

Topic 6: The Man Born Blind (John 9:1-41)

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Historical situations

There are two historical settings. One is the setting when Jesus interacted with people and the other one is the situation encountered by the author. In the Gospel of John these two settings were blurred. The author portrays that Jesus's party and the Jewish were opposed to each other. According to Brown (1970), the Gospel of John is characterized by Jesus' intention of replacing Jewish religious institution with his own, such as the cleansing of the Temple. This act was more than purging an abuse; rather, Jesus was attacking the Temple and the Jewish religious tradition. At first glance it is strange because Jesus and His disciples are also Jews. However, when the Gospel was written the Johannine community was breaking away from the synagogue, and therefore it carries a tone of **us vs. them**.

This reflects in the story of healing the blind man in several ways. First, the Pharisees were skeptical of Jesus's healing. Second, the parents of the formerly blind man were afraid of the Pharisees because anyone who recognized Jesus as the Messiah would be thrown out of the synagogue. At the end, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their spiritual blindness.

The early church might face attacks from the Jewish community. Some Jewish Christians started being excommunicated from their synagogues in AD 85. This story might be used to convey the message that Christians and the Jews are different in essence because the Pharisees had rejected the Messiah. Nevertheless, Christians were encouraged to keep their faith by following the footsteps of Jesus, who had been attacked by the Pharisees before.

Form:

This story also has a unique form, **Johannine discourse**, which is not found in the synoptic gospels. In the Gospel of John, Jesus was fully aware of his divine nature and mission, and He intended to reveal God through himself. For example, He said that he is the light of the world, rather than saying that "I am like the light."

Misunderstandings:

- The disciples thought that physical handicap must be caused by sins. This idea might be inherited from traditional Jewish teaching (Keener, 1993).
- The Pharisees thought that they could "see" but indeed they were "blind."

Symbolism:

- **Day and night:** When Jesus said "day" and "night," obviously he didn't mean the time periods within 24 hours. Rather, "day" was the period that He, as the light of the world, shone upon the world. "Night" was the period that he was absent. In the Jewish literature "light of the world" is associated with Israel, Jerusalem, the patriarchs, the Messiah, God, famous rabbis and the law. More importantly, it means something of ultimate significance. During the celebrations of the Feast of Tabernacles many torches were used to light up the city (Keener, 1993). In this passage Jesus implied his ultimate importance for his presence brought the light to the day.
- **Dirty materials and washing:** Jesus put dirty materials (mud and saliva) on the man's eyes and then told him to wash it. Afterwards, he could see. This event probably happened at the last day

of the Feast of Tabernacles, and the water of Siloam was the sacred water for this feast (Keener, 1993). Jesus was capable of remote healing. Why didn't he simply shout, "Open your eyes!" Perhaps this was a symbolic act: Our spiritual eyesight was obscured by unclean things and people needed to be cleaned by a divine power in order to see God. The clay may also be a symbol of creation (cf. Job 4:19; 10:9).

- **Water of Siloam:** The meaning of the word "Siloam" is "Sent." It may symbolize Jesus as the one who is sent by God (9:4), and therefore there may be additional symbolism of baptism in the name of Jesus (Losie, 2015, Personal communication).
- **Sight and blindness:** In this passage physical blindness symbolizes spiritual blindness, which is incapability of seeing the "light" of the truth, whereas physical eyesight means spiritual sight. In the Old Testament light is frequently used as a symbol of the divine presence and salvation (Ex 13:21; Ps 27:1; 36:9; Is 60:19), as well as the future eschatological salvation (Shirbroun, 1992). In John's Gospel "light" refers not so much to God's holiness; rather, this is about the revelation of his love in Christ and the penetration of divine love into lives darkened by sin. And Christ proclaimed himself as 'the light of the world' (Jn. 8:12; 9:5) (Ellis, 1996). Taking all these into account, it is no wonder John used the story of opening the eyes of a blind man by Jesus to illustrate spiritual sight and spiritual light.

Irony: Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. It is ironic. Jesus implied that the Pharisees could see in a physical sense, but they were blind in a spiritual sense.

2C. Identity of Jesus

God and Jesus are **ontological equals**, but Jesus is **functionally subordinate** to the Father. Specifically, Jesus did things according to the Father and **revealed the glory of God**. In this passage he clearly did so because His healing of the blind man was to display the works of God. Later Jesus asked the man whether he believed in the Son of Man and then he revealed his identity. In addition, the story gradually reveals the identity of Jesus. The man called Jesus (v 11), a prophet (v 17), the Messiah (v 22), from God (v 33), and finally Son of Man (v 35; cf. 1:51) (Loise, 2015, Personal communication)

Difference

This story is different from other stories found in the synoptic gospels in several ways. Matthew is a Jewish gospel whereas Luke is written for the gentiles. In Luke some Jewish elders acted as the mediator between Jesus and the centurion. In that story at least those Jewish elders believed in Jesus's healing power, and Jesus didn't refuse to talk to them. However, John shows a very **strong anti-Jewish sentiment**. In John 9 the image of the Pharisees is extremely negative. I can sense a very decisive Christian departure from Judaism.

Second, in the Gospel of John **Jesus was more assertive of his divine nature and mission**, and he used many "I am" statements to reveal himself. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke after the transfiguration Jesus didn't want the disciples to tell people who he is. However, in John 9 he implied that He is the light because when he was present it was day. He also told the formerly blind man that he is the Son of Man.

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