

J. Duncan M. Derrett

John 9:6 Read With Isaiah 6:10; 20:9

We are glad to present yet another brief note from the researches of Dr Derrett, former Professor of Oriental Laws in the University of London and a noted exponent of the significance of Jewish background for understanding many an obscurity in the New Testament.

I do not intend to explain Jn. 9:1–41, the marvellous story of the Man Born Blind and his courage. I wish to communicate the clue to Jesus' anointing (*epechrisen*) the Man's eyes with clay. That he was attempting some primitive surgery is nowhere suggested. The question is how we approach such stories, without surmise as to what element or aspect may go back to reminiscence. We are prepared to understand John to be an adept at allusion to scripture;¹ we have been given evidence that the Johannine school employed this technique, in particular in reference to Is. 6:9–10,² an intriguing and justly famous passage;³ and we have recent confirmation that aggadic as well as halakhic midrash figured in the assembling and demonstration of primitive Christian material.⁴ I am impressed by the number of occasions when Jesus is reported as putting into concrete action metaphors from Old-Testament prophetic material. No previous commentator has observed this present instance.

My starting-point is a piece of Qumranic Hebrew, now decyphered, translated and printed by Eisenman and Wise,⁵ in the so-called *Sons of Righteousness (Proverbs-4Q424)*, a fragment which had not been annotated in print before.⁶ At frag. 2, lines 3–4 we read

¹ J. D. M. Derrett, *The Victim* (Shipston-on-Stour, 1993), ch. 9.

² J. M. Lieu, 'Blindness in the Johannine tradition', *NTS* 34 (1988), 83–95; id., 'Scripture and tradition in the Johannine epistles', *ibid.* 39 (1993), 458–477.

³ C. A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9–10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (JSOT SS 64: Sheffield, 1989).

⁴ A. Del Agua, 'The narrative of the transfiguration as a derashic scenification of a faith confession (Mk. 9, 2–8 par.)', *NTS* 39 (1993), 340–354.

⁵ Robert H. Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Shaftesbury, 1992), 167.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

ʾyš šw^c ʾnyym ʾl tšlh lhzw^t byšrym k[ʾy ʾyš] kbd ʾzn ʾl tšlh ldrwš
mšpṭ . . .

They translate: 'Do not send the man of poor eyesight to look for the Upright, fo[r . . . Do not send the poor of hearing to seek Judgement . . .]' The material in brackets is conjectural and doubtful. For 'man of poor eyesight' read 'man whose eyes have been closed'.

From the two lines it is evident that the author alluded to Is. 6:10:

hašmēn lēv-hāʾām hazeh w^c ʾāznāyw hakhbēd w^c ʾēynāyw hāšāʾ . . .
'Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and close their eyes . . .'

The strange verb for 'close', viz. Š^c (Gesenius), actually means 'paste up' as by plastering. It appears again at Is. 29:9 but with different resonances: . . . *hištaʿašʿû wāšoʿû*, which can be translated either 'cry out and cry', or 'blind yourselves and be blind', or, as a midrashist will argue, conceivably both according to context.

The lexicographers have had the greatest difficulty with the verb in question up to the year 1614;⁷ and things have not improved since. We are faced by the débris of conjugations of several similar roots, which cannot be disentangled, presenting the aggadist with a gift. The European reader will remember that the romanization of Hebrew and Aramaic words can give an appearance of wild diversity, when the root letters in fact bring them, willy nilly, into a startling proximity. One thing is certain, namely that to close eyes with plaster, such as is immediately removed by bathing,⁸ is to take Is. 6:10; 29:9; 30:20 and other verses using the vocabulary we are discussing, by the throat and make them work. A man actually *born* blind (cf. Ps. 58:3) is an unique opportunity, as we shall see.

We shall consider the Hebrew and Aramaic roots Š^c and ŠW^c, bearing in mind that certain lexicographers are ready to tackle all the evidence under one, with references to the others. Let us list the material:

(A) Š^c I (Gesenius): Make another blind by closing his/her eyes: Is. 29:9; Ps. 39:14 (?); 4Q424 frag.2, line 3.

(B) Š^c I: Plaster, smooth over: Is. 6:10. The same root in Aramaic has the additional meaning 'to appease, console'. There is also the (shadow?) Hebrew root Š^cH to the same purpose (Is. 32:3; 41:10 midrash). The Aramaic forms š^cēy and šūʿa have the meaning 'plaster (over)'; and the lexicographers are interested to find that in Hebrew as well as Aramaic ŠW^c means 'cry out', viz. for help, with

⁷ Sanctes Pagninus, *Thesaurus Linguae Sanctae sive Lexicon Hebraicum* (Geneva, 1614), coll. 2901-5.

⁸ *Mishnah*, *Miqwāʾōt* IX.2.

the impression of near-despair.⁹ What plastering, closing up, has to do with crying out is left to the imagination.

(C) *Š^{cc}II* (Gesenius): Play, rejoice, cause joy, delight: Ps. 94:19; 119:16, 47, 70; Is. 11:8; 66:12 (cf. 5:7) and *passim*. Modern Hebrew words for delight use this root.

I shall not speculate whether the Man Born Blind had those congenital cataracts which suggest 'wall-eye'. But we can speculate what John thought Jesus was doing. To the average modern man the metaphor of being (spiritually) blind applies equally well to people who have never seen. But perhaps it was not equally obvious to the ancients, who were distinguishing between seeing with one's (tutored) eyes and seeing with insight (see Is. 11:3 which makes this point). In any case it is over the sighted that the dilemma hangs. Unless they are enlightened with some special light their physical sightedness can be an actual handicap. A person born blind, suddenly enabled to see, will pass through the unenlightened stage (symbolised by mental confusion), becomes subject to Yahweh's impatience with obduracy, and can then be freed from that handicap and see with corrected vision (as demonstrated at Mk. 8:23-25) —appropriately to the messianic age.

Jesus intends to shut those eyes which are fit to be opened, leaving shut those who never imagined they were blind (Jn. 9:39). He puts into action a passage which is obviously fit to be taken messianically, Is. 32:3: *w' lo' tiš'eynāh 'eyney ro'im*, 'And the eyes of those that see shall not be closed (made blind/plastered) . . .'.¹⁰

Providing a sign for his contemporaries, he uses the method of the Creator (as is known), making clay, infusing it with breath (ditto), and providing the moisture for which that dust had been waiting.¹⁰ That spitting might have magical properties is neither here nor there. Now the time had come for the threats of Isaiah which are also promises to materialize. The Man's eyes are physically closed up without affecting his prophetic ability (Is. 29:10), and then these will be *opened up* (Ps. 146:8; Is. 35:5; Jn. 9:10, 14, 17, etc.), by washing off the clay which is also plaster in his 'baptism'.¹¹ The man is de-plastered, opened, given sight by his extraordinary adventure, to his, and all sensible people's (not necessarily his dependent parents')

⁹ M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim* . . . (New York, 1950), 1537-8, 1610, 1611-12 for details of these roots.

¹⁰ Gen. 2:5-7. Note moisture and breath.

¹¹ C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1965), 184; id., *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (ibid., 1968), 138, 310, 402; J. Marsh, *Saint John* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 329. At that time the Man became a New Creature, ageless, and without relations, as if he were a proselyte. Hence the ironies of the story as told.

delight. Now the formerly blind man becomes a prophet indeed, and since he is sent (note the Qumranic passage I have noted), coming from the Pool called Sent, I suspect he becomes the first apostle (Šîlôah/šâlûah). But that is another aspect of the story, in which also the idea of 'lamp' hovers. And, though formerly a beggar, he sees his Teacher with his (clear) eyes, for Jn. 9:37 (*heōrakas . . . lalōn*) alludes to Is. 30:20–21 (RV, RSV, NJB, *not* LXX), another allusion which has not been seen hitherto.¹²

It will be asked whether John expected his readers to grasp that pun, as between metaphorically closing, actual plastering, crying out, and delighting. Jesus closes, causes an opening, creates delight, and provokes exclamations. The plastering of the eyes, with Hebrew and Aramaic roots which will have been none of the clearest even then, was so bizarre an act that though only a poet could 'unwind' it, every hearer will have been eager for an explanation, should the informed care to supply one. We, at any rate, can be sure John himself knew the Hebrew of Isaiah, and it is a pity that he overestimated successive ages' ability to retain and to use this arcane information.

Abstract

The anointing of the blind man's eyes with clay in John 9:6 is to be explained in the light of Isaiah 6:10 and 20:9 where the Hebrew verbs used allow a punning connection between making blind, plastering over, and rejoicing.

¹² Cf. J. D. M. Derrett, 'Ti ergazē (Jn. 6:30): an unrecognized allusion to Is. 45:9,' *ZNW* 84 (1993), 142–144. Jn. 20:16–17 may also rely on Is. 30:20–21, in which case the difficult *strapheisa* is accounted for.