

The Bible from the Perspective of the Deaf Community

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1. Introduction

In many countries in Latin America there has been an explosion of sign languages in recent years. They are emerging and becoming stronger. Governments from different countries, in response to the pressure from associations of deaf people, are beginning to recognize the sign language of their own country as the official language of their Deaf Community. In Costa Rica the official sign language is called “LESCO”, that means Costa Rican Sign Language. Viability of any sign language is enhanced when the deaf community engages in promoting and teaching it among new generations, and even among the hearing society. This is the case in many countries in Latin America, including Costa Rica, a small country with a deaf population of approximately 26,000.

Little by little the hearing society is becoming aware of the presence of deaf people due to the fact that this population has burst into society claiming to be a culture with its own identity and language. They are asking to be respected. Ignorance about the deaf community is very common. Just a brief contact with the world of deaf people is enough to become aware of the lack of sensitivity that we, hearing people, show toward deaf people. For example, there are more than a few hearing people who think that deaf people are also dumb, that they are deaf-mute. This is a very irritating term for deaf people since they have all their vocal chords. Many myths are created about them: people think that they are idiots, unable to work or to study. But reality is totally different; they can be as smart as any hearing person given the proper conditions and circumstances.

Hearing people have little information about deaf people, for example, they don't know that:

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- there is an International Deaf Federation, an international non-governmental organization representing approximately 70 million Deaf people worldwide¹⁾;
- Deaf Community doesn't see deafness as a disability, but a condition that allows them to build a community with identity, culture and language of their own;
- each country has its own sign language;
- deaf associations and organizations often plan national and international meetings for adults and young people in which they share their experiences and discuss their needs and aspirations;
- for several years Symposia have been held on Sign Language organized by linguists, interested in analyzing sign language morphology, syntax, phonemes, semantics, etc.;
- there are universities for deaf people where all staff and students are deaf (e.g. Gallaudet); churches only for deaf people and soccer championships among deaf people;
- there are many websites for deaf people where they interact, express their feelings and support each other;
- there are digital libraries in sign language (i.e. www.cervantesvirtual.com).

We hope that this lack of knowledge among hearing people will change when the presence of deaf people becomes more and more visible and when we, hearing people, become more sensitive to deaf people's feelings. These words of Aminah Davids, from South Africa, are very eloquent regarding deaf people's feelings: "There is a problem: the vastness of the hearing world, leaving us a very lonely road to walk."²⁾

2. The Bible from the Perspective of the Deaf Community

The Bible makes sense for people and communities when they understand and read it from their own situation, needs and dreams.

For a long time deaf people have lived with loneliness beginning in childhood

1) WFD uses special, legal or administrative measures to ensure that Deaf people in every country have the right to preserve their own sign languages, organizations, and cultural and other activities. Most important among WFD priorities are Deaf people in developing countries; the right to sign language; and equal opportunity in all spheres of life, including access to education and information.

2) From his poem: *La sordera es como tener oídos ciegos*. www.sitiodesordos.com.ar

because of difficulty with communication. This loneliness and feeling of being misunderstood can be seen in their poems and writings. The following poem by a young deaf Argentinean woman shows this:

I need understanding

I lack being understood
I don't know if it is my silence
or my different form of communication
that sometimes makes people not show themselves as they are.

There is no understanding
when I feel pain
when I am down
lost in life.

I only need someone
to honestly understand me
so I can have hope
to overcome pain.

There is no understanding
I want to stop thinking negatively
so we can begin changing
the way we live together.

There is no understanding
when you struggle
towards your goals
and you are not accepted
by others.

Only those that know
the world I live in
understand me. ...³⁾

Deaf people feel excluded from hearing society. In fact, access to information,

3) Anonymous. www.sitiodesordos.com.ar

technology, jobs, education, health, religion, sports etc. is available almost exclusively for the hearing society.

Many times when deaf children grow up in hearing families and are forcefully integrated into schools to interact with hearing children, they feel lost and their self-esteem goes down considerably. They believe they are unable to reach goals set for them and often quit school. This testimony of a little girl is one of many:

They (the teachers) didn't realize that many times I didn't know what I had to do because I was not able to hear [...] I had to study a lot and often I didn't understand anything. Sometimes I asked them but they didn't understand me. When the teacher was speaking I didn't understand at all because she spoke too much and too fast and it was very difficult for me to read lips.⁴⁾

This common situation of loneliness among deaf people has changed rapidly since sign language has been recognized as their natural way of communication. When deaf people, young and old, meet with each other, they generate a fluid and wonderful communication which causes them deep feelings of joy.⁵⁾ Indeed, a paradigm shift has taken place in all senses.⁶⁾ In Costa Rica, the deaf community has been built little by little since deaf people have started meeting with each other. To be able to communicate fluidly with a language that is natural to them and to share their own problems, desires and visions has helped them to find an identity, a culture of their own and a deep sense of pride.

The Bible as a source of inspiration and empowerment can accompany this process of affirming the deaf community, not only by means of the biblical texts themselves, but also by reading those texts from the perspective of the deaf community. The deaf community has a huge contribution to make to hearing society.

4) Testimony taken from: Villamayor, Analía, *Educación Especial*, Boletín No.3, Feb. 2001 "Educación Especial-Atención temprana-Diversidad e integración".

5) E.g. In San José, Costa Rica, long ago it became quite common to see a good number of deaf people of all ages meeting and interacting in La Plaza de la Cultura.

6) Cf. According to Soledad Cavaría Navas sign language is not only an "identity referential framework of deaf people" but a source of change for hearing people as well. Cf. "Un cambio de paradigma: la educación de la persona sorda"

3. Pilot Project in LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language)

In this context of the emergence of sign language, the UBS Americas Translation Department has accepted the challenge of producing a modest pilot project: the translation of portions of the Bible into LESCO. One of the reasons is that many people with severe or profound hearing loss, especially the poor, don't know Spanish and have serious problems with reading and writing. This is not the only problem. In this process of the deaf community's self-affirmation, they need to read the Bible as a source of empowerment. The deaf community needs to appropriate the Scriptures for themselves and interpret them from their own reality. The pilot project addressed these two issues: the translation of some Bible selections and a comment about each of them from the perspective of the deaf community. All these were prepared by a team of deaf translators.

During 2005 and 2006, we produced a DVD with four biblical portions from the Gospel of Luke: the birth of Jesus and three parables. In addition to the translation of the biblical texts, we included an introduction of two themes. The first is about the deaf community and its relationship with the Bible; the second introduces the context of the biblical text, in order to explain the narratives geographically and historically. We also introduced some new biblical signs that will appear later in the translation of the texts. At the end of each Bible story we presented a five to seven minute commentary. This commentary highlights some important points of the narrative and relates them to the deaf community's situation. Each section finishes with a prayer of gratitude for God's Word. Included in the DVD are subtitles and audio in Spanish for the relatives of deaf people and for hearing people who have a ministry with the deaf. We included this so that they can listen to the Bible and gain a better understanding of the deaf community's perspective. Our deaf translators felt it was important to include subtitles so that deaf people could also improve their reading and writing.

Deaf people have translated, commented and signed, as well as scripted and directed the DVD. Prior to the professional production, a home video was presented to the LESCO National Committee to approve the new signs. Later, the final draft of the home video was presented to deaf people representing different churches.

I am now going to show you a section of the DVD: The parable of the coin that was found again, including the translation, the commentary from the perspective of

the deaf community and the final prayer of gratitude.

4. Presentation of the DVD

4.1. The Coin that was Found Again (Luk 15:8-10)

Jesus gave them an example: “There was a woman who saved ten coins. Suddenly she realizes that one is missing. She had lost it! Immediately she lights a lamp, sweeps her house, and looks carefully everywhere until she finds it.”⁹ When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, and says to them, ‘I am so happy I found the coin I lost. Let us be happy and celebrate!’¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, the angels of God rejoice and celebrate in heaven when a person far from God turns to him and forms a relationship with him.

4.2. Commentary

In the story we have just seen, there is a woman that was living perhaps in a small house with four walls, no windows, no light, just darkness. This woman looked carefully everywhere, but because it was dark inside the house she had to light a lamp to look for the coin that was lost. The details show us that she was a poor woman, perhaps she was living alone because her husband had died.

According to the story, what happened when this woman realizes that one of her coins that she has carefully saved was lost? Did she get depressed? Did she give up? No! What did she do? She immediately looked for the coin everywhere in her house. She resolved to find her coin and she did. She tried hard: lit a lamp, cleaned her house and looked carefully for the coin till she found it. Then she was relieved and full of joy and had a party with her friends.

Let’s compare the story of this woman with the situation of deaf people. Here in Costa Rica deaf people have different life experiences, depending on where they live such as Guanacaste, Puntarenas, Limón, Pérez Zeledón. Some deaf children of hearing parents grow up in a family where communication is very difficult for them. Later when they meet other deaf people they experience great communication, it is very fluid and they feel very happy and full of life. Other children grow up in

families where they can communicate quite well, but later when they meet other deaf people and interact with them they really enjoy the communication and interaction. In the bible story when the woman found the little coin she became very happy. This also happens with deaf people; they rejoice when they communicate, interact and support each other. We, deaf people, rejoice when in the deaf community we experience respect among ourselves, support among friends and when we become aware that we, each of us, have an identity as a deaf person. Here we include our cultural activities also, like sports, education and entertainment. Communication is so important for life. With it we are happy, we can struggle together and we can go on. For deaf people it is very important that their, friends and others know that in the deaf community there is support, joy, courage and endurance.

Now in regard to the angels of God in the story, it tells us that when people feel confused, guilty, and then turn to God and relate to him, God receives them with joy and angels celebrate. The same occurs with a deaf person that feels far from God, without communication, involved in sin, confused, alone. When a person comes to him and talks about God, telling him that Jesus is the Savior, and that God has power to change his life, and that his life can change, this person approaches God and is amazed. So, thanks to this communication this person now understands and relates to God! God receives this person with joy and the angels celebrate.

Prayer of gratitude

Thank you God, that in our deaf community we can communicate with our sign language, and we have a culture and an identity. Thank you.

<Keyword>

Bible translation, Costa Rica, deaf community, sign language, Luke 15:8-10

<Abstract>

청각장애 공동체의 시각에서 바라본 성서

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이 글은 코스타리카를 포함한 세계 각국에서 수화가 등장하고 있음을 언급하면서 각 정부들이 수화를 공식적으로 인정하고 있음과 이것이 청각장애자들에게 끼치는 영향력에 대하여 지적하고 있다. 오늘날, 청각장애 공동체는 국내적으로나 국제적으로 그 정체성과 문화 그리고 언어를 부각시키고 있다. 필자에게, 오늘날 이러한 변화는 정상인들의 사회에는 하나의 도전이다. 왜냐하면, 청각장애 공동체의 세계는 정상인들에게는 잘 알려져 있지 않았으며 많은 잘못된 신화가 있었기 때문이다. 필자는 청각장애우들이 얼마나 무시되고 소외되었으며 오해받고 있었는가를 소개하였다. 그러나, 이 상황의 변화로 인하여 청각장애우들은 인정받고 그들 자신을 표현하며 그들 자신의 언어와 문화를 가진 공동체로 권리를 쟁취하기 위해 노력하고 있음을 밝혔다. 필자의 견해로는 성서가 수화로 번역되고 청각장애 공동체의 시각에서 새롭게 읽힐 때, 성서는 청각장애우들을 위한 능력의 원천이 된다.

(안근조 역)