the New Testament has other implications, including imparting the Holy Spirit or blessings in the sense of initiation, ordination, or commission.<sup>32</sup>

In response to the people's request, Jesus took the man by the hand away from the crowd and touched him in a succession of comprehensive therapeutic steps. It is crucial to accentuate that Jesus taking the deaf and mute man away from the crowd is significant as it points to Jesus' giving the man his dignity. In presenting the man with the respect he deserved, Jesus did not want to make his disabilities and the healing process a spectacle for the crowd.

There is some debate regarding whether the deaf man was also mute or having difficulty or impaired speech. Though *mogilalon* translates as speaking with difficulty, it is proper to see the man as mute in this context because his tongue was tied. In other words, the condition of his speech was as good as being dumb. Bowman supports the point that it seems more accurate to interpret *μογιλαλον* as "mute" rather than someone with a speech impediment. The fact that Isaiah 35:6 in the LXX translates the same Greek word as "dumb", and this healing story of Mark is a haggadic midrash on Isaiah 35:5, 6, part of a chapter with significant eschatological implications, along with Isaiah 34.<sup>33</sup>

That Jesus looked up to heaven should be construed as his usual recourse to his heavenly Father, while his groaning depicts his grief for the man's condition. Robert Gundry observes, "Jesus looked up to heaven as he groaned in a mighty effort to work a particularly difficult miracle".<sup>34</sup> In Mark 7:34, Jesus sighs (*stenazō*) before restoring the hearing of a deaf man, suggesting his distress over the plight of the disabled man before him.<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere in John's Gospel, Jesus wept on account of Lazarus' death (11:35).

### **Implications of the study**

**Discrimination/Stigma:** Though not evident in the text analyzed, it is common knowledge that non-disabled discriminate against people with disabilities. In some cultures and religious settings, non-disabled people still consider people with disabilities, especially children, as punishment or curse from God or gods. Because disability denotes not being able, society often regards people with disabilities as not capable of what "normal" or "able-bodied" people can do. Thus, the so-called non-disabled men and women discriminate and stigmatize people with disabilities as unsuitable for most social activities. This discrimination/stigma affects both people with disabilities and their families and underlies the exclusion of people with disabilities in planning and policy formulation in many cultures around the world. The negative impact of discrimination on people with disabilities is depressing. In Nigeria, there are about five million people with disabilities. Due to stigma and discrimination, some families still hide their children with disabilities, often denying them early intervention and support that could enhance their capabilities and functionality.

**Advocacy:** Recapturing Jesus' voice for promoting the human rights of people with disabilities requires effective advocacy. Developing countries where legislation to improve the capabilities and functionalities of disabled people are weak or non-existent need much of this advocacy. We have an example of this advocacy in those who brought the deaf and mute man to Jesus. In today's society, we need people who devote their time and other resources to lifting people with disabilities and defending their rights in their communities. In this line of advocacy, Toyin Falola and Nic Hamel suggest that disability in Africa requires a reactivation of an African communalist ethos through a critical evaluation of African cultures and belief systems and investment in families, caregivers, and disabled peoples' organizations, and productive cooperation among national



governments, NGOs and the international humanitarian community to recognize and respond to the unique situation of disabled people in Africa.<sup>36</sup>

**Equality:** The principle of human dignity implies that every person is equal before the law. This equality presupposes that non-disabled and disabled individuals have equal standing before the law, irrespective of their differential conditions. Acceptance of this principle demands the removal of discrimination against people with disabilities. Jesus' ministry is replete with his radical, non-discriminatory approach, especially to the sick (disabled). The clamour for equality demands that disabled people should have full and equal access to institutions of society. In the Markan account under study, Jesus gladly received the deaf and mute man and the request of his advocates, demonstrated his love for the man and used his power to heal and restore him. There should be a constant concerted effort by all and sundry to make sure people with disabilities have access to educational, economic, political, social, cultural, religious, etc. activities within their communities, nations and international arena.

**Inclusivity:** To adequately promote the human rights of people with disabilities, policies and programs for individuals, families, schools, religious centres, recreation centres, social events, government offices, etc., should include consideration and sensitivity to the needs and rights of people with disabilities. An inclusive approach that considers people with disabilities in policy and program implementation would go a long way to mitigating challenges confronting disabled people. It is instructive that Jesus' gesture toward disabled people on several occasions dispelled the erroneous belief that infirmities, impairments, and disabilities are acts of God's anger and punishment for sins. It implies that society must continue to widen the net of inclusion for people with disabilities in all activities. The church should reach people with disabilities, interact with them and involve them in all events.

**Poor implementation of human rights laws for disabled people:** Despite the universal intention of human rights to apply to all individuals, people with disabilities worldwide still face discrimination when protecting and realizing their rights.<sup>37</sup> Lee Ann Basser echoes the point: "People with disabilities have not traditionally been seen as rights bearers. For the most part, people with disabilities have been recipients of charity and welfare, seen as objects of pity rather than as authors of their own destiny".<sup>38</sup> Observers and experts have suggested that one potential solution to address the exclusion and rights denial of people with disabilities is to utilize legal avenues and ensure that legal interpretation takes disability into account by vigorously applying the core human rights principles of dignity, equality, inclusion, and participation to achieve grounded outcomes for people with disabilities in policymaking and implementation.<sup>39</sup> Such deployment of the human rights perspective would go a long way to ensure that people with disabilities are accorded their rights and enjoy the benefits of belonging to the human family. However, the challenge remains with implementing the human rights laws for the disabled. For instance, in Nigeria, there is a need to improve the government's performance in implementing laws relating to people with disabilities because, so far, implementation "has been lethargic at best".<sup>40</sup>

**Social support for disabled people:** Some studies on disability have established a nexus between poverty and disability, particularly in developing countries. The undeniable fact of the studies is that poverty and disability reinforce each other, thus deepening the vulnerability and exclusion of disabled people. Children with disabilities are likelier to die young, abandoned, malnourished, uneducated, and poor. When people with disabilities cannot access educational opportunities, they are less able to find employment, driving them deeper into poverty.<sup>41</sup> It is, therefore, plain that

wealthy individuals, governments, NGOs and international organization organizations must rally social for people with disabilities. Those who brought the deaf and mute man demonstrated the needed support, and the crowd also applauded the man's healing and restoration.

### **Conclusion**

As noted in this study, several problems confront people with disabilities as a vulnerable and minority group in their communities. Significantly, however, Jesus' ministry of many centuries ago still has a relevant message for today. Jesus' attitude to the socio-religious outcasts of his days was unparalleled. Jesus cared greatly for the oppressed, marginalized and outcasts, including persons with disabilities, when he trod the land of Palestine to inaugurate God's kingdom. On many occasions, Jesus accepted requests to heal disabled persons, thereby bringing them into the inclusion of their communities and God's kingdom. Also, the people in the narrative supported the deaf and mute man. Such gestures are instructive for recognizing and promoting the rights of people with disabilities. Therefore, it is imperative to emulate Jesus' gesture as encapsulated by his pronouncement of Ephaphata "be opened" and that of the people around the deaf and mute man to create an enabling social and physical environment for disabled people. It is high time that people with disabilities should no longer experience forms of alienation, spiritual, social, educational, recreational, etc., and those who love the Lord Jesus must remain at the forefront of this campaign.

### **ENDNOTES**

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