Sign Sources: Reading Matthew with Deaf Cultures

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'it is a non-deaf world which has created deafness as a subject of discourse'
S. Gregory and G. Hartley, *Constructing Deafness* (1994:5)

Contextual biblical interpretation seeks to redress the marginalization sustained by 'dominant' readings by voicing 'alternative' views. Here interaction will be initiated with a long overlooked marginal perspective, Deaf culture.[1] Sally Sainsbury maintains that 'the historical neglect of deaf people is as disgraceful as it is perplexing' (Sainsbury 1986:vii) and demands urgent remedy. This paper constitutes one small response to her challenge. First, labels of 'ability' and 'disability' with regard to the Deaf will be exposed as social constructions promoted by the (dominant) hearing world. As a result, the Deaf will be defined, not through their sensory impairment but rather as a (sign-) language minority culture. In light of these insights, and utilizing perspectives from postcolonial theory, I will then approach Matthew's Gospel to see whether it is a hearing-dominated text which associates sense-impairment with stigma. Following this largely 'resistant' reading I will then move on to the more positive task of exploring aspects of Deaf cultures including emphasis on significance of vision, sight and light, use of sign language and minority cultural status and the collective ethos of Deaf communities and use of storytelling to consider how, if at all, these Deaf cultural aspects could in fact be recovered in readings of the Gospel of Matthew.

1. *Defining Deaf: '[Sense-]Ability' Not 'Disability'*

Imagine the experience of a hearing man who accidentally falls into a valley populated by the congenitally deaf. He falsely believes that in a non-hearing world, the hearing man is king. However, he soon finds out that if a culture is specifically designed around deafness then the hearing person is in effect disabled from social interaction within it. Inept and incompetent

[1]On language: 'Deaf with capital D refers to culturally deaf people' (see Lewis 2007: x). Hereafter I will capitalise Deaf to denote the cultural model of deafness, namely a community united by their use of Sign Language and social identity through Deaf clubs etc. Where I cite other authors however, I have retained their original capitalization.

within his new context, the deaf valley-dwellers decide the only solution is to gouge out the hearing man's 'dis-eased' ear canal so he can fully participate within their society.[2]

Cultures which challenge dominant ideas of the 'abled' and 'disabled' make us aware of the social construction of our categories. Martha's Vineyard, an island situated off the coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, is frequently mentioned in discussion of deafness, given that there is an inordinately high instance of genetically inherited deafness within the community (McDermott and Varenne 1995:324-348). Hearing and non-hearing alike are socialised into a world in which both communicate freely. As a result, the deaf are not excluded or under-privileged in that context at all. Indeed often when anthropologists asked hearing members of the community to identify deaf members, they could only name a couple, despite knowing many more. This illustrates that for this community deafness was 'so integral a part of life on the Vineyard that it attract[ed] neither attention nor moral evaluation' (Gregory and Hartley 1994:5). Robert Johnson similarly describes the universal use of sign language (for hearing and deaf) in a Yucatec-Mayan village and reveals how the deaf had full access to both the social and political life of the community in that context (Johnson 1991).

What all these examples serve to show us is that 'being able or unable to hear does not emerge as significant in itself; instead it takes on significance in the context of other sets of meaning to which ... [one is] exposed' (Padden and Humphries 1988:22). In short, whilst in both Martha's Vineyard and the Yucatan-Mayan village it is 'normal' to be deaf, these sorts of environments are very rare exceptions. For the most part, dominant hearing discourses constitute what is 'normal' and deafness constitutes a deviation from that norm, a 'dis-ability'. Lennard Davis goes further in underlining the binary nature of labels of 'normalcy' and 'disability' when he states:

> Disability is not an object – a woman with a cane – but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses. Just as the conceptualisation of race, class and gender shapes the lives of those who are not black, poor or female, so the conception of disability regulates the bodies of those who are 'normal'. In fact, the very concept of normalcy by which most people (by definition) shape their existence is in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather the concept of disability is a function of a concept of normalcy. Normalcy and disability are part of the same system. (Davis 1995:2)

[2] This is a creative adaptation of H. G. Wells' short story, 'The Country of the Blind' (1904), but here made to reference d/Deaf experience. Wells is cited and discussed in McDermott and Varenne (1995) 324-348.

Often the hearing world seeks to 'normalize' the deaf within a hearing framework through oralism (oral methods of education in which lip-reading is central, though this has been identified as a contributory factor in poor language acquisition among deaf children) or the insertion of cochlear implants. In Tony Booth's terms, 'the purpose of normalization is seen not only as giving deaf and partially deaf young people access to the hearing world but also as *making them more acceptable to it*' (my italics, Booth 1994:157).

In contrast to the medical model of disability which defines deafness as a biological hearing impairment, or the social-situation model which sees disability less as an essential categorisation and instead views different environments as abling or dis-abling for individuals, the cultural model of Deafness (with a capital 'D') sees the Deaf community as an ethnic group, with their own cultural mores and language. J.G. Kyle and B. Woll's definition of the Deaf community in their study of *Sign Language* (1988) illustrates these traits:

> It involves a shared language . . . it involves social interaction and politics . . . but all of these interrelate and interact with attitudes towards other Deaf people. The choice to communicate and share information with other people must be seen as a primary feature, and because of the language used by members of the community this communication will generally be restricted to other Deaf people. (Kyle and Woll 1988: 5)

Harlan Lane, from a Deaf-advocacy perspective, believes that the Deaf community should be understood as an ethnic group for then 'they would have the protections offered to such groups' including the fostering of 'linguistic minorities' and ensuring 'that children and adults have adequate opportunities to learn the minority language'. For, in Lane's opinion, 'like all members of other ethnic minorities, Deaf people are generally not disturbed by their identity, despite the need to struggle for their rights. Culturally Deaf people have always thought and think today that being Deaf is a perfectly good way to be, as good as hearing, perhaps better' (Lane 2005:291-310). Conceiving of the Deaf as a cultural minority, akin to an ethnic group, has also allowed interpreters to utilise insights from post-colonial theory to reflect on oppression suffered under the imperialistic hearing world. Hannah Lewis reveals that historical instances of the disempowerment of the Deaf (particularly in reference to their own language) are analogous to political colonisation defined as 'a process of physical subjugation, imprisonment of an alien language . . . and the regulation of education on behalf of colonial goals' (Lewis 2007: 32). The 'colonisation' of the Deaf community by the hearing in educational, religious and academic contexts in many ways parallels ethnic colonisation,

for 'if an *ethnos* is defined as a culturally similar group sharing a common language, then the Deaf conceivably fit that category' (Davis 1995: 77). Davis has likewise drawn comparisons between racial stigmatisation and Deaf stigmatisation as 'outsiders' (see Davis 1995:78). The accessibility (or rather inaccessibility) of texts in Sign Language has undoubtedly perpetuated this 'outsider' status. With these thoughts in mind, we approach Matthew to see what definition of 'normal' is operative within the Gospel and whether the Deaf are stigmatised as a result.

(2) Sense and Stigma: Matthew as a Hearing-Dominated Text

For Erving Goffman, 'stigma' is emblematic of how certain individuals are discredited and dis-identified from dominant maps of the 'normal' held within societies. As such 'stigma' involves 'perception of a negative attribute' and 'devaluation of a person with such an attribute' (Yong 2007:84); it is a concept manifested in social exchanges, rather than a static condition dependent on 'biomedical' factors. As Thomas Reynolds explains, 'stigma is not the property of an individual body but rather the result of complex social projections that represent bodies, lumping them into general stereotypes insofar as they display undesired qualities' (Reynolds 2008:63).

Reading strategies of resistance which expose 'stigmatisation' operative within texts are suspicious of the oppressive power structures sustained by particular authors. The central concern here is to gauge whether Matthew's conception of the 'normal' is audio-centric and as a result whether d/Deaf experience is stigmatised. At the outset is it important to note that the faculty of hearing is of course fundamental in oral cultures and Matthew reflects this assumption. Moreover, he has produced a written text, a medium which belies a certain 'word-centricity'. Wayne Morris has recently challenged the utility of 'texts' such as the Gospel of Matthew from a Deaf perspective given that 'for Deaf people, words – spoken or written – are thought to be a peculiarly hearing phenomenon' (Morris 2008:xiii). Because sign languages' primary mediums are visual and spatial, sounds and texts are not part of their communicative repertoire. Morris also notes that metaphors, as understood by hearing cultures, literally 'fall on d/Deaf ears' within the Deaf community. In Morris' words, they are 'linguistic characteristics . . . peculiar to hearing people' (Morris 2008:98). In this respect many of Jesus' parables within Matthew's gospel, which convey two-levels of meaning, would be hard for Deaf communities to comprehend. In Morris' study it was revealed that the parable of the sower for example, was viewed in Deaf reception to have 'more to do with

farming techniques than the eschatological significance which Jesus attaches to it' (Morris 2008:92).

If the form of the Gospel itself seems to marginalise Deaf encounters with it, what of its actual substance? Even a cursory look at the Gospel in reference to 'sonic' themes reveals a cacophony of 'aural' imagery and thus a suspicion that the text 'disables' the full participation of the Deaf community within its discourses. The term *akouō* features 19 times within the Gospel. God's revelations are heard, as at the baptism (3:17) and transfiguration (17:5). Moreover, testimonies regarding Jesus' activities are heard (11:4) and Jesus' primary mode of communication is speaking to others in parables and extended discourses (15:10; 21:33 etc.). The faculty of hearing and the organ of the ear also becomes a synecdoche for cognition and discernment: 'He who has ears to hear let him hear' (11:15; see also 13:9). For Matthew, 'true hearing involves listening and understanding', thus 'to have deaf, heavy, or uncircumcised ears is to reject what is heard' (Ryken *et al* 1998: 223). As Matthew's Jesus declares, 'This is why I speak to them in parables, because . . . hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand' (13:13).

When encountering Matthew from a Deaf perspective, one is immediately struck by the general disinterest in the agency of deaf characters (they are portrayed as passive sites of divine healing). Often Matthew lists the deaf and mute among other 'defective' individuals including lepers, the blind, the lame and the maimed (11:5; 15:30-31) indicating a specific conception of 'deficiencies' which will be rectified in the Kingdom. Worse still however, deaf characters are themselves made largely 'invisible' within Matthew's Gospel, its translations and its receptions. We encounter *kophos*, a term which can encompass muteness or deafness, only twice within Matthew's account, in 9:32-34 and 12:22. In redacting Mark, Matthew has deliberately downplayed deaf references: in a parallel account in Mark 7:32-37, the mute is defined as deaf and Jesus inserts his fingers into the man's ears to graphically illustrate this. However modern translations and commentators of Matthew's account (9:32-34) view the characters as 'mute' rather than 'deaf' (NRSV, NIV etc.). Daniel Harrington for example notes in reference to 9:32, that '*kophos* can have several meanings: unable to speak, unable to hear or both. Since the sign of the healing is the fact that the man could speak the translation "mute" seems most appropriate' (Harrington 1991:132). Similarly in reference to the 12:22 account Harrington submits that the supplicant was 'blind and mute' (not deaf): 'the result of Jesus' healing him is that he both speaks and sees, that is, both conditions are healed' (Harrington 1991:182). Even those exceptions among commentators who offer the possibility of these respective characters being deaf, still understand them as functioning within the plot to

illustrate Matthew's more central interests in prophetic fulfilment and the Kingdom of God, rather than the social agency of the deaf character. Warren Carter for example notes in reference to 9:32-34 that 'deaf mutes are promised to hear and speak (Is 29:18-20)' in messianic hopes (Carter 2000:229) similarly, Donald Hagner confirms that 'the direct, unmediated healing of the man's inability to speak symbolises the fulfilment and joy of the kingdom announced by Jesus' (Hagner 1993:258). The 'bit-parts' of the sensory impaired characters within these two stories are illustrated further by the way in which the narrative stereotypes their respective identities (the demon possession featured in the 9:32-34 account is a typical deviance label and stigmatising strategy) and accordingly swiftly narrates their healings. Harrington notes in reference to 9:32-34 that 'the healing of the mute demoniac is told so quickly that one gets the impression that Matthew's real interest lay in contrasting the reactions of the crowd and the Pharisees' (Harrington 1991:133). Likewise, given the startling brevity of the 12:22 account in which the complaint and healing are accomplished in just one verse, one is forced to admit that the account serves to highlight the 'focus on the accusation of the Pharisees and Jesus' response' (Harrington 1991:341) rather than any sustained reflection on the transformed position of the healed individual. Matthew seems to assume the social marginality of the characters within these stories. They are silent and exhibit no social agency within the narrative whatsoever. In common with many caricatures of disability within literature here these individuals are 'not real people who happen to be deaf, but deaf characters that on the whole appear not be real people' (Gregory 1994:294). Rather they stand as static props in the plot to exhibit the restoration of wholeness and illustrations of the nature of the Kingdom of God.

One aspect of Matthew's account which could however possibly be used to disrupt the hegemony of hearing is 'silence'. Jesus for example exhibits 'silence' in the trial narrative in his resistant response to the questioning of the high priest (26:63). It is also stated that 'he will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets' (12:19) linking silence to his servanthood role which flies in the face of a culture which values prestige and honour-precedence. Developing this trajectory, one could also consider how 'silent' characters within the gospel, could in effect, be conceived as 'resistant' characters that challenge what Stanley Hauerwas has termed the 'tyranny of normality' (2004:37). To take just one example, the Canaanite woman in chapter 15, pleads on behalf of her daughter who Matthew tells us is 'tormented by a demon' (15:22). The daughter is 'off-stage', inactive and silent throughout the whole account. Donald Senior has recognised exorcisms as specific

instances where the clash between the 'cult of normality' and deviations from this are most explicit (Senior 1995:12-13). Deaf resistant readers could protest that the woman and her daughter are 'normalized' within the exchange — the daughter is cured of her possession; the mother starts to speak like a (proselyte?) Jew: 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David' (15:23). Developing such resistant lines, Laura Donaldson names the daughter as a silent figure who is characterised as overcome by the demonic possession which has seized her. Donaldson however, deconstructs this reading and pictures the daughter's plight quite differently from transgression of cultural rules about what bodies should be like. Donaldson warns that the passivity of the daughter's silent witness 'insistently calls the able to investigate rigorously their own complicity in oppressively naturalized ideologies of health' (Donaldson 2005:101). Donaldson chastises the history of interpretation for 'robbing' this daughter of her indigenous power. Rather creatively she probes the idea that 'rather than evoking the illness pejoratively identified in the Christian text as demon possession, the daughter might instead signify a trace of the indigenous [spirituality] . . . and rather than manifesting a deviance subject to the regimes of coercive (Christian) curing, she might be experiencing the initial stages of a vocation known to indigenous people for millennia as shamanism' (Donaldson 2005:105). One could also creatively probe the daughter's status from a Deaf perspective; she is silent and absent from public communication, but that which is labelled as 'demonic' by the power structures operative in the text, could instead be her use of sign language as a major channel of communication. Such musings produce counter-memories, or hidden transcripts and 'interrupt the hegemonic through hallucinatory confrontations with other histories' (Donaldson 2005:98). Davis likewise, from a Deaf perspective, has noted the violations through silence which can be affected within narratives. In his words, 'deafness in effect is a reminder of the "hearingness" of narrative. It is the aporetic black hole that leads to a new kind of deconstruction of narrativity . . . ' (Davis 1995:115).

If multiple features of Matthew's Gospel do sustain the stigmatisation of d/Deaf perspectives and promote the 'cult of the hearing' as normal, then any method of 'recovery' will need to access 'the social-symbolic world of persons with disabilities, such that the disabling framework of the normal becomes questionable' (Reynolds 2008:15). My next task therefore is to sketch some general features of Deaf cultures and then see if the Gospel text itself can be 'sensitised' along those lines.

(3) Deaf Cultures and Matthew's Gospel

If the Deaf are not to be understood primarily through their hearing impairment, but rather, as suggested previously, as a specific cultural group akin to an ethnic minority with its own language and values, then attention in recovery readings must also move beyond a sole focus on physical deafness to what Carol Padden and Tom Humphries have termed the 'far more interesting facets of Deaf people's lives' (1988:1). Within studies and ethnographies of Deaf cultures, particular characteristics and models are repeatedly identified. This is not to essentialize Deaf cultures as static or monolithic (there are of course different national Deaf cultures and also variations within cultures according to differentials of race, gender, age and geography etc.) but rather only to define general contours which unite Deaf experience and are frequently represented within the literature. Paddy Ladd has identified the 'culture concept' as central in movements of resistance and change. In his opinion 'culture is the key held in common with other colonized peoples and linguistic minorities. Political and economic power may or may not be the driving forces behind language oppression. But both the key and the lock in which it turns is culture' (Ladd 2003:8).

Deaf cultural traits and values which will be explored here are as follows: (a) significance of vision, sight and light (b) use of sign language and minority cultural status (c) the collective ethos of communities (d) use of storytelling. Each one of these Deaf cultural features will be explored and then read alongside selected features of the Gospel of Matthew. Hannah Lewis in her construction of Deaf Liberation theology recognises that for the Bible to have relevance to the Deaf community it must be 'read in a way that affirms the distinctive language and culture of Deaf people' (Lewis 2007:112). The imaginative and creative touch-points offered here between Matthew's text and Deaf cultures will, I hope, be a step in the right direction to producing the sorts of interpretations Lewis campaigns for.

(a) Significance of Vision, Sight and Light

Those cultures which communicate without sound often put far greater emphasis on visual perception. Illustrating this, George Veditz speaks of the Deaf as 'first, last and for all time a people of the eye' (Veditz cited in Padden and Humphries 2005:2). Knowing the world through sight and communicating through visual performances, also demands appropriate use of light. My previous work with Deaf communities (Lawrence 2009:91-104) taught me that a room needs to be brightly lit, without shadows, in order for sign communication to ensue. Others speak of the special resonance that images of light and darkness have within

visual cultures. Many witness that the image of 'darkness to light' is frequently used to denote 'lostness in the [dark] world' and subsequent enlightenment in 'finding one's people and one's home in the Deaf community'. Deaf cultural stories likewise often include references to a so-called lamp-post trope where stories involving the imagery of a light, under which people are able to communicate in sign, are told (See Ladd 2003:257).

Reading Matthew with 'sensitivities' attuned to sight and vision, one encounters a text in which forms of *oraō* occur over 40 times. Statistically therefore it would seem Matthew is a visiocentric text and thus, at least in part, open to Deaf perception. Moreover if d/Deaf experience is largely filtered out by Matthew, stories of the healing of the blind occur quite frequently and are even exaggerated by redacting Mark's account (Matt 9:27; 20:30). Blindness is reserved as a synecdoche for the hypocrisy and misconceptions of Jesus' bitterest enemies, the scribes and Pharisees. In chapter 23, Matthew's great diatribe against the religious establishment, Jesus' opponents are over and again characterised as 'blind guides' (23:16-17, 19, 24, 26) despite their supposed professional command of the written scriptures. These features would seem to indicate that blindness is conceived both physically and spiritually as a far graver sense-impairment than deafness within Matthew's world.

Continuing tracing ocular themes, and in line with Peter Hitchings' estimation of Deaf theology, Matthew seems to 'move away from a purely wordy God to one [conceived] in terms of vision and touch' (Hitching 2003:21). The wise men from the East are led by heavenly portents (2:10) and warned in a dream to not go back via Herod's palace (2:12); Joseph in visionary dreams is given reassurance about the source of Mary's pregnancy (1:20) and about the family's flight to Egypt (2:19-20). Pilate's wife is the only voice of truth in the passion narrative when she narrates her troubling dream and urges her husband to 'have nothing to do with that innocent man' (27:19). God, for Matthew it seems, communicates through visions and, as a result, often usurps those whose authority is based on hearing or written words alone. It is no accident that Herod, whilst quizzing scribal authorities about written prophecy (2:3-5), still remains, unlike the magi, 'unenlightened' regarding Jesus' true identity and role. Visions also play a central role in Jesus' career: a public vision of 'the Spirit of God descending like a dove' (3:16) accompanies the baptism; the transfiguration likewise features Jesus' face 'shining like the sun' (17:2); extraordinary cosmic signs accompany Jesus' death (27:51-53) and the close of the gospel features the disciples witnessing a vision of the resurrected Christ on a mountain (28:17).

The imagery of darkness and light, featured within studies of Deaf cultures, likewise are attested in Matthew's Gospel. Darkness is used to symbolise religious, social and political realities and Jesus' coming is pictured as part of God's prophetic enlightenment project: 'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned' (4:16). Akin to the lamp-post trope so prevalent in Deaf cultures, likewise, Jesus and the community he founds are shown to be a 'light of the world' (5:14), 'a lamp' giving light to the whole house (5:15) and a moral example to be shone before others so that they also may also 'see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (5:16). Ancient conceptions of the eye, which rather than conceiving of the eye as letting light in, actually believed the eye emitted light out to touch objects, also stand behind the graphic visual image of the 'eye' as a 'lamp of the body' (6:22) regulating moral disposition. In reference to mission, likewise, Matthew's Jesus states that what is told in the dark his disciples are to 'utter in the light' and 'proclaim on the housetops' significantly one of the most visible places from which to deliver a message. Lewis notes that 'so much communication in the Deaf world starts with 'LOOK-AT-ME' . . . that it seems the Deaf Preachers [likewise frequently] perceived Jesus as beginning his teaching in the same way . .' (Lewis 2007:141).

In short, Matthew's gospel is vision-orientated and in this respect is open to access by Deaf cultures. Indeed the God of visions and dreams in Matthew's Gospel often subverts the power of those scribal classes who are masters of the written word and exercise hegemony over knowledge. Light and vision is positively featured and evocative for sign language users for whom face-to-face performance is central and cannot be 'seen in the dark'.

(b) Use of Sign Language and Minority Cultural Status

One of the most significant factors uniting Deaf cultures is of course the use of sign language. Harlan Lane speaks of 'the mother tongue' as an 'aspect of the soul of a people' (Lane 2005) and a visible mark of ethnicity within a specific culture. Accordingly, 'a language not based on sound is the primary element that sharply demarcates the Deaf-World from the engulfing hearing society' (Lane 2005). The respective mediums by which spoken and signed languages are communicated are very different. The former is based on sounds and words, the latter on three dimensional uses of hand and body movements and facial expressions. Of course the visible presence of God witnessed in Matthew's 'Emmanuel' (1:23-24) is itself one which fits more neatly with Deaf cultures than a physically absent deity who can only be heard. Morris

talks of the 'idea of God being seen in human form, present among us' (Morris 2008:101) as having weighty significance within Deaf cultures. For, in sign language, one must be able to see face-to-face the person one is communicating with. Accordingly Morris cites Mary Weir's description of 'Christ as a sign' allowing Deaf people's communication with God. Likewise, unlike Mark's absent Christ at the close of his Gospel (Mk 16:1-8) Matthew's Jesus appears on a mountaintop and assures his followers that he will be with them always 'to the end of the age' (28:20).

Matthew's gospel of course does not feature sign language as such, but it does feature non-lingustic gestures. Although these gestures are significantly different and lacking linguistic traits such as grammatical agreement inherent in sign communication (see Senghas and Monaghan 2002:75) nevertheless these too can be viewed positively within Deaf cultures. Morris cites the example of a Deaf interpretation of healing narratives which use 'physical and visual' gestures (Morris 2008:103) to illustrate some degree of understanding, on the part of Jesus, of communicating in ways beyond speech and words. For example, touch is 'seen' within Matthew's gospel and forms of *haptō* occur 8 times. Jesus 'stretches out his hand' to heal a leper (8:3) and through touch cures Peter's mother-in-law (8:15), blind men (9:29; 20:34) and an epileptic (17:7). A bleeding woman famously touches the hem of Jesus' garment to be healed (9:21) and is accordingly, without words, made whole. Likewise hands and body parts within the Gospel are not only instruments of movement but also tools of communication. Frequently Matthew speaks of the right hand as a place of honour (20:21-23; 22:44; 25:33; 26:64). The gestures central to the passion narrative in Matthew are also hugely evocative signs readily received by Deaf receivers of the Gospel. The dipping of the bread in the dish symbolises the one who will hand Jesus over (26:63) and the subsequent kiss of betrayal (26:49) visually enacts deception; the words of institution at the last supper act as a sign of Jesus' material presence in the ritual life of the community (26:26); Pilate's symbolic washing of hands in the trial narrative denotes disassociation from the capital punishment sentence he delivers (27:24); the crown of thorns and the reed placed in the right hand of Jesus (27:29) are visible illustrations of the ironic mocking of his kingly power. The crucifixion itself has also been interpreted, in relation to Deaf cultures, as the graphic pinning of Jesus' hands to the cross so he cannot sign or communicate, this acts as the most arresting and iconic sign of the total 'disability' that torturous powers have inflicted on him. Whilst there can be no simple or naive equivalence drawn between sign and gesture, nevertheless from a Deaf cultural perspective the exhibition of bodily means of

communication beyond speech can function as important re-'membered' practices in Deaf recovery readings. As Paddy Ladd likewise submits that Deaf cultures,

> embrace[s] the planet by communicating through those very parts of our own bodies which we ourselves are afraid to utilise. Through the unique plasticity of sign languages, they move in and out of each other's very different cultures like shoals of fish, eagerly seeking out new information about different ways of living in this world of ours. (Ladd 2003:25)

Another defining feature of sign-language use is of course occupying a minority status within a hearing culture. Ladd states, 'sign language users know that they cannot find "home" within a majority society until the day when that society is able to use their language.' They must endure the daily struggle of co-existing 'alongside majority culture members who do not understand them' (Ladd 2003:16). Deaf clubs and schools are accordingly often pictured as 'safe houses' in which sign language is the norm and in which there is a 'general disassociation from speech' (Padden 1994:42-43). One of the most explicit ideological clashes between signed and spoken languages has occurred in the promotion of oralism within educational practice, with oralism defined as 'an ideology that privileges spoken (and written) languages over signed ones, often denying the validity or linguistic nature of signing altogether' (Senghas and Monaghan 2002:83).

Whilst Matthew is undoubtedly a speech-dominated text (forms of *legō*, occur over 200 times in the gospel) and citations of spoken and written prophecies (1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23, 3:3; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 27:9) and law codes (5:27, 31, 33, 38, 43, 12:2-3; 15:3-5; 19:4-5) occur throughout, as outlined earlier, there is a certain ambivalence surrounding the authority of those who presume to be professional readers of scripture. Likewise, one of the traits Matthew often uses to show Jesus' subversion of his opponents' authority is that he is able to understand what they are thinking (12:25). Morris understands such interceptions as a signer's adaptation to an oral culture (through lip and gesture comprehension) which actually subverts that word-centric culture. In his words, 'Jesus knows what the scribes are saying about him without being able to hear them . . . [for he has] been watching their lip patterns and demeanour in order to get this information' (Morris 2008:149).

Whilst Matthew's textual world may not be one in which the battle between sign and speech is extensively played out, Deaf marginal perspectives can no doubt find resonance with the depiction of Matthew's marginal community. Warren Carter has posited Matthew's gospel as a counter narrative, representative of a 'minority community of disciples' who 'resist the dominant Roman imperial and synagogal control' (Carter

2000:xvii). It is no accident that Matthew celebrates the revelation of God to vulnerable 'infants', people without speech or words, in contrast to the 'wise and understanding' literate class (11:25). Likewise the marginal child, unvalued and disposable, becomes the icon of true discipleship (18:3; 19:14; 21:16). Children demonstrate the 'social location of powerlessness' (Carter 2000:362) and thus function as powerful signifiers for all those who struggle at the margins of society, including minority sign language users. In Carter's terms:

> All disciples are called children. Parents have no place in the alternative households. Their absence indicates a basic rejection of a hierarchical and patriarchal structure in which power is exercised over others and the creation of a different social order . . . in which all are equal. (Carter 2000:386)

For Matthew, marginality is at the heart of the Christian community's identity, ritual and practice. And as such, as Sathianathan Clarke reminds us, it stands at one with those cultures whose social location demands that reflection and practice be unified:

> It is pertinent to register the point that communities that work with their hands and are intimately related to the products they create do not have a need to separate reflective activity from the material activity they are involved with. Thus production, reflection and communication are connected and integrated into a human way of living. Praxis is a way of life. (Clarke 2002: 264)

Whilst Matthew's gospel may display hegemonic 'textual' discourses that have kept the Deaf and their language on the margins, nevertheless through its subtle critiques of authority based on words and mastery of written traditions it does also indirectly acknowledge the great contribution that cultures that speak with their hands, rather than words, can offer. Matthew's ethos also resonates firmly with a context that is on the margins, for following Matthew's Christ inevitably leads to experiencing paralysing rejection outside a city's walls.

(c) The Collective Ethos of Communities

Ladd voices a consensus when he states that 'Deaf cultures are not cultures of individualism, but of collectivism, a trait which they share with 70% of the global population' (Ladd 2003:16). One of the most significant features of collective communities is of course the explicit demonstration and performance of communal identity. Lane likewise considers that 'self-recognition and recognition by others is a central feature of ethnicity' (Lane 2005). It is not incidental that Deaf advocates have accordingly adopted labels like 'Deaf-World' and 'Deaf-Way' to illustrate their communal identity and belonging. Richard Senghas and Leila

Monaghan see the spatial elements of 'Deaf-World' being particularly evocative in relation to Deaf identity. They submit that the 'DEAF-WORLD is seen as transcending national borders and invokes the experiences of d/Deaf individuals and groups as unifying events' (2002:80). Both Lane and Ladd have plotted the 'global' and 'universal' potential of Deaf world. Lane reveals how Deaf people from two different cultures can nonetheless still communicate at least in part with one another and as such function like other 'Diaspora ethnic minorities worldwide' who are subject to 'prejudice in the host society' (Lane 2005). Ladd also points to the adaptability of sign language, which he defines as a mode of 'global communication' which cultivates 'citizens of the entire planet'. In Ladd's opinion, 'such a powerful experience cannot continue to be constrained by the feeble diminutive of "deafness"; hence the concept of Deaf seeks to encompass those larger dimensions' (Ladd 2003:14).

In picturing Deaf cultures as akin to ethnic minority cultures united by experience across geographical limits, many commentators focus on the strong emphasis on social and family ties operative within them (Padden 1994:42-43). Ladd concurs that 'tropes such as family and home are widely used and might well be drawn into a coherent symbol system' (Ladd 2003:257) within Deaf cultural experience. Similarly the protection of the in-group through endogamous marriage, consensual decision making and positive identification with the language and values of the culture (see Lane 2005) also serve to protect and propagate the interests of the minority collective.

Whilst the substance of the collective identity in Matthew's Gospel may be substantially different from Deaf cultures, nevertheless the broad structure of communal identity featured there does find resonance with Deaf experience. (Indeed sign language as a mode of communication in a collective culture may be far nearer the earliest Palestinian 'oral' modes of transmission of 'gospel' traditions than our texts would imply). Matthew offers a number of communal identity labels by which his community can understand themselves. These include 'ekklēsia', 'infants' and 'little ones'. Such labels, as Carter recognizes, serve, like Deaf-World, to 'secure separation from other communities [and] reinforce group identity' (2000:9). Likewise fictive kin and households are dominant tropes within Matthew's world. Jesus provocatively asks 'Who is my mother and my brothers?' (12:48) only to conclude it is those with whom he shares faith and experience (12:49). Claims of exclusive revelation – "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (13:11) – also serve to underline the different bases of authority operative within the new collective identity of the ekklesia. Particular 'signs' of that community identity are also materially and visually performed: baptism (28:19), worship (5:23-24), governance

(18:15-20), Eucharistic meals (26:26-29) and prayer (6:9-13) to name just a few. Such rituals serve to 'create order, sustain a community in an alternative way of living and effect transformation' (Carter 2000:9).

The global potential of Deaf world and communication is also discerned in the way in which Matthew's Gospel plots a mission that at first is limited to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10:6) but careers towards a universal mission (ethnically and racially diverse), articulated in the great commission at the climax of the account: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (28:19). Like Deaf world, Matthew exhibits a strong collective identity which he wishes to promote and through which he hopes to transcend barriers of race, class, nationality and geography.

(d) Use of Storytelling

A frequently cited feature of Deaf cultures is 'storytelling'. Roger Hitching shows how the Deaf not only convey information through stories but also use them as a coping strategy:

> In their stories, they include self-mocking elements and make fun of interactions with hearing people. Storytelling also influences how they conceptualise reality and create their worldview. In Deaf culture the storytelling mode, the dialectical nature of encounter and the greater experience of immediacy create differences in the backdrop against which reality is interpreted. (Hitching 2003:69)

Paddy Ladd has hypothesised that this feature may find its genesis in the fact that 'thirst for information is a major theme in a culture not only denied access to broadcast media and public communication . . . [and] because of the additional oralist restrictions and exclusions from parental and educational information' (Ladd 2003:309). Of course, Matthew's Gospel was itself delivered in a culture where estimated literacy rates were only 10%, and thus has some resonance with this situation. Matthew needs to adopt vivid story-telling elements for a non-literate audience. From the comic-strip jibe of taking a speck from a neighbour's eye whilst a log sits in one's own (7:5) to the figurative story-telling marking episodes like the cursing of the fig tree (21:18-22), Matthew draws his audience imaginatively into his narrative world.

Making texts relevant to particular contemporary situations is of course the hallmark of midrashic modes of interpretation (see Lawrence 2009:91-104). Matthew has, in various ways, been understood to contain midrashic elements. To give just one example, the birth

narrative is often read as midrashic haggadah. Midrashic, because scriptural prophecies are woven into the entire complex and haggadah, because 'the story is not told for the sake of facts alone, but in order to illustrate their deeper meaning, that is, the theological significance of Jesus as the fulfilment of OT prophecies' (Hagner 1993:16). Likewise in Deaf culture 'storytelling is a form of oral transmission of text . . . and in the hands of a skilled practitioner accurately transmits what is seen as the essence of the narrative' (Ladd discussed in Lewis 2007: 118).

Moreover, the characterisations and attitudes operative within the Gospel (for example of the Pharisees and scribes as opposed to Jesus) likewise form an important part of the telling. In stories told in sign language often the performer will physically change position, posture and facial expression to denote a change of character and illustrate the outlooks of respective individuals. In such telling, aspects, manner and mood become central parts of the storytelling endeavour. In Hitching's terms such interpretations are not merely giving the meaning 'but also the speaker's attitude to his listeners and to what he is saying' (Hitching 2003: 70) within the performance.

(4) Matthew and Deaf Cultures: Identifying Common Touchstones

Notions of 'ability', 'disability', 'normality' and 'abnormality' are socially constructed and often largely dependent on the environment in which they are used, and by whom they are advanced. In contrast to a medical model of deafness, the cultural model which conceives of the Deaf as a linguistic or ethnic minority group challenges us to disrupt our classifications surrounding what is 'normal' and interpret d/Deafness as 'difference not defect' (Creamer 2009:109). For, as Deborah Creamer reminds us, every individual is limited in some respect, and as such binary categories of 'us' and 'them' in reference to disability are very hard to sustain (2009:109). Encountering Matthew with Deaf sensitivities, on first sight it seemed a predominantly audiocentric document which stigmatized, even stifled, d/Deaf presence within it. Whilst the exposure of and resistance to oppression by a hearing 'cult of normalcy' is an important part of Deaf readings, so is finding positive touchstones which allow the 'meaning of the text [to] shift' in view of contemporary liberation agendas (see Lewis 2007:107). By elucidating key features of Deaf cultures and allowing them to reverberate and echo within Matthew's world a dynamic exchange with the text in light of contemporary experience was initiated, albeit by a hearing academic. Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister and Ben Bahan, warn of the 'inevitable collision with the values of DEAF WORLD, whose goal is to promote the unique heritage of Deaf language and cultures' that will occur when a hearing

person undertakes a journey such as the one attempted here, for 'the disparity in decision-making power between the hearing world and DEAF-WORLD renders this collision frightening for Deaf people' (Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan 1996:371). Heeding this warning, this paper does not claim to be the last 'sign' on this topic, but rather poses an open invitation for Deaf people themselves to partake in creative interactions with texts such as the Gospel of Matthew and as such curb the perpetuation of Deaf absence from biblical texts and interpretation.

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