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**William John Lyons**

## **How the “New Testament” Shaped Deaf People at St Saviour’s, Oxford Street**

**A Study in Reception History and in Reception Exegesis**

Within the burgeoning area of the Bible’s reception history is a variant approach, termed “reception exegesis” by Paul Joyce and Diana Lipton. Investigation of an occasion of reception can generate new insights into the meaning of the biblical texts, they suggest. Introducing the results of a Leverhulme Trust Research Project on Britain’s first purpose-built deaf church to a scholarly readership interested in biblical reception, I outline here how the New Testament—especially Mark 7:32–37—was used to construct the deaf people of Victorian London. Specific details of my argument will be compared with the Markan text as constructed by modern commentators in order to test Joyce and Lipton’s hypothesis. The article questions reception exegesis’s usefulness as a generator of long-term interest in biblical studies and proposes a different response to its difficulties, that biblical scholars dedicate themselves to developing a broad conception of reception history in order to generate collaborations across disciplinary boundaries while they are still in a position to do so.

William John Lyons is Reader in Religion and History at the University of Bristol.

WHEN I SUGGESTED the title, “Neither Science nor Prayer Can Heal Them’: How the ‘New Testament’ Shaped the Deaf at St Saviour’s, Oxford Street,” for a plenary presentation at the British New Testament Conference in Chester in September 2016, I intended to offer the audience a critical tour of the deaf-spaces of Victorian London, and of the role that the New Testament had played in their construction.<sup>1</sup>

The fascinating materials involved come from a highly successful three-year Leverhulme Trust project involving myself and my University of Bristol colleague, Mike Gulliver, in a study of Britain’s first purpose-built deaf church, St Saviour’s Church for the Deaf and Dumb, an imposing building which stood proudly on London’s Oxford Street between 1873 and 1923.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This area of study has been consistently underdeveloped within biblical studies as a discipline. In their introduction to their 2007 edited volume, *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper point to two significant dates in the history of the academic study of the phenomenon of disability in general: the first meeting of the “Religion and Disability Consultation” at the AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, focused on “People with Disabilities and Religious Constructions of Theodicy and Tragedy,” and the second was the first session of the “Biblical Scholarship and Disabilities Consultation” at the same meeting in San Antonio in November 2004, focused upon “The Blind, the Deaf, and the Lame: Biblical Representation of Disability”; this consultation met at both the AAR/SBL Annual and the SBL International meetings. In more recent years, seminars on “Disability Studies and Healthcare in the Bible and Near East” at the Annual meeting have been added (since 2007) and on “Healthcare and Disability in the Ancient World” at the International meeting (since 2011); with an increasing flow of publications from those involved and encouraged by these sessions, it appears that Disability Studies is finally beginning to make its mark on studies of the ancient world (*This Abled Body*, 2–3).

Studies specifically interacting with the New Testament and its relationship with deaf people are few and far between, however. Two volumes that take an explicitly theological approach to deaf people and which touch on the New Testament are Hannah Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (London: Routledge, 2007), which examines the history of deaf interaction with the church in the UK (and asks, among others, the question, did Jesus sign?), and Wayne Morris, *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (London: Routledge, 2008), which seeks to develop a non-verbal, deaf-centred approach to Christian spirituality. In biblical studies, and New Testament Studies specifically, particular note should be given to the work of Louise Lawrence. Her focus on Mark 7 in chapter 3 of her book *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) considers Mark 7 in the context of “Deaf World Performance.” A more essential read, however, in terms of this article at least, is her article “Exploring the Sense-scape of the Gospel of Mark,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 4 (2011): 387–97.

<sup>2</sup> The study referred to is a three-year Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant entitled “Scripture, Dissent and Deaf Space: St Saviour’s, Oxford Street,” running from February 2014 to January 2017. Using the example of St Saviour’s Church for the Deaf and Dumb,

When the time came to write the piece, however, I gave in to the temptation of setting the presentation of that material within the context of a particular bugbear of mine, the shape and future of the discipline of biblical studies. My first published foray into that vexed area of research, a *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* article on what reception history might bring to New Testament studies, was published in 2010 and represented years of thought prior to that.<sup>3</sup> An edited volume entitled “Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice” followed,<sup>4</sup> then came a 4000-word discussion of reception history and its disciplinary possibilities in the online venue, *Bible and Interpretation*,<sup>5</sup> before, most recently, a review of Professor Joan Taylor’s edited volume, *Jesus and Brian*,<sup>6</sup> was published in the journal *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*.<sup>7</sup>

Since I obviously cannot leave the subject of the discipline’s future well-enough alone, this article, a lightly-revised version of the BNTC presentation mentioned above, will attempt to do two things at once: to look at the fascinating story of how the New Testament impacted upon the deaf-spaces of Victorian London, and then to ask what that story, and the many others like it, might be able to bring to the discipline of biblical studies.

## The “Way of the Shoe” and the “Way of the Gourd”

In June 2014, Kings College London organized a conference with the aim of answering a simple question about the 1979 film Monty Python’s *Life of*

Oxford Street, London (1873–1923), our aim has been to challenge simplistic portrayals of the relationship between deaf people and the hearing English Churches, interrogating the construction of textual and taught knowledge about the former’s place within both established and dissenting churches and its scriptural and traditional origins, and the deaf spaces that were produced in response. We wish to record our grateful thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for their support in carrying out this work.

<sup>3</sup> W. J. Lyons, “Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): 207–220.

<sup>4</sup> Emma England and W. J. Lyons (eds), *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> W. J. Lyons, “Some Thoughts on Defining Reception History and the Future of Biblical Studies,” *Bible and Interpretation* (2015), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/Lyons1.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Taylor (ed.), *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and his Times via Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (London: Bloomsbury 2015).

<sup>7</sup> W. J. Lyons, “Review Essay: What Have the Pythons Ever Done for Us?” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 5, no. 1 (2015): 95–103.

*Brian*:<sup>8</sup> “What have the Pythons ever done for us?”<sup>9</sup> By “us,” Professor Taylor and her KCL colleagues meant “biblical scholars” in general. A year later, the conference book appeared and a panel reviewed it at the BNTC meeting in Edinburgh in September 2015, with Professor Taylor as respondent. As I reflected on both conference and book, I came to appreciate them more and more, offering a positive review of the latter to *Relegere*. There I pointed out that the book was dualistic in nature, offering two different ways to appropriate the film; these I termed the “way of the shoe” and the “way of the gourd,” thus appropriating two related aspects of the film’s discipleship imagery to serve as metaphorical markers. In the film, Brian loses a sandal and some of his followers take off and brandish their shoes as identifiers. He also discards a gourd and a different group take that as their symbol of identity and squabbling ensues. The distinction between the labels “shoe” and “gourd” as applied by me to the conference book revolves around the central question of *what researchers are studying the film for*. In the book’s foreword, Paul Joyce writes that:

the contributors to the present volume not only explore the many ways in which the *Life of Brian* uses, adapts and is influenced by the gospels, but also frequently engage in what has been called “reception exegesis,” which is driven by the insight that how the Bible has been received may provide invaluable assistance in the exegetical task... Use of the Bible in later times can... shine a spotlight on biblical verses that have been dulled by familiarity; it can foreground biblical concepts and concerns that have faded over time into the background; and it can even give rise to new readings of difficult Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek terms.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Dir. Terry Jones, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/events/jandb/JBprogWeb.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce, “Foreword,” *Jesus and Brian*, xviii. Clearly this is a revival of Larry Kreitzer’s idea of “reversing the hermeneutical flow.” E.g., Larry Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993); *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); and *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). This is referenced by both Joyce (*Jesus and Brian*, xix) and Taylor (*Jesus and Brian*, xxvii) as a precursor to their work. Its aim was described by Kreitzer in his own scholarly context as being “to reverse the flow

This activity, seeking what Joyce later calls “a serendipitous bonus,” provides the key identity marker of the group whom I describe as following the “way of the shoe” (i.e., the “Shoe-sians”). Their work in Part II of the book, “History and Interpretation via Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*,” consists of ten of the volume’s sixteen essays and 145 of its 237 pages. What is truly remarkable is Professor Taylor’s success in persuading those whom she rightly calls “eminent scholars” to try their hands at reception exegesis, to work happily with a subject that is far outside their usual specialisms. It is that achievement that leads me to suggest that her book is one of the most important published in New Testament studies in recent years.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the emphasis on reception exegesis, however, scholarly interaction with the Python film in the volume could not ultimately be held to that agenda. Joyce acknowledges this when he addresses the approach of the six authors in Part I of the volume, those whom I termed in my review the followers of the “way of the gourd” (the “Gourd-ians”).

This does not mean, of course, that examples of reception history that do not enrich our understanding of the core biblical

of influence within the hermeneutical process and examine select NT passages or themes in light of some of the enduring expressions of our own culture, namely great literary works and their film adaptations” (*New Testament in Fiction and Film*, 19; and quoted on page 13 of his *Old Testament in Fiction and Film*).

<sup>11</sup> The centrality of “reception exegesis” to the construction of both conference and book is clear in the materials written by Professor Taylor for both the conference website and for the book. On the website, she writes: “This conference opens up *Life of Brian* to renewed investigation, using it in an innovative way to sharpen our view. Papers presented by some of the world’s most eminent biblical scholars and historians will discuss the film’s relevance to history, biblical studies and Life of Jesus research.... There will be discussion of the socio-political context and Josephus; costuming and setting; and other topics. The aim is to use the film to reflect on history, interpretation and meaning, as a tool that can help us consider our assumptions and the historical evidence: a ‘reception exegesis’ approach” (cf. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/events/jandb/about.aspx>). In the book, she writes: “I [Taylor] invited scholars I knew to be cutting edge in the field, not only locally within the United Kingdom and Ireland, but also internationally, and only wish I could have invited more, since once word of the event got out I was written to by many who supported the project.... In the recent work of my colleague, Paul Joyce, with my former colleague Diana Lipton, in their study of Lamentations [Paul Joyce and Diana Lipton, *Lamentations through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 1–25], they talk about ‘reception exegesis.’... [I]n the conference and for this book, I asked eminent scholars to reflect on the film’s reception, and to use the *Life of Brian* as a hermeneutical tool, a means of reflecting not only on our texts, but on the Jesus of history and on his context in first-century Judea” (Taylor, “Introduction,” *Jesus and Brian*, xxii, xxvii).

text are less valuable than those that do. In other words, the legitimacy of reception history as an enterprise by no means depends upon its having to “pay its way” by yielding exegetical fruit; it is valuable in its own right in multiple ways.<sup>12</sup>

In the review, I confessed myself to be a follower of the gourd but also wrote that I valued the way of the shoe as “a way of enticing the wary, skittish, biblical scholar into the wilds of Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* in search of exegetical insight, not least because there is always a chance that they might find the quest worth repeating for its own sake.”<sup>13</sup> In what follows, however, I will use our work on Victorian London to compare the way of the shoe, “reception exegesis” and the way of the gourd, “reception history” in a somewhat less irenic fashion. I will first outline the story of St Saviour’s, Oxford Street, before examining the way in which New Testament texts, especially Mark 7:32–37 (henceforth Mark 7), were used to construct the deaf people who encountered it. Assuming a serendipitous bonus, I will then look at some recent commentaries and ask if we can learn anything substantive in reception-exegetical terms from the impact of Mark 7 upon the Victorian deaf. Finally, I will close by reflecting upon the potential importance of such “serendipitous bonuses” to our discipline’s future.<sup>14</sup>

### The Story of St Saviour’s, Oxford Street

It was a commonplace in Victorian London’s philanthropic circles that deaf people were invisible in everyday life. Unlike the obviously blind, a person

<sup>12</sup> “Foreword,” *Jesus and Brian*, xviii.

<sup>13</sup> Lyons, “Review Essay,” 103.

<sup>14</sup> A third option which can plausibly be drawn from the film is the not-to-be-recommended “way of the Milligan,” the option of ignoring the film altogether. This appears very briefly in the film when Spike Milligan, in a cameo appearance, tries to create a third grouping, but is left standing abandoned and then stalks off screen right; the brevity of the appearance of this discipleship mode in the film was reflected in the short thrift given to it in my review of the conference volume (Lyons, “Review Essay,” 97–98). On the role of those who ignore reception history in biblical studies, the “followers of the Milligan” as it were, see Jon Morgan’s “Visions, Gatekeepers, and Receptionists: Reflections on the shape of Biblical Studies and the Role of Reception History,” in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Emma England and William John Lyons (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 61–76. Morgan notes that the sense he gets from reading those traditional critics with whom he is interacting is that “as they pause from gazing proudly down the long and noble history of biblical studies and swivel around, they see a similarly long and glorious future rolling out ahead” (74). Until they relinquish this notion, little or nothing will be allowed to change in their areas of influence.



could pass them by in the street without ever realising their “affliction.”<sup>15</sup> If hearing people knew where to look, they could find some of them, however. Education for the deaf children of London’s poor had only been available since 1792, with the opening of the London Asylum, first in Bermondsey, and then from 1809 on the Old Kent Road in South-East London.<sup>16</sup> Taken in at age nine and then sent out at age fifteen to work in a variety of trades, and able to sign and to comprehend English, these young deaf adults gathered in visible social micro-spaces. However, since many deaf children received no education at all, such gatherings always fell short of the whole. Once deaf people had been identified in the 1840s as a class in need of charity, and as a mission field requiring outreach, however, the need to identify every deaf person became pressing. With the inclusion of a question about deafness in the 1851 census, the opportunity came. From a London with an unknown deaf population, the census produced a “map” that located thirteen hundred and twenty five deaf people street-by-street. Although poor definitions of deafness and a reluctance to record deafness left the results inaccurate, and deaf transience soon left them out-of-date,<sup>17</sup> that headline figure, and those of following censuses, became both a fund-raising rallying cry and a basis for charitable action.

The “Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb” had begun life as the “Institution of Providing Employment, Relief and Religious Instruction for the Adult Deaf and Dumb” in 1841. For years, the philanthropists involved had struggled to add trade skills to the communication and numeracy skills

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Samuel Smith, “It is not by any means to be wondered at, that so little is known of the true state of the deaf and dumb, when it is considered that their affliction is not obvious to the eye. One cannot ‘run and read’ a man’s deafness in his face, as blindness can be distinguished” (Samuel Smith, *The Deaf and Dumb: Their Deprivation and Its Consequences; The Process of Their Education* [London: William Mackintosh, 1864], 6).

<sup>16</sup> John Townsend, *Memoirs, of the Rev. John Townsend, Founder of the Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb and of the Congregational School* (London: J. B. & John Couthope, 1828), 37–53; Edward Walford, “The Old Kent Road,” in *Old and New London* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878), 6:248–255, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/old-new-london/vol6>. On the history of British deaf education generally, see Anne Borsay, “Deaf Children and Charitable Education in Britain 1790–1944,” in *Medicine, Charity and Mutual Aid: The Consumption of Health and Welfare in Britain c. 1550–1950*, ed. Anne Borsay and Peter Shapely (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 71–90.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., the missionary’s visitations following the census data have shown that “the Deaf and Dumb are emphatically migratory in their habits... many of them have changed their residence” (Annual Report 1854–1855, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, 56); cf. also the thorough discussion of the inaccuracies of the census with regard to definitions of deaf people by David Buxton, “The Census of the Deaf and Dumb in 1851,” *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 18 (1855): 174–77).

gained at the Old Kent Road Asylum, before realising in the early 1850s that the best way for them to provide aid to deaf people was via the religious services of the Church of England. In 1854 the Association was re-launched as a mission-orientated charitable society with various high-status individuals as its patrons. It set out to visit the dispersed individuals brought to light by the 1851 census in their homes, with the aim of providing them with practical help, financial relief, pathways to education, and access to the Christian gospel.<sup>18</sup> The “official” Church of England position on deaf people at the time was that educated deaf individuals should sit unnoticed among the hearing in their parish church, with the Book of Common Prayer in one hand and, maybe, a written sermon in the other.<sup>19</sup> This approach, it was thought, would best turn the benighted savages who had become signing pagans through secular education into Christian believers who were ready for heaven, the “better land” in which they would hear, and thus disappear, for all eternity.<sup>20</sup>

Though the Association gave lip service to that idea,<sup>21</sup> it spent its first five years offering services for deaf people, in either sign language, “silent services,” or in spoken form with a signed interpretation, “interpreted services.” These were held in schoolrooms, lecture halls, a dissenting chapel, but only rarely in an Anglican church and then only by invitation of a sympathetic but hearing incumbent. Samuel Smith (1832–83), appointed in 1855 as a hearing missionary, had personal ambitions concerning ordination, however. Upon completion of his studies at Kings College London, he became part of the “armoury” of the seven deaf men who approached the Association in 1859 and demanded a church of their own. The charity’s

<sup>18</sup> E. Chalmers, “Report of Agent in London,” in *Magazine for the Deaf and Dumb* 1855, 6–7; Anon, “Aims and Objectives of the Association,” *Magazine for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1856, 17–18.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Smith, *Deaf and Dumb*, 64–65; Samuel Smith, “Church Work among the Deaf and Dumb,” in Anon, *Authorised Report on the Church Congress Held at Stoke on Trent*, 1875 (London: William Wells Gardner, 1875): 245–46.

<sup>20</sup> As the anonymous author of the Association’s Annual Report for 1877–78 put it: “Victims of an incurable malady, the greatest benefit and the most effectual consolation to them is undoubtedly to realise the great truth of a future existence in ‘the better land,’ where the ‘ears of the deaf shall be unstopped and the tongue of the dumb sing’” (Annual Report, 1877–78, Royal Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, 8).

<sup>21</sup> In the Association’s Annual Report of 1856–57, the view was presented that deaf people who can intelligently join in with parish services should do so, while those who could not should be offered services suited to their capabilities. These were cast as auxiliary services and were explicitly intended to supplement the parish system, not supplant it (6).

refusal on the grounds that deaf people should be encouraged to gather together as little as possible was met with the response that those arguing for the church would go it alone, a move which was accompanied by the implicit threat that they would be taking the soon-to-be-ordained Smith with them.<sup>22</sup> Faced with such a potential exodus, the Association performed a *volte-face*, adopted building the church as its official policy, and quietly abandoned the BCP/sermon ideal.<sup>23</sup>

For ten years, the Association struggled to find a place to build. It continued its activities, offering services in West, East, and South London. But on June 6, 1870, the foundation stone was finally laid at a site on Oxford Street donated by the Duke of Westminster (1825–99), and set within the parish of St Mark's, North Audley Street.<sup>24</sup> By March 28, 1872, the Association had moved into the downstairs Lecture Hall.<sup>25</sup> Eighteen months later, on June 22, 1873, the building was finally opened, as a chapel for the deaf people of London and, ostensibly at least, for the poor of the parish (fig. 1).<sup>26</sup> During its first year, St Saviour's saw only silent signed services. The Association were surprised to find that late-deafened people began to attend, learning sign language as they watched. The interpreted "anniversary" services of June 1874 were presented publicly as the re-entry of sound into the Oxford Street building.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Annual Report 1859–60, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, 12–14; cf. also the attached Appendix, 23–29.

<sup>23</sup> In the Annual Report of 1860–61, this change of heart is left unexplained (Annual Report 1860–61, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, 13–15), but a decade later, the Annual Report of 1871–72 offered a much more informative account of the discussions underlying these events: "It was with great hesitation that the Association lent itself to the movement, for anything which helps to make the deaf and dumb regard themselves as a separate class is undeniably objectionable. But in the circumstances, as they arose, the Association had, in fact, no alternative short of allowing the deaf and dumb to go from under its influence..." (Annual Report 1871–72, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, 6–7).

<sup>24</sup> "New Church for the Deaf and Dumb," *The Times*, July 6, 1870; "New Church for the Deaf and Dumb," *The Morning Post*, July 6, 1870.

<sup>25</sup> Item 4, Minutes, March 1st 1872, Trustees General Committee, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, Papers of Royal Association in aid of Deaf People London Metropolitan Archives: City of London.

<sup>26</sup> Anon, "Saint Saviour's Church for the Deaf and Dumb," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1973, 127–28.

<sup>27</sup> *The Times*, June 22, 1874; reprinted "slightly corrected" as "The Deaf and Dumb Church," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1874, 102.



PLATE 34.

ST. SAVIOUR, OXFORD STREET.

Figure 1: Exterior of St Saviour's Church for the Deaf and Dumb, 1870s. ©University of Bristol Library, Special Collections.<sup>28</sup>

Figure 2 shows the upper-floor “church” space in use and gives an idea of the building’s design, its physical features, and its use. These are a mixture

<sup>28</sup> A. Capes, *The Old and New Churches of London* (London: J. Bumpus, 1880), plate 34 (unpaginated).

of “deaf-friendly” features incorporated by the architect, Arthur Blomfield (1829–99), into a building constructed in the neo-gothic style demanded by

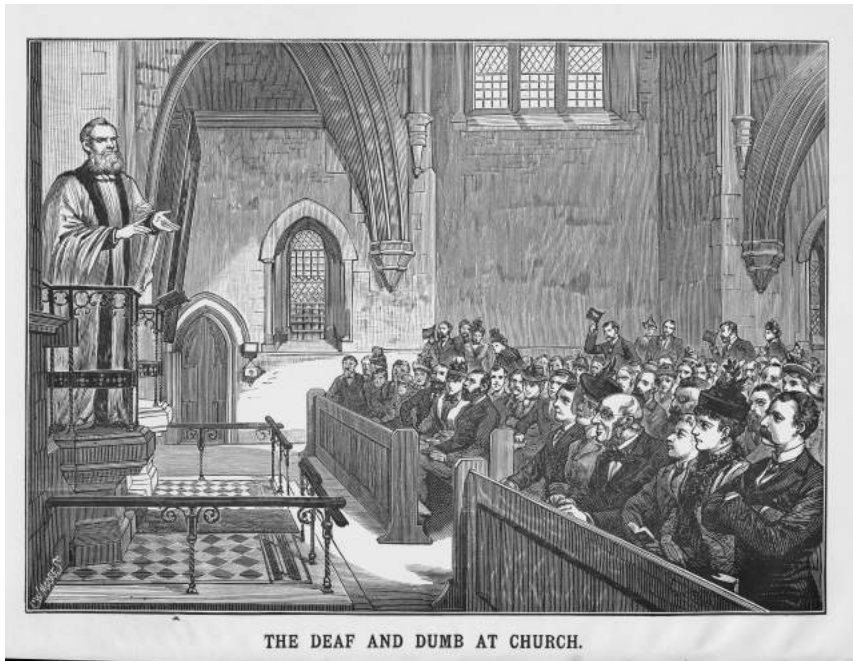


Figure 2: Interior of St Saviour's Church for the Deaf and Dumb, 1870s (©Gulliver & Lyons)<sup>29</sup>

Lord Westminster.<sup>30</sup> A squat cross shape with a high ceiling, the church faced northwards towards a narrow, raised apse. Large high windows supplemented gaslights positioned over the preacher's head. Two ambones, set either side of the apse, echoed the “standard” pulpit and reading desk, allowing interpretation of a visiting preacher's spoken sermon, or, in a silent service, allowing traditionally-fixed activities; e.g., read this from here, preach that from there. With six level rows of pews, three more raised rows towards the rear, and a central aisle, the seating for around one hundred and sixty deaf people was not the original design. The lease stipulated that the building also

<sup>29</sup> Frontispiece to Samuel Smith, “The Silent Services,” in *Talks about Jesus to Our Silent Ones, No 1* (Ayrshire Mission to the Deaf and Dumb, Kilmarnock and Ayr, n.d.).

<sup>30</sup> Item 4, The “Statement” for the Architects, Minutes, November 15, 1869, Trustees General Committee, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, Papers of Royal Association in aid of Deaf People, London Metropolitan Archives: City of London. The minutes refer to “Lord Westminster” and note his “opinion in favour of red brick with black lines or some similar Gothic style,” 52.

be used for the parish poor, and the idea was to have three hundred movable chairs evenly dispersed for the poor, with two hundred and fifty gathered in the centre for deaf people, all within a 45ft- square space. Running services using just one hundred and fifty such chairs in the comparably sized Lecture Hall during the eighteen months when only that room had been in use led to a rethink and the use of fixed pews, however.<sup>31</sup> Alterations were then made as the space was used; when it became clear that the apse carvings behind the preacher seemed to the deaf audience to move, dark curtains were added.<sup>32</sup> With the church fully open, a library and reading room, lectures, a debating club, business meetings, dramatic performances, and numerous games, all became part of deaf life downstairs in the Lecture Hall.

The deaf person's life-progression at Saint Saviour's was similar to the BCP/written sermon model of provision mentioned earlier, but the building had three significant effects. First, the erection of a building in which to gather the signing deaf together meant that the Association's rejection of the idea of the deaf person sat alone and invisible in their parish church with the BCP was given material form. Second, the church's size, location, and design instead rendered the deaf-spaces of its worshippers highly visible—a deaf person in Australia wrote in 1875: "I always wish that I could go see St Saviour's Church, which must be splendid and grand in London."<sup>33</sup> Finally, their hearing future in their heavenly destination meant that the church's various deaf-spaces, impressive as they were, could only be seen as temporary, and their importance had to be evaluated accordingly.

The plot's sixty-year lease had been offered at a peppercorn rent of 10 shillings a year. Unfortunately the approaching lapse of the lease coincided with the redevelopment of Oxford Street as a commercial centre. Sitting opposite the vast edifice of Selfridges store, it became clear to the Association that this prime space would have to be given up. Paid £15,000 by way of compensation, they ploughed the money into a new church in West London, St Saviour's, Acton, and moved on. The building itself was demolished

<sup>31</sup> Item 2, Minutes, undated meeting subsequent to meeting of April 8, 1873, Building Committee, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, Papers of Royal Association in aid of Deaf People, London Metropolitan Archives: City of London.

<sup>32</sup> Item 13, Minutes, November 7 1873, Trustees General Committee, Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, Papers of Royal Association in aid of Deaf People, London Metropolitan Archives: City of London.

<sup>33</sup> "Letter from a Deaf Young Man [C.S.C.] in Australia to Miss Tredennick," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1875, 63.

in June 1923 and the “grand and splendid” edifice that was Britain’s first purpose-built deaf church was no more.<sup>34</sup>

## Viewing the World through Mark 7:32–37

During the project, I turned to blogging as a way to develop ideas about a single relevant text, Mark 7.<sup>35</sup> My point in mentioning it here is to relate an online comment to the effect that “it definitely won the award for the most narrowly focused blog around.”<sup>36</sup> While it is always nice to win stuff, this prize could only be awarded if you were approaching it from a perspective in which New Testament texts were of (relatively) equal interest, with these seven verses an absurdly short passage upon which to concentrate; that is, if you were approaching it from a hearing perspective. Historically, Mark 7 has been anything but equal to other New Testament texts where deaf people are concerned. It has impacted their lives to an extent to which most other churchgoers will have no comparable experience.

I now want to sketch five uses of Mark 7 relating to St Saviour’s: a speech delivered on the day of the foundation-laying, two sermons delivered on the church’s opening day, and an article and a prize-competition essay, both published in Samuel Smith’s *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb* in 1873 and 1874 respectively. I hope they will shed light on Mark 7’s reception among the Victorian deaf, the philanthropists around them, and the professionals in between.

## Five Sketches

### 1. The Laying of the Foundation Stone

On the day of the foundation stone laying, a service took place in the presence of numerous dignitaries, including the Prince and Princess of Wales, and a large contingent of deaf people. The sermon was delivered by the parish incumbent, the Rev. J. Watson Ayre, and referenced three texts: Isa 35:5–

<sup>34</sup> “The Passing of St Saviour’s Oxford Street,” *Ephphatha: A Church Magazine for the Deaf*, 1921, 691–96.

<sup>35</sup> “Gospel of Mark 7:31–37: A blog about responses to Mark 7:31–37 in Victorian London and in biblical scholarship,” <https://gospelofmark73137.blogs.ilrt.org>.

<sup>36</sup> “The most narrowly focused blog around?” <https://gospelofmark73137.blogs.ilrt.org/2015/03/04/the-most-narrowly-focused-blog-around/>.

6, Luke 7:22, and Mark 7.<sup>37</sup> The sermon is lost, but it is easy to imagine how each was presented. The first was presented as a messianic prophecy: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.” The Lukan passage related Jesus’s claim to fulfill that prophecy in his response to John’s disciples: “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that *the* blind see, *the* lame walk, *the* lepers are cleansed, *the* deaf hear, *the* dead are raised, *the* poor have the gospel preached to them.” Mark 7 then provided Ayre with the only account of Jesus healing deaf people in fulfillment of prophecy. That role within a narrow set of biblical texts was already so ubiquitous that we can take it that a Victorian deaf audience would have heard those texts in that combination many times before. A hint as to how Mark 7 was being interpreted that day can be seen in the address delivered by the Archbishop of York, but written by the Association’s Honorary Secretary, Arthur Henry Bather (1829–92), a man deafened at age five by scarlet fever who nonetheless retained some speech, and was a high-ranking Admiralty clerk. Printed in the next day’s *Morning Post*, it was largely an account of the Association’s history, but a brief passage at its close illustrates how Mark 7 was being used to frame St Saviour’s:

The complete help [to the deaf and dumb] is still beyond every effort of science, as well as every prayer of love, and when we sought for a name for this church we could not stop at any on the long list of saints and martyrs. Of the Highest alone is it recorded that it came within the might of His power and the tenderness of His love to open the ear and to set free the tongue.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Harvey Goodwin, Bishop of Carlisle

Church opening day, June 22, 1873, was celebrated with three services—in the morning, afternoon, and evening—with each sermon being delivered orally by a high-ranking clergyman and interpreted simultaneously by the Association’s chaplains, Samuel Smith and William Stainer (1828–98).

<sup>37</sup> “New Church for the Deaf and Dumb,” *The Times*, July 6, 1870.

<sup>38</sup> “New Church for the Deaf and Dumb,” *The Morning Post*, July 6, 1870.



The morning preacher was Harvey Goodwin, Bishop of Carlisle (1818–91).<sup>39</sup> A longstanding supporter of the charity—his younger sister being deaf—Goodwin had himself written a commentary on Mark, published in 1860.<sup>40</sup> The published account of his sermon records his assertion that it was impossible to preach on deafness and dumbness without reference to Mark 7. Interestingly, Goodwin conflated that text with Matthew and Luke's healing of a "dumb man"—"St Mark assured us he was deaf as well as mute"—before concluding that Mark was the "Gospel for the deaf and dumb" because it offered the "greatest precision."<sup>41</sup> His commentary is silent on this conflation.

Fixed in place and set to loom over this space during its fifty-year existence was a large picture of Jesus healing the deaf man of Mark 7 (fig. 3); it was entitled *Ephphatha*, and was painted and donated by a deaf congregant, Thomas Davidson (1842–1919). Goodwin found himself referring to a painting that "preached to the eyes of the deaf and dumb": "It pointed out the feelings of Christ, it pointed out the duties and privileges of the deaf and dumb, it pointed out our own privileges also, and all he could say would be but a commentary on that picture."<sup>42</sup> For Goodwin, "the man to whom our Saviour had given speech was one who could not speak because he was deaf, like those for whom [this] chapel with all its charitable agencies were intended." In what followed, he described the deaf man as being more helpless than the blind man who could at least ask for help. As with Bather's speech, Goodwin distinguished between Jesus's ability to heal and the nineteenth-century church's inability to do so: "we could not, like our Saviour, compel that suffering to come to an end."<sup>43</sup> He added:

The work of the association could not be like the work of Christ—it was no miraculous work, but in many respects, perhaps in all but one, it was like His, for it was based on brotherly love, it was quiet and unobtrusive, and it was designed for the relief of suffering humanity.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> "Report of the Sermon: The Bishop of Carlisle," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1873, 122–24.

<sup>40</sup> Harvey Goodwin, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St Mark* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell & Co, 1860); his discussion of Mark 7:32–37 is on pages 119–21.

<sup>41</sup> "Report [Carlisle]," 122.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

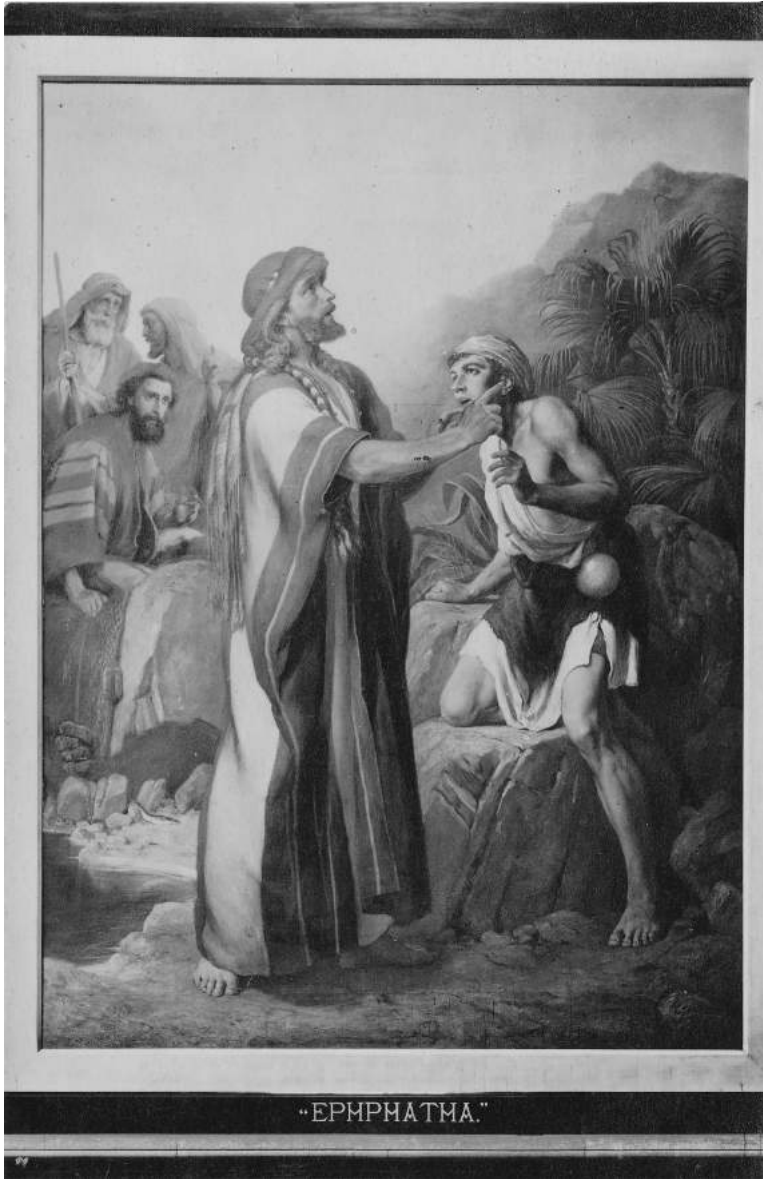


Figure 3: Thomas Davidson's *Ephphatha* (1872) (©Gulliver & Lyons)<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Postcard, held at UCL Ear Institute & Action on Hearing Loss Libraries, at the RNTNE Hospital, 330–336 Grays Inn Rd, London, WC1X 8EE. In fig. 2, the edge of the painting can be seen hanging on the wall behind the preacher and facing the congregation. This gives some indication of its actual size in relation to its surroundings.

### 3. Augustus Dunscombe, Dean of York

The Dean of York, Augustus Dunscombe (1814–80), delivered the evening sermon and focused on the moral choices available to deaf people.<sup>46</sup> Initially casting our text as evidence of prophetic fulfilment, he was swift to point out that even in Jesus's day not all cures were instantaneous. Suffering was a trial used by God to achieve broader purposes, the afflicted working out "His glory." Though Christ was no longer on earth to work healing miracles, Christian ministers were instruments in his hands, relieving suffering, mitigating infirmity, and miraculously reaching the shut-in minds of deaf people and blind people. They strove "to lead people from what was unprofitable to what was profitable—from the gin-shop to the mission-room, and from the mission-room to the church."<sup>47</sup> For Dunscombe, educated deaf people could be influenced for good or ill, and he argued that Jesus's sigh in Mark 7:34 indicated Christ's awareness that the gift given to the man brought with it the possibility of a heavier judgement should he misuse it.

### 4. John William Lowe and "Cophology"

John Lowe (1804–76) was a remarkable man.<sup>48</sup> Deaf from birth, he was privately educated until he was eighteen, eventually becoming a barrister, not, as Smith put it, "a pleader, of course, but... a conveyancer."<sup>49</sup> His linguistic achievements would put most academic specialists working on biblical literature to shame. At age thirty-four, his father asked him for a list of his languages: French (Old and New), Latin, Greek, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, and a slight acquaintance with Gaelic, Irish, Manx, and Welsh. At thirty-five, he commenced Hebrew. He increased his knowledge of some of these by reading translations alongside the Greek New Testament.

In a letter to Smith's *Magazine* in 1873, Lowe suggested a title for the study of deaf people, "Cophology," a combination of *κωφός* and *λόγος*.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> "Report of the Sermon: By the Hon and Very Rev. The Dean of York," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1873, 154–55.

<sup>47</sup> Anon, "Report [York]," 154.

<sup>48</sup> W. J. Lowe, "Biographies of the Deaf: John William Lowe," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1876, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Deaf and Dumb*, 63.

<sup>50</sup> John Lowe, "Cophology," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1873, 13–14.

The latter was self-explanatory, but he offered a rationale for using the former. Comparing the Greek with the English, Lowe pointed out that κωφὸς sometimes means “deaf” (Matt 11:5; Mark 7:37; Luke 7:22 [all with ἀκούω]) and that sometimes it means “dumb” (Matt 9:32; 12:22; 15:31 [all with λαλέω]) depending upon context or verb. On two occasions—Mark 7:37 and Mark 9:25—he noted that “deaf” and “dumb” do appear together “as in one term,” with κωφὸς as “deaf” alongside ἀλάλος as “dumb.” Lowe concluded that κωφὸς may mean either deaf or dumb when used alone, but when used with ἀλάλος it could only mean deaf. To him, this made κωφὸς “a very convenient term for either deaf or dumb, or even both, as the two defects generally occur together in most persons of that description and are commonly supposed to be akin to and inseparable from each other.”<sup>51</sup> This conclusion was reached despite his apparent recognition that the term is not unequivocally used that way in the New Testament. Lowe knew well that some who were deafened in later infancy could retain their speech, entering into a class of deaf people whom the Victorians termed “semi-mutes.” His use of κωφὸς was therefore clearly intended to refer to those who had been born deaf, as he had been, or to those who had not retained their language skills after being deafened in earlier childhood, with both being included in the class of people whom the Victorians called “deaf-mutes.” Though he did not refer to the man of Mark 7:32 explicitly in the letter, the strong implication of his argument was that the man healed by Jesus was a “deaf-mute,” either born deaf or deafened in early infancy. Lowe signed his letter “Philocophus,” translated as “the deaf and dumb man’s friend.” In a footnote, Smith called Lowe a “deaf-mute” and added enough detail for modern researchers to identify him with confidence.<sup>52</sup>

## 5. Richard Rowland Williams

Seeing education as important, the Association ran essay competitions, occasionally publishing the best. Richard Rowland Williams’s essay *Ephphatha* was published in Smith’s *Magazine* in 1874 and provides a commentary on Mark 7.<sup>53</sup> Williams (1825–79) was born, lived, and died in Liverpool, and was deafened and blinded in one eye as child when vitriol was thrown in his

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Rowland Williams, “Ephphatha: One of the Essays sent in Competition for the Prize,” *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1874, 54–55.

face during a squabble at school. He “retained in some degree the power of vocal utterance, and this *he never lost*, but constantly exercised in communicating with his family, and relations, and with workmen among whom his duties lay.”<sup>54</sup> On entering the Liverpool Institution as a pupil in 1835, he was taught to sign, before becoming a teacher there in 1841. Leaving his post in 1844 for “more active employment,” Williams gained the post that he would hold for thirty-five years, the rest of his working life, of timekeeper, working for the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board<sup>55</sup> Married to a hearing woman and with a large family, Williams was described in an obituary in 1880 as having “a great command of language” and as being “very ready with his pen,” and the published testimonial to his character closed by describing him as a “good and useful man,” sufficient praise for any Victorian deaf man.<sup>56</sup>

In the essay, Williams identified the man addressed by Jesus as one who was afflicted “like myself” and regarded the word spoken to him, *Ephphatha*, as one that should be engraved on the heart of every “mute.” The meaning of Jesus’s look towards heaven was plain to the “deaf and dumb,” so well-versed in reading “silent language”; it was “very intelligible and significant, even to an uneducated deaf mute”; all the benefits came from above! For Williams, the healing carried out was “one of the many stupendous and wonderful miracles [Christ] performed, which did not fail to astonish the spectators, for not only did He confer hearing and articulation [speech], *but gave him at once the language of his country and its signification.*”<sup>57</sup> “[I]n those days... there were no institutions, schools, or systems for their education,” he also noted.<sup>58</sup> The second part of his essay focused upon Jesus’s message ringing down the centuries in such a way that even without his healing power the deaf were brought into the “fold of salvation.” *Ephphatha* was symbolic of Jesus’s work and Williams concluded that “we shall all hear that word someday, when it shall burst open our prison house and our liberated spirits shall wing their flight to those glorious realms beyond the sky.”<sup>59</sup>

His choice of phrasing about “the language of his country” and about “signification” suggests that Williams did not see the man of Mark 7 as be-

<sup>54</sup> “Biographies of the Deaf and Dumb: Richard R. Williams, 1825–79,” *Deaf and Dumb Magazine*, 1880, 56 (author’s emphasis).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–58.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, “Ephphatha,” 54 (my emphasis).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

ing deafened so late that he had retained a working knowledge of a previously spoken language. Whatever his use of “like myself” and the relatively-open term “mute” meant—and it could have been very little, with Williams perhaps seeing the man as being deaf from birth and “like him” only in a general sense—their use could certainly not have been intended to characterize the Markan man as someone whose knowledge of language was so developed that he did not need the specific miraculous intervention that Williams was ascribing to Jesus. Williams must have recognized that his own language capabilities were developed to such a high level of competence—not just through his retained speech and through whatever writing skills he had acquired at school pre-accident, but also through his training at an Institution for deaf people and his later use of sign language—that he himself had no need of that kind of intervention. As he had already informed his readers, such Institutions did not exist in the ancient world, and it was common knowledge that illiteracy was the norm in the biblical world. It is also doubtful that Williams would have believed that people in that setting would have been aware that beyond a certain age speech could be retained post-deafness, albeit with great effort. The logic of his argument is that if the man had been born with hearing and had retained knowledge of his language and of its significance following the “event” which deafened him, they could only have been at a level wholly inadequate for either proving that his healing had really taken place or for equipping him for his future life of speech and hearing. For Williams, the man’s condition, whatever it was exactly, must have been such as to require Jesus’s interventions in the two specific areas of language knowledge and of signification.

### How the “New Testament” Shaped Deaf People at St Saviour’s, Oxford Street

Bather’s speech and the sermons by Goodwin and Dunscombe publicly acknowledged the healing ministry of Jesus, but subverted it. In their philosophical world, physical healing was unavailable to deaf people. Science could not cure and neither could prayer. In an 1873 magazine article, Samuel Smith mocked the miracles claimed for Lourdes, describing them as “alleged miracles” and concluding that “if the above be true, ought not all the deaf and dumb in the world to make a pilgrimage..., and be cured?”<sup>60</sup> Accep-

<sup>60</sup> Samuel Smith, asterisked footnote to “A Miracle,” *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1874, 176; cf. the title for this article, “Alleged Miracles,” in the 1874 index (iv).

tance of the view that only Jesus had healed a deaf person did not mean any kind of disconnect between Jesus's ministry and that of the Association, its missionaries, and its building, however. Instead, Bather as its Honorary Secretary, and Goodwin and Dunscombe as its invited preachers, all portrayed its activities as a continuation of Christ's mission to the deaf world. For all three, St Saviour's, named in honour of Jesus, embodied in physical form Christ's ongoing intervention. Entering its porch was to be understood by Victorian deaf as their entering into the redemptive space that existed around Jesus during his earthly ministry.

To us it might seem ironic, to say the least, that these men were unconcerned about how their view that healing was unavailable to Victorian deaf would be received. In fact, any dissonance was smoothed away by three consequences of the Association's appropriation of Jesus. First, "healing" in the sense of ameliorating the effects of an afflicted body had been expanded to include all manner of support mechanisms provided by the charity. Second, "healing" had been downgraded, since all involved knew that deaf people's gaining of communication skills through education, in many ways an equivalent to physical healing, did not inevitably lead to their choosing a heavenward path. Moral dissolution was seen as just as big an issue for the Victorian educated deaf person as it was for the rest of London's poor; the healing of the deaf man in Mark 7 did not guarantee him a place in eternal rest! Third, "healing" had not been lost; it had only been deferred. As I briefly mentioned earlier, it was a common expectation that the deaf would become hearing when they entered into heaven. This last aspect, present in Williams's essay and ubiquitous in Victorian deaf writings about the future, is absent from Goodwin and Dunscombe's sermons. However, if we look at the Rev. Francis Garden's afternoon sermon on the day of the church's opening—on 1 Cor 15:44: "There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body"—we find this:<sup>61</sup>

What joy then for [the maimed, the halt, and blind, together with the greater numbers bound in the heavy chain of infirmity and disease] to know that this material body was but a temporal tabernacle and that there was a spiritual body—a body which could do more for those who were clothed with it than the finest and completest earthly framework could do for any one..., a

<sup>61</sup> "Report of the Sermon: By the Rev. Francis Garden, M.A.," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1873, 139.

spiritual body, the house not made with human hands, eternal,  
in the Heavens!

All who heard Garden's sermon would have been well aware that their future spiritual body could hear and sing!

If we turn to Lowe and Williams, we can see that the link between Mark 7 and the Victorian deaf was no one-way street. For the Greek-literate Lowe, his desire to name the study of deafness led him to discuss the New Testament and its Greek terms for that “afflicted class.” Building on the polyvalence of *κωφὸς*, he implicitly inserted the deaf-mute of his own day back into Mark 7, defining the healed man as one born deaf or as one deafened in early infancy, and not as one deafened in later infancy with retained speech, or as one deafened later-in-life as the surprise attendees at St Saviour's mentioned earlier were. Lowe did not develop the implications of this move for the Markan passage, but Williams did. For him, the “stupendous and wonderful” miracle of Mark 7 involved four elements, not just the physical healing of “hearing” and of “articulation,” but also the conferral of a cognitive knowledge of “the language” and of its “signification,” its relationship to the physical and conceptual world in which the man lived. Aware that no teaching institutions for deaf people existed “in those days” and that illiteracy was the norm, Williams knew that a man born deaf or deafened in early infancy would have had no way to acquire a competent knowledge of the language of his place or of its practical use. Fixing his ears and tongue alone would not have allowed this man to speak and to be comprehended that day. For Williams, Jesus's miracle was much, much bigger than that.

### A Serendipitous Bonus?

Turning to recent commentators, I was immediately struck by a note about a single ninth-century manuscript, 0131, in Adela Yarbro Collins's *Hermeneia* commentary. Its verse 33 reads: “he spit on his fingers and put (them) into the ears of the deaf man and touched the tongue of the man with impeded speech.”<sup>62</sup> This move echoes a larger tradition that sees the deaf people and the dumb people in v. 37 as two separate groups—e.g., in Joel Marcus's translation: “He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak”<sup>63</sup> —

<sup>62</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 369.

<sup>63</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (Anchor Bible Commentary; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 471.



but otherwise it is about as marginal as it gets. Commentators agree that v. 32 deals with one person.

The second thing I noticed was the too-easy deployment of contemporary knowledge and attitudes. Here are some examples:

Vincent Taylor: “No difficulty arises [with Jesus’s use of *Eph-phatha*] from the fact that the man was deaf for either he was not completely deaf or he was able to read the lips of Jesus.”<sup>64</sup>

This reference to “lip reading” ascribes to the ancient world a technique that arose in Spain in the seventeenth century.

Robert Gundry: “Throughout vv. 32, 33, 35, 37 Mark maintains the order deafness-muteness, which represents cause and effect.”<sup>65</sup>

This use of cause and effect overlooks the fact that it was not until the early twentieth century that muteness was widely recognized as a secondary effect of deafness.

John Donohue and Daniel Harrington: “The Greek ‘deaf’ (κωφός) means completely unable to hear, while *μογιλάλος* (lit. ‘speaking with difficulty’), depicts accurately the suffering of those born deaf even today.”<sup>66</sup>

But “lit. ‘speaking with difficulty’” only matches the sounds of those born deaf if they have been trained in the oralist tradition that first arose in the seventeenth century.

Not all such deployments are as anachronistic, however. These two quotations introduce a naturalistic sensibility that is more helpful to the discussion.

Robert Gundry: “Someone born a deaf mute has never heard a language spoken and therefore has not learned the motor skills necessary to speaking a language.”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, 2nd ed. (New York: St Martin’s, 1966), 355.

<sup>65</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 1:390.

<sup>66</sup> John R. Donohue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 239.

<sup>67</sup> Gundry, *Mark*, 390.

William Lane: “If the man had been born deaf and mute he would not have learned to speak and would possess no concept of language.”<sup>68</sup>

What interests me about the work of Gundry and Lane is how these naturalistic views of deaf people are then used to construct the man of Mark 7 and thus define the nature of Jesus’s miracle.

I want to begin my discussion of how best to understand the man and the miracle with a framework suggested in Charles Cranfield’s commentary on Mark. After stating that κωφός means “deaf,” Cranfield wrote that μογιλάλον “strictly” means “speaking with difficulty, having an impediment in speech.”<sup>69</sup> Why did he use the word “strictly”? That word was used because while the occurrence of ἐλάλει ὀρθῶς in v. 35 supports a meaning of “impeded speech,” the appearance of ἀλάλους in v. 37 supports an alternative meaning, “dumb.” It is the interaction of these three verses—vv. 32, 35, and 37—that drives what follows. Cranfield himself did not resolve the puzzle.

One resolution erring in favour of v. 35 is that of Yarbro Collins. She cites BAGD in support of twin assertions that κωφός may mean “deaf” or “dumb” depending on context, and that μογιλάλον can mean either the “ability to speak only with difficulty (‘impeded in speech’)” or “the inability to articulate (‘mute’).” Verse 35, however, leads her to conclude that: “the man could speak beforehand but not correctly.” In this context then, κωφός means either “deaf” or “hard of hearing.”<sup>70</sup> For Yarbro Collins, the man was not born deaf because he could speak, however badly. Jesus’s miracle was restoring the man’s lost or poor hearing and correcting his speech.

Referring to earlier scholarship foreshadowing Yarbro Collins’s position, Gundry suggests that such readings may “underinterpret the miracle.”<sup>71</sup> According to him, the tension between Cranfield’s three verses is best resolved by seeing ἀλάλους, “unspeaking”, in v. 37—a word play with λαλεῖν—as a synonym for v. 32’s μογιλάλον, “the inarticulate grunts of a deaf mute.” It is these “inarticulate grunts” that form the background for the “speaking plainly” of v. 25.<sup>72</sup> In the light of his comment about motor skills, what

<sup>68</sup> W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 266.

<sup>69</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 251.

<sup>70</sup> Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 370.

<sup>71</sup> Gundry, *Mark*, 390.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

Gundry calls Jesus's "stupendous" miracle of healing a deaf-mute<sup>73</sup> involved not just the restoring of the man's hearing and the correcting of his speech, but the provision of the motor skills needed to enable him to speak at all.

Lane's insight that a man born deaf would "possess no concept of [a spoken] language" renders Gundry's conclusion problematic, however. More than "motor skills" would have been needed for Gundry's miracle to work. Indeed, so much more that Lane retreats from a Gundry-like position altogether, concluding that the man had "become deaf later in life apparently as a result of disease or injury and could speak only with great effort," a Yarbrow Collins-like man and miracle.<sup>74</sup>

Time to introduce our serendipitous bonus from Victorian London. Richard Williams would have doubtless regarded the positions of Yarbrow Collins and Lane as miracle-lite, their Jesus's powers constrained by their inability to imagine how Mark 7 could portray a man born deaf or deafened very early in life. He would also have been puzzled by Gundry's failure to realize what the life of such a man involved. The key to Williams's "stupendous and wonderful" miracle of Mark 7 was that it involved more than a physical healing of "hearing" and of "speech" and the provision of the motor skills needed; it involved the giving of a cognitive knowledge of "the language" and of its "signification", its relationship to the world in which the man lived. Jesus's "stupendous" miracle was larger than even Gundry allows and much, much larger than Collins and Lane allow.

Williams's Jesus has turned out to be a deeply transformative Jesus. In an ancient world where many, if not most, people were disabled by disease or injury, the man of Mark 7 had been turned, not into what Joel Marcus calls in his commentary a "normal human being,"<sup>75</sup> but into something rather different. Everyone healed by Jesus had been restored to health in a way that those around them had not. "Normal," if we agree to allow for the moment such a contested term, they certainly were not. Being deaf from birth or from early infancy meant that this man had not been "restored," however. He had become instead an augmented man, a human being who had been corrected to the max by Jesus. Since the educated Victorian deaf Christians who were to enter heaven and hear had already accepted the gospel through a learned visual method of communication, through sign language,

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>74</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 266.

<sup>75</sup> Marcus, *Mark 18*, 479.

Williams's version of the miracle of Mark 7 surpassed even that wondrous event. Williams's Jesus had performed the most amazing miracle that the Victorians could ever imagine taking place in relation to deaf people.<sup>76</sup> It is little wonder that *Ephphatha* took pride of place on the wall of St Saviour's, Oxford Street, during its fifty-year existence.<sup>77</sup>

## A "Better Land" for Biblical Studies

This attempt to apply reception exegesis to St Saviour's Oxford Street may not convince those interested in the historical-critical meaning of the New Testament, but hopefully it is a useful contribution to debate about Mark 7:32–37. At the very least, it should encourage us to engage the passage in

<sup>76</sup> Its only possible equivalent would be the entry of uneducated "deaf-mutes" into a hearing heaven. Such an event would not have been entertained by many mission-oriented Victorian Christians, however; the pressing need to save God-less individuals from their sin was a primary motivating factor in their taking of the Gospel to the lost, whether hearing or deaf. In a sermon of Samuel Smith's addressed directly to a deaf audience, for example, we read that: "we have all broken God's commandment, and we have all neglected our duty to God.... All this is sin and if we continue in sin, we cannot be saved.... What then must we do to be saved? What is the first step towards heaven?... It is this: we must give up all sin.... So the first step towards heaven is REPENTENCE. What is the second? It is FAITH" (Samuel Smith, "Sermon 1: By the Editor. 'What must I do to be saved?'—Acts xvi. 31," *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, 1873, 11). Without hearing the Gospel, without repenting, and without having faith in Christ, the position of the uneducated deaf person could very easily be seen as being beyond the bounds of Christian salvation. For some, however, the fate of those unevangelized altogether might have appeared less clear. (On the question of hell in Victorian England, see Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974].)

<sup>77</sup> Modern readers, especially those interested in Deaf/deaf culture, will find Williams's miracle in particular more ethically problematic, however. The notion of people deaf from birth or from early infancy becoming hearing is inevitably embedded in the web of assumptions held by many hearing people about what would be best for such people, namely that they are "disabled" and should be "fixed" in some way. While that viewpoint is a prominent one, a viewpoint that explicitly rejects that approach and instead sees Deaf people as members of a linguistic and thus a cultural minority (cf. e.g., H. Lane, "Ethnicity, Ethics, and the Deaf-World," *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 10 (2005): 291–310) is more likely to understand Jesus's actions as being a prefiguration of the destruction of an irreplaceable human culture, and hence as a potentially dangerous precedent for those developing "curative" technologies which may similarly eradicate discrete types of humanity, including deaf people, in the near future. Needless to say, the miracle of Yarbrow Collins and Lane is less provocative, the restoration of hearing to a culturally-hearing man being viewed as unproblematic by pretty much everyone.

the light of the insights of these hitherto marginalized interpreters, many of whom, being deaf themselves, had experienced it as a fundamentally central part of their everyday lives.

I want to end by asking a difficult question about reception exegesis and its importance for the discipline of biblical studies, however. I described Professor Taylor's book earlier as one of the most important in New Testament Studies in recent years and I won't take that back. Getting eminent scholars to chance their arm is a real achievement. But how much work can reception exegesis really do for the discipline of biblical studies in a broader sense? Particular exegetical arguments may be chastened by such insights, but the work involved is narrow in application. Who, but biblical scholars and their usual readers will care whether Richard Williams fills in a gap left by the commentators? Reception exegesis cannot generate new audiences or new funds for biblical studies.

With humanities under heavy financial pressure, the discipline faces a slow decline and I suggest that neither traditional historical-critical work nor reception exegesis can halt this. It is into this void that I offer the St Saviour's Leverhulme Trust-funded Project Grant in particular and a broad view of reception history in general for consideration by biblical scholars. The detailed study of how the "New Testament" helped to construct the deaf people of Victorian London that is laid out in the first half of this article does, I hope, add considerable bite to Paul Joyce's view that "biblical scholars should not define their work too narrowly and refuse to step outside the circle of their expertise, strictly defined." Past experience has shown me—and indeed has shown many others working in reception history—that beyond the discipline's narrow borders there exist academics in many other disciplines who are valiantly struggling with the concepts and approaches that are taken for granted in New Testament studies. It is my contention that biblical scholars should not hesitate to use what they know to find and work with such people who can then in turn support them to get the kinds of help that their discipline now so desperately needs.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>78</sup> I would like to offer thanks to those who read early versions of this paper—James Crossley, Jonathan Downing, Deane Galbraith, Mike Gulliver, and Scott Midson—and the audience at the British New Testament Conference in Chester in September 2016 for their helpful comments and suggestions. Any foibles that remain are entirely my own responsibility.