


# The irony of ability and disability in John 9:1–41



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The story of the man born blind is constructed within a grand irony of ability and disability. The Johannine narrator develops the characterisation of the man born blind as a progressive, seeing and missional personality, whereas all others in the story appear as people without proper understanding and vision and those with lower perspectives. Although the world conceived the man as a sinner, Jesus understands him as a means for divine glorification; though the Jews are widely considered able people in the socioreligious terms, Jesus considers them as sinful. The article argues that people can overcome their physical disabilities with the help of spiritual foresight and mental stability; people's physical abilities are not guarantees for their wholistic stability. In that sense, John 9:1–41 can be considered a paradigmatic narrative which demonstrates the experiences of the disabled and marginal sections of the 1st-century CE context.

**Contribution:** This article presents the irony of ability and disability within John 9:1–41 and suggests a new way forward in interpreting the fourth gospel by taking into consideration the existential struggles of people with disabilities. As a theological interpretation of the fourth gospel, this article fits well within the scope of *HTS Theological Studies*.

**Keywords:** irony; ability; disability; John's Gospel; physical blindness; spiritual foresight; Johannine community.

## Introduction

The story of the man born blind in John 9:1–41 can be considered a paradigmatic narrative which demonstrates the experiences of the disabled and marginal sections of the 1st-century CE context (Clark-Soles 2018:337). The man born blind shares his unique experiences of disability and shows how the stigma of disability was attached to him even after the healing. Swinton (2018) comments:

Without the hermeneutical voice of people living with disabilities, the revelation that God desires to impart to us remains lacking. Disabled human bodies can carry powerful messages of redemption just-as-they-are. To see such things, we need to read Scripture in a quite particular way. (p vii)

The story of the man born blind persuades us to read John 9 from a disability perspective. How can human beings be transformed in their faith journeys irrespective of human-made boundaries and oppositions? How can a person born with disability take steps for transformed living? How can a believer overcome juridical trials through the means of bold proclamations and Christ-centred living? Answers to these questions are some of the significant undercurrents of the present article. The story of the man born blind can be considered one of the best dramatic stories within John's narrative framework (Solevåg 2018:64–72).

This article conceptualises the irony of ability and disability within John's narrative framework. The thesis statement of the article is that people can overcome their physical and societal disabilities with the help of spiritual foresight and mental stability; a person's physical ability is not a guarantee for her or his wholistic stability.

A person's social acceptance as an able-bodied person does not mean that such an individual can be considered able. According to Sande and Ringson (2020):

[P]eople with disabilities are most often marginalized, excluded and discriminated against and perpetually subjugated within the religious circles. This complexity of disabilities is exacerbated by the fluidity of policies, culture and religious ideologies when dealing with issues of disabilities. (pp. 78–93)

As a marginalised, excluded and subjugated strata of the society, people with disabilities deserve special attention in hermeneutical engagements. A polyvalent analysis shall enable the reader to understand the rhetoric of the text and its power dynamics from multiple vantage points

(Thomaskutty 2015:19–26). The task of the article is twofold: understanding the drama and dialogue in John 9 in the context of disability and developing a new way forward in interpreting the irony of ability and disability.<sup>1</sup>

## Jesus and a man born blind (9:1–7)

The story of the man born blind develops in a dramatic way. In 9:1, as Jesus walks along, he sees (Greek, *eiden*) a man born blind.<sup>2</sup> The portrayal of Jesus' ability to see the congenital disability of the man is intentional, as Jesus is introduced as the light of the world (v. 5). Jesus as a 'walking teacher' resembles in many ways a Peripatetic teacher (v. 1; cf. 1:36).<sup>3</sup> The question of the disciples to Jesus about how the person was born blind draws the attention of the reader (Jn 9:2) (Fox 2019:137; Martyn 1979:30). Usually, the Jews connected people's illnesses with demonic powers and sinfulness.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the invalid, Jesus says, 'Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you' (Jn 5:14), but here, Jesus says to the disciples, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him' (v. 3) (Stibbe 1993:103–105). The divine ability is going to be manifested in the context of human disability. Though the two stories have several similarities, the narrator describes them from different perspectives. The invalid was suffering because of his sinfulness, but the man born blind suffered neither because of his own sinfulness nor because of his parents' sinfulness (Schneiders [1999] 2003:151). But people in the public square weighed him down for so long with the conception that his disability happened due to his or his parents' sinfulness that he was considered a downtrodden and untouchable man (Yong 2007:19–27). Thus, people considered ability and disability on the basis of human physical conditions and other connected factors.

In the narrative, the revelation of God's glory is one of the most significant intentions of the narrator. In v. 4, another dualistic contrast is delineated through the imagery of 'day' and 'night'. This imagery is coupled with the theme of 'work' (Gench 2007:65). The expressions such as 'God's work', 'we must work the work of him [God]' and 'no one can work' imply the following aspects: God's work is doing the mission of God in the lives of the people, inclusive of those with disabilities; it is the duty of all those who are appointed in the world to accomplish the work of God; and a time is coming when no one can work. Jesus exists in the world below as an agent of God to accomplish the works given to him. The current time is considered 'day', when all can work for the glory of God; a future 'night' time shall appear when no one

1. For more details about contemporary response to disability (see Black 1996).

2. Duke (1985:118) says, '[h]e is not even called *tis anthrōpos*, but simply *anthrōpos*, thus de-emphasising his particularity and hinting that for John all humankind is born blind'.

3. Asian religious teachers like Dronacharya, Buddha, Mahavira and the Sikh gurus imparted knowledge to the disciples whilst they walked together (see Thomaskutty 2022:145–146).

4. The OT passages such as Exodus 20:5, Numbers 14:18, Ezekiel 18:2–4 and Jeremiah 31:29–30 indicate that the sins of parents would be visited upon generations of their descendants (ed. Nworie 2016:30).

can work for God's glory.<sup>5</sup> In the biblical narratives, the creation of the universe is considered one of the greatest works of God. When Jesus refers to work in this passage, he prepares his disciples for something similar to the divine task of creation.

Jesus' identity as the light of the world is brought to the foreground yet another time (v. 5b; cf. 8:12). A demonstration of his identity as the light of the world is made obvious through leading a person from darkness to light. The tenure of Jesus' life in the world is declared as the time of the 'light', and his departure from this world will bring an experience of 'darkness' (v. 5).<sup>6</sup> Jesus' activities in v. 6 are significant to note: he spits on the ground, makes mud with the saliva and spreads the mud on the man's eyes. The materiality in Jesus' actions is noticeable even when he is involved in miraculous activities. His actions are realistic and at the same time symbolic as he controls the created things as per his wish.<sup>7</sup> Rather than considering the story an event of transformation, it has to be construed as an event of recreation.<sup>8</sup> He commands the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam (v. 7a).

The meaning of the name 'Siloam' is given in the text as 'sent' (v. 7a) (Reimer 2013:428–438). The man going to the pool (as a sent one) symbolises his obedience; his washing symbolises a sacramental activity; (Clark-Soles 2018:348) coming back symbolises his willingness for discipleship; and his seeing symbolises the starting point of wholistic sight.<sup>9</sup> It resembles the story of Naaman, who went down and dipped himself seven times in River Jordan to be healed from leprosy (2 Ki 5:1–14). In the episode, the man crosses over Siloam and starts to experience divine sight and taste divine manna. Jesus' seeing (*eiden*) in v. 1 and his identity as the 'light of the world' in v. 5 are divine and heavenly as he recreates a man and offers him new life. In the first exchange, the narrator portrays how divine ability overshadows human disabilities even in the midst of marginalisation and ostracisation. Here, disability does not simply mean a person's physical disability, but also it means the world's inability to make a man wholesome. The man lived all his life as a disabled person, but the world was unable to recreate him.

## The man and his neighbours (Jn 9:8–12)

The neighbours and other people saw (Greek, *theōrountes*) the disability of the man from their 'below' perspective; it is different from the way Jesus saw (Greek, *eiden*; v. 1) from an

5. Gench (2007:65) states, '[t]he mission is an urgent one, for Jesus's time in the world is limited ("night is coming")'.

6. Talbert (1992:159) states, 'Jesus's response to the disciples' question concludes with a near repetition of 8:12: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world (v. 5)". This ties Chapters 8 and 9 together'.

7. Fox (2019:137) comments, '[t]he healing event challenges and broadens people's fixed beliefs about how God can and does work in the world'.

8. Clark-Soles (2018:347) comments, '[o]nce again (cf. 1:1), the author alludes to the creation accounts of Genesis by showing Jesus's creative act, using the earth for the sake of the earth creature'.

9. For more details about the stylistic, poetical, numerical and symbolical aspects (see Menken 1985:204–205).

'above' perspective (v. 8) (Martyn 1979:30–31). The lack of clear vision and the 'from below' perspective of the people are obvious through their multiple opinions (Fox 2019:137). But the man responds by saying that 'I am the man' (v. 9) (Gench 2007:65). Clark-Soles (2018:348) states that, '[u]se of *egō eimi* on his part associates him with Jesus and is a bold expression or identity'. For many, it is beyond their imagination that a person who was born blind can now see (v. 10) (ed. Nworie 2016:29). The man tells the events one after another without any hesitation: 'the man called Jesus made mud; spread it on my eyes; and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash"' (v. 11a) (Talbert 1992:159). Whilst the people around him show their inability to see and perceive things properly, Jesus is able to see the man with the heavenly vision and leads him to wholistic sight.

Whilst the invalid person does not know the name and the identity of Jesus, the healed man here slowly progresses in his understanding of Jesus' identity.<sup>10</sup> He obeys to act upon the words of Jesus: as per Jesus' command, he *went*; as per the requirement, he *washed*; and as per the expectation, he *received his sight* (v. 11b) (Talbert 1992:159). Duke (1985:119) says, 'The newly sighted man, like the one in Mark 8:24 who at first saw people as moving trees, confesses what he does not yet perceive'. The characterisation of the man reveals that people with disabilities are mentally strong, although often their physical conditions make them immobile. Though the man is seeing, still he is considered disabled by others. The social stigma as a marginalised person continues for him, as does the religious stamp upon him of being a sinner. Whilst he can see but remains on the periphery, people around him claim that they see but perceive that he 'only looks like him' (v. 9b). The narrator slowly develops a character and ideological irony between those who claim that they are able to see and the man with his claim that 'I am the man' (v. 9c).

## The man and the Pharisees (Jn 9:13–17)

People bring the man to 'men of mature judgment who can examine the case and arrive at definite conclusions' (Martyn 1979:31).<sup>11</sup> The day Jesus makes the mud and opens the man's eyes is a Sabbath day (v. 14) (Keener 1993:288). The people bring him directly to the Pharisees, as they are the appropriate body of people who can take decisions on Sabbath violations (cf. 5:1–18).<sup>12</sup> It is now the turn of the Pharisees to interrogate him, and they execute it by asking him how he has received his sight (v. 15a). His responses in verse 11 and verse 15b are concurrent with Jesus' actions in verses 6–7. The event is narrated about three times so far (vv. 6–7, 11, and 15b) (Stibbe 1993:108–109). The man's transition from disability to ability is narrated with evidence

10. See more comparisons: Schneiders ([1999] 2003:152–154).

11. Clark-Soles (2018:348) comments, '[t]he neighbours continue to treat the man as "lesser than" (implied already by their naming him a beggar) and assume that they have the right to drag him to the authorities'.

12. Duke (1985:120) comments, '[i]ronically, some of the Pharisees instantly conclude that Jesus cannot be from God since he has broken the Sabbath. The man is not sure where Jesus is, but the Pharisees are very sure where he is not from'.

and multiple references. Though he was blind, he recalls the events one after another in the proper sequence.

The event is portrayed with the help of several ironical aspects: Jesus is understood as one not from God, but he does a divine activity; he is a sinner, but he saves people; and he is a Sabbath-breaker, but he makes people's lives wholesome. The man attended several Sabbaths as a person with disabilities, but none of the religious authorities did anything good to him. Jesus saves the man from disability to ability, but the people are not concerned with the divine intervention in his life. According to the Jewish law, Sabbath-breaking is considered a sinful activity. The Pharisees interrogate him further, as if they were not convinced of his response (v. 17a) (Schneiders [1999] 2003:152–158). The man comes out with a profound statement about Jesus: 'he is a prophet' (v. 17b; 4:19; 6:14) (Duke 1985:120; Talbert 1992:160). Whilst the Pharisees are unable to recognise it (v. 17a: 'it was your eyes he opened?'), the man comes to recognition (v. 17b: 'He is a prophet').<sup>13</sup> Thus, the narrator takes the attention of the reader towards wider levels of ability and disability. The man increases in his understanding about the divine truths; the Pharisees, who claim to be 'in the know', look myopic in their reflections. The irony of ability and disability overshadows the narrative framework to suggest a point to the reader.

## The Pharisees and the parents (Jn 9:18–23)

Whilst the man progresses from disability to ability, the Jewish leaders demonstrate their lack of belief, recognition and understanding (v. 18a). They call his parents to confirm it (v. 18b) because they are unable to perceive what is happening before them (Talbert 1992:160). The parents' response shows that they wanted to escape the situation wisely. They state that he is their son and he was born blind, but they do not know how he gained his sight and who the healer is (vv. 20–21a). The testimony of the parents further shows that the man was suffering from congenital disabilities. In v. 21b, they respond out of frustration that their son himself is able to answer those questions (Martyn 1979:33). Whilst the son himself is at a grown-up stage, and he is the first-hand witness, the authorities call the parents to get the information first-hand (vv. 20–21a) (Duke 1985:120). Although the Pharisees claim that they are able to take decisions, they prove that they are unable to decide. Whilst the parents and the Pharisees are presented with their timidity and unrecognition, the man born blind is presented as a bold and intelligent personality.

The parents presented an escapist answer because of their fear of the Jews. They were afraid of expulsion from the synagogue (v. 22) (Brown 1988:73). The Greek word *aposunagōgos* means casting somebody out of the synagogue (9:22, 34; 12:42–43; 16:2) (Senior 1991:24). The Jews impose this penalty against all those who show faith in or confess Jesus as Messiah. This rule would have been widely practised

13. Clark-Soles (2018:349) states, '[t]o call Jesus a prophet is to ascribe him religious authority; recall that Moses, Elijah, and Elisha all performed healing miracles'.

and that would have prompted the parents to say, 'He is of age; ask him' (v. 23) (ed. Zanchettin 2000:100–105). Although all others around the man claim that they are able-bodied people, people of the synagogue, Sabbath keepers and people of influence, they ironically lack wisdom and decline in their sensibility.<sup>14</sup> Duke (1985) comments:

Here we are told that belief in Jesus will result in expulsion from a cherished community, and that disbelief in him will require deliberate blindness to the undeniable works of God. (p. 121)

Though the man was suffering from congenital disabilities, marginalised in society and voiceless in the religious assemblies, he demonstrated progress from disability to multiple abilities.

## The man's expulsion from the synagogue (Jn 9:24–34)

The religious authorities do not consider Jesus to be God's son, but rather a sinner who breaks the Sabbath regulations and blasphemes the name of God. In John, the opponents of Jesus continually attempt to disable Jesus, accuse him of having a demon (*echei daimonion*) and call him mentally insane (*mainetai*) (7:20; 8:48–52; 10:20–21) (Clark-Soles 2018:335; also see Pate 2011:116–117). The religious authorities invoke the name of God to make the man deny the work of God; they command the man to speak the truth whilst they are closed to the truth; and they utter that they know whilst they prove their ignorance (v. 24) (Duke 1985:121). Jesus performs a sign (vv. 1–7; cf. v. 16b) and glorifies his Father's name, but the religious authorities are neither ready to accept the son nor give glory to him. Whilst the saviour of the world is projected as a sinner, the sinful Pharisees project themselves as a community of salvation (vv. 24–25) (Blum 1983:308). Whilst Jesus says that neither this man nor his parents sinned, now the healed man is labelled a sinner. One who came to save sinners is now labelled a Samaritan, a demoniac and a sinner. The Pharisees consider that the power and authority they occupy are a means to support themselves and to suppress others. The irony of ability and disability comes with profound terms and dramatic situations here.

The Jews realise that though they were able to silence his parents, they are unable to succeed in the case of the healed man (Blum 1983:308–309). Whilst they attempted to erase the event and subside it by a threat, the passionate testimony of the man is a setback to them (v. 26). As the man picks up courage, he also changes his tone towards the authorities. A man who was interrogated so far now turns to interrogate the religious authorities. His response develops in bravery as he implicitly gestures that they cannot change his opinion in their favour. He completes his statement with a mixture of realism and sarcasm (v. 27): 'Do you also want to become his disciples?' (Duke 1985:122). Brown (1988) comments:

The courageous sarcasm of the man's answers strikes a warm chord in the reader's heart; obviously here we have a character very different from the timid paralytic of John 5. (p. 74)

<sup>14</sup>Clark-Soles (2018:349) poses a question: '[n]o matter – he is probably used to standing alone and against. But who is more disabled here, the man or his parents?'

As the man moves from physical disability to ability, he also demonstrates his conceptual and ideological stability. By interrogating the religious authorities back, he diminishes them to the level of frustration and speechlessness (Duke 1985:121).

The tone of the Jews becomes harsh and abusive as the narrator uses the expression 'then they reviled him' (v. 28a). Whilst the Pharisees count the healed man as a 'disciple of Jesus', they associate themselves with Moses.<sup>15</sup> As the man's identity is strongly attached to Jesus, he is considered a disciple of a sinner. Whilst the man declares his unknowing and then his knowing in relation to Jesus (v. 25), the Pharisees declare their knowing first and then their unknowing (v. 29) (Resseguie 2001:144). They know that God had spoken to Moses, but they are unaware of Jesus' whereabouts.<sup>16</sup> Their knowledge is imperfect, as Moses himself was speaking about Jesus, and as they are unable to recognise and accept him (Painter 1993:314–316). The story as a whole emerges out of a contrast between the man's personal witness and the opponents' superficial understanding of the scripture and the tradition.

The man becomes more sarcastic and ruder to his interlocutors. He can never imagine considering Jesus a sinner since 'God does not listen to the sinners'. His utterances are not from the perspective of a passive observer, but as a person who has experienced the presence of God through Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Whilst the man argues as a first-hand witness of the power of God in his life, his interlocutors argue from their biased religious perspectives. Whilst they argue from their 'knowing' perspective and ironically end up in their 'unknowing', the man begins with his 'unknowing' and convincingly comes out as a 'knowing' person.<sup>18</sup> He considers his experience a global incident, as he relates it with 'never since the world began' (v. 32) (Pate 2011:117). His argument is that Jesus is from God because he has done a universally convincing miracle. The man's disabled life-situation changes to a mode of wholistic ability, knowledge and theological outlook (Clark-Soles 2018:350).

Jesus being able to open the eyes of a person born blind means that he is from God (Martyn 1979:34–35). The dialogue would be taking place in a synagogue context, and as the parents of the man fear in vv. 22–23, he would be cast out of it (Greek, *exebalon*, v. 34) (Martyn 1979:34–35; Talbert 1998:161).<sup>19</sup> Even in this state, the Jews consider him a demon-possessed, diseased and sinful man. The man is progressively and openly developing his loyalty to Jesus (vv. 11, 17, 33). Martyn writes about the man in the following way:

<sup>15</sup>For more details about the Moses and Jesus contrast (see Pancaro 1975:106).

<sup>16</sup>Clark-Soles (2018:349) states, '[t]his passage drips with irony based on the verb "to know" (*ginōskō*)'.

<sup>17</sup>Smith (1999:198) says, '[t]he once blind man now makes a telling, explicit argument (vv. 30–31). The sarcasm becomes deeper and more hostile (v. 30)'.

<sup>18</sup>Whilst the Jews bring in a 'you-and-we' distinction between themselves and the man based on Jesus-and-Moses ideologies (vv. 28–29), the man counters their response with another 'you-and-we' distinction that is based on the person of Jesus and his relation to the Father. See Westcott (1958:148).

<sup>19</sup>Clark-Soles (2018:350) states, '[t]he verb used in verse 34, *ekballō*, is quite violent; it is the word used for driving out demons'.

'A member of the *Am Ha-aretz* has failed to recognise the halakic authority of the Gerousia in regard to a most sensitive matter' (Martyn 1979:35). The man's disability experiences, his trying situations even after healing and society's attempt to silence him are at the centre of the narrative framework.

## Jesus meets the healed man (Jn 9:35–38)

As a thrown-out member of the institutionalised Judaism, the healed man loses the privileges of a member, especially the identity associated with it. But Jesus shows him solidarity and asks him (v. 35b): 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' As Martyn says, 'They stand face to face in the street' (Martyn 1979:35).<sup>20</sup> The man is ready to take extra steps in his faith journey (v. 36) (Keener 1993:289). His identity changes as follows: whilst he was considered a disabled, marginal and sinful man in Jewish society, he is considered able, a man with identity in Christ and a saved person in the Johannine community; whilst he was part of the synagogue, he was not shown mercy by the authorities (as they were bad shepherds), but Jesus as the good shepherd enables him by giving him sight; and whilst the doors of the synagogue was closed before him, Jesus appears before him as the door of the sheep. His vision enlarges when he sees Jesus as he is.

Jesus' response in v. 37 is reminiscent of his declaration to the Samaritan woman in 4:26. Jesus plainly says to his interlocutor that the one whom he sees here and now and the one whom he dialogues with is the Son of Man (Duke 1985:124). Perkins (2001) says:

Jesus's coming to find the man may also be an enactment of Jesus's saying in 6:37: 'Everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and the one comes to me, I will not cast out.' (p. 968)

Whilst the Jews cast a person out from their assembly, Jesus' assurance to the community is very significant to note. The man's confession (i.e. 'Lord, I believe') and his posture of worshipping demonstrate the apex level of his loyalty to Jesus. His confessions about Jesus and willingness to believe in him come into action through his worship (v. 38) (Beasley-Murray 1999:159–160). The theme of worship is another point where the story of the Samaritan woman and the man born blind have striking relationships (Clark-Soles 2018:351). As a disabled person, the man was denied justice, thrown out of the synagogue, not given a fair judgment and considered a sinner all his life. All these details demonstrate the way a disabled person was treated in the Jewish society. The narrator demonstrates how the man overcomes challenging situations and finally sees the healer with his physical eyes and reaches the apex level of spiritual foresight.

## The man receives holistic sight (Jn 9:39–41)

As indicated in 5:22, Jesus uses his authority to execute judgment on Earth. His coming into the world was for

20. Stibbe (1993:110) says, '[t]hroughout the story knowledge and ignorance are related to sight and blindness. The verb "believe" is found at vv. 18, 35, 36 and 38'.

judgment: those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind (v. 39).<sup>21</sup> The statement of Jesus here is double-edged and metaphorical. Whilst the man born blind received both physical sight and spiritual foresight, the Jews who claim that they are in the know and seeing prove that they lack spiritual insight.<sup>22</sup> Jesus guides the audience to an understanding of wholistic sight in the pretext of the man's story. Whilst the man acquires both physical sight and spiritual foresight, the Jews, though physically able to see, diminish to the level of blind guides. They make claims about their relationship with God, but they are unable to recognise the Son of Man. They claim that they are disciples of Moses, but they fail to accept the one about whom Moses wrote (see Painter 1993:316–317; Resseguie 2001:144). The irony of ability and disability comes convincingly through the characterisation of the man born blind and the Jews.

The statement of Jesus placed towards the end of the story is one of his profoundest utterances (v. 41).<sup>23</sup> Duke says, 'Their [Pharisees'] disease, quite different, is an illusion of sight, which has led them to a far deeper darkness than they know' (Duke 1985:124). Their short-sightedness and shortcomings make them incapable in their religious engagements. At the beginning of the narrative, the man is portrayed as blind and sinful (v. 2), but at the end of the story, the Jews are projected as blind and sinful (v. 41) (Martyn 1979:36). Clark-Soles (2018) states:

Jesus, the light, has come into the world and is shining in the faces of the religious leaders. They hate the light and want to do the evil deed of disabling Jesus through death. The man born blind sees the light and does the work of God by believing in Jesus. (p. 351)

Finally, it is proved that neither Jesus nor the man born blind are sinners, but the people who claim that they are children of Abraham, disciples of Moses and ultimately people of God themselves remain in sin through their wilful ignorance (Duke 1985:125).

## Concluding remarks

The irony of ability and disability comes to the foreground through the narrative: the Jews claim that they have physical sight and spiritual foresight, but Jesus proves that though they are physically able to see, they lack spiritual foresight; the Jews consider both Jesus and the man born blind to be sinners, but Jesus proves that the Jews themselves are sinners; and the Jews consider the man born blind to be a person with disabilities, religiously sinful and socially an untouchable, but Jesus enables him to see everything, gives him a new religious hope and opens a new door for him. The Jews consider the Saviour of the world a sinner and claim that they see everything, although they do not recognise the Son of

21. Blomberg (2001:124) says, 'Jesus replies to the man's obedience by declaring how his ministry will reverse the roles of the blind and the sighted (v. 39)'.

22. Duke (1985:124) says, '[t]he irony of Chapter 9 is epitomized by Jesus's saying of verse 39'.

23. Stibbe (1993:111) says, '[p]erhaps the most savage irony is reserved for the very end of the story where the Pharisees ask, "Are we blind too?" Here the author uses the literary technique of the unanswered question, used with great effect already in the Gospel'.

God, and they say that they observe the commandments of Moses although they do not accept the one about whom Moses wrote. But Jesus proves that the Jews are blind guides. The Jews, although they remain as shepherds of the synagogue, never show mercy to the man with physical disabilities; although they claim that they are a protective community, they never protect the man (but cast him out of the synagogue) (Bennema 2009:136–144). All the aforementioned ironies and contrasts prove that the Jews are people with an ample number of shortcomings and disabilities. According to Albrecht (ed. 2006:105), '[t]he passage is based on the inferred metaphorical contrast between the physical blindness of the healed man and the spiritual blindness of the synagogue leaders'. The narrative is not simply an event in which Jesus meets a man and heals him from blindness, but it is also a story of the Jews' blindness. The story turns out as a masterpiece in which the irony of ability and disability is stated with rhetorical devices.

The event of healing the man born blind cannot merely be treated as a restoration story, but rather it can be considered an activity of new creation. The man's new being and identity are emphasised through the creative mission of Jesus (Jn 3:3; 2 Cor 5:17). The man experiences newness in his physical, spiritual, psychological and theological areas of life. On the one hand, Jesus affirms that he is the light of the world (Jn 8:12; 9:5); on the other hand, he models a new community in him as the light of the world (Mt 5:14). The man born blind becomes an illuminating light in the world to remove world's darkness. The neighbours do not agree on the identity of the man (Jn 9:8–9); Pharisees were divided on the identity of Jesus (Jn 9:16); and then the Pharisees debate amongst themselves about their *own identities* (Jn 9:40) (Fox 2019:137). All these show people lacking proper knowledge and deficient in seeing things adequately. But the man progresses in all levels of vision and thus stands out as a paradigmatic figure.

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J.T. is the sole author of this article.

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