Louise J. Lawrence


This book takes a much-needed critical look at the way in which biblical scholarship has chosen to “turn a blind eye” and read disabled characters only as passive victims in need of healing. Using performance and embodiment studies, ethnographic studies of the Dalits in India, disability studies, and sensory anthropology, Lawrence challenges our simplistic and reductionist view of the way in which we connect our sensory perception to only particular sensory organs. She makes the point that our senses are multifaceted, complex, and dynamic, thereby heightening our sensitivities towards the way in which we see and interpret sensory-disabled characters in the Gospels. Lawrence also makes a compelling argument and contends that we see characters with sensory disabilities not as helpless victims, but rather as persons with agency who resist, redefine, and subvert traditional definitions of ability and disability.

Redefining the traditional way in which the lack of sight (i.e., blindness) is understood as limited only to the eyes, Lawrence notes that seeing is reterritorialized as hands become the new eyes of the sensory disabled characters in Mark 8:22-26, Mark 10:46-52, and John 9:1-34. Traditionally, blindness has been seen as a physical deformity, a physical defect that can only be fixed through the gift of sight. However, by extending the gift of seeing into touch, Lawrence in her reading of these passages breaks open the way in which able-bodied characters like Jesus experience the world of the blind on their terms. Lawrence uses the example of Maurice Pervin, the protagonist in D.H. Lawrence’s “The Blind Man,” who forces the sighted Bertie to experience his face through touch and in doing so subverts the way in which bodies that see through eyes now experience sight through their touch (p. 52). Rather than seeing Jesus’ touch as authoritative and healing in these passages the way in which it has been traditionally interpreted; Lawrence argues for a different reading of Jesus. Thus, when Jesus touches the blind man in Mark and John, his touch subverts the hierarchy between the blind body and the sighted body. The able-bodied Jesus in these passages not only participates in the world of the blind, sensory-disabled characters but also subverts and resists the way in which sight is perceived, constructed, and limited only to the eyes.

Lawrence exposes the way in which Mark 7:31-37 has been interpreted to privilege the world of hearing, speech, and the recognition of formal language over and above the experience of the deaf and mute person, who engages in a language that is performed rather than spoken. Reading Mark 7: 31-37 alongside deaf performance helps Lawrence construct an alternative interpretation
that not only resists the traditional way in which these texts have been understood, but also sensitizes readers to the way in which deaf and mute people are forced to assimilate into the dominant culture. This is especially seen in the way in which people who are deaf are constantly “normalized” through “oralist education, the insertion of cochlear implants, or other such assimilations to the hearing world” (p. 64). Lawrence further argues that Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren’s analogy of listening with the third ear can be used to interpret Mark 7:31-37. Jesus’ removal of the deaf man from the public space must be seen as “a move away from the hearing culture and a context in which hearing and meaning are perceived as unified” (p. 68). The word Ephphatha, a foreign word when translated by the author, plays a “part in distancing the audience from the simple equivalence between words and meanings” (p. 69). This word that needs translation blurs the lines between the hearing world (with sounds) and the deaf world (without sounds). Hearing and speaking are deconstructed as Jesus reconfigures the way in which speech is no longer merely oral but is an action that is seen and performed in a space where the rules of the dominant do not apply. Such a reading successfully resists the way in which hearing and speaking are constructed and also successfully argues for the liberation of the character of the deaf and mute man in Mark 7.

In her chapter, “The Stench of Untouchability,” Lawrence reads the story of the leper (Mark 1: 40-5/Matt. 8:1-4/Luke 5:12-15), Legion (Mark 5: 1-20/Luke 8:26-39), and the leaky woman (Mark 5:25-34/Matt. 9:20-2/Luke 8:43-47) in conjunction with the experience of the “untouchables” in India. The “untouchables” or Dalits are born in the lowest caste and are identified by their occupation, which includes working on “foul-smelling animal hides, collect[ing] and dispos[ing] of rotting corpses and stinking excrement” (p. 83). The Dalit body, as a result, is depicted as dirty and capable of pollution. At the same time, this pollution is empowering because the mere touch or the shadow of a Dalit has the capacity to pollute even the highest caste. The three characters in Mark 1: 40-45, Mark 5:1-20, and Mark 5:25-34, Lawrence argues, are empowered by their pollution; invoking “repulsion in others, their conditions also ironically arm them with sensory tactics which can at times function as ‘poisoned weapons’” (p. 97). Reading these texts in conjunction with the Dalit protest in 2010 at the Savanur Station, where Dalits covered their bodies with human excrement and protested the commercial complex that was going to be built upon their homes, Lawrence redefines the way in which pollution becomes a fluid concept that is engaged and shared to create resistance by the socially marginalized.

Lawrence’s book is an important contribution to biblical scholarship because it exposes the way in which we have traditionally read and interpreted