

Nonverbal Communication in the New Testament

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Nonverbal communication includes all aspects of the communication process other than words. In normal face-to-face communication, nonverbal communication plays a vital role in interpretation; a simple request, for instance, is vastly different if it is said with clenched fists or while gently holding the addressee's hand. Scripture reports only a small fraction of the nonverbal communication that would have taken place in the actual events, leaving a great deal to the reader's imagination; even so, a close reading of scripture reveals a considerable repertoire of nonverbal signs that add meaning to the text. An example of such a sign is Jesus's gesture when he raises the daughter of Jairus: "He took the little girl by the hand and said to her, *Talitha, koum!* meaning, 'Little girl, arise!'" (Mark 5:41).¹

Categories of nonverbal communication include kinesics (the use of hand gestures, body postures, facial expression, and gaze), haptics (the use of touch), vocalics or paralanguage (the use of nonspeech sounds and voice inflection), proxemics (the communicative use of physical closeness and distance), chronemics (the communicative use of timing), physical appearance, objectics (the use of "artifacts" or physical objects to communicate), and olfactics (communication through scent). However, opinions vary on the relationship between these categories and on what should and should not be included in nonverbal communication.² For the present purposes, it is useful to adopt Fernando Poyatos's division of communication into three components: language, kinesics, and vocalics.³ In particular, the focus here will be on hand gestures, gazes, postures, and vocalics—those elements of nonverbal communication that are explicitly described in the New Testament text.

Older studies, particularly entries on gestures in Bible dictionaries before the 1990s, tend to associate biblical nonverbal communication with the uncontrolled emotion of “Oriental” peoples. This is evident, for example, in the following statement made in 1909 by W. Ewing:

The Oriental is a natural expert in appropriate and expressive gesture. To his impulsive and emotional temperament, attitude and action form a more apt vehicle for thought and feeling than even speech. . . . Conversation is accompanied by a sort of running commentary of gestures. Easterns conduct argument and altercation at the pitch of their voices: emphasis is supplied almost wholly by gestures. These are often so violent that an unskilled witness might naturally expect to see bloodshed follow.⁴

Statements such as this are of questionable value. Not only are they based on impressions of modern rather than ancient Near Eastern cultures, but the impressions themselves are superficial, lacking long-term insider knowledge of the cultures. The statements certainly are not based on the New Testament text, which reports only a modest quantity of gestures. It is true that many people in the Near East and in Mediterranean countries communicate with a wider range of movement than is typical for middle-class northern European culture, and this may have been true also in the days of Jesus and the apostles. Some gestures reported in the New Testament, such as prostration (see chapter 32 herein) and the lifting of the hands in prayer, involve a high degree of movement and tend to confirm this assumption. However, this was not necessarily true for all parts of society and for all social situations. The surprise for modern Western readers is that the appropriate gestures for a given situation are different from our own culture. For instance, it is in the most sacred situations of worship, situations that we might associate with tranquil passivity, that the gestures with the highest degree of movement occur. The same observation holds for the volume and tempo of speech—people in New Testament times were not necessarily always conducting “argument and altercation at the pitch of their voices,” but the situations in which loud voices were appropriate, such as prayer, may appear unusual to modern readers.

Another issue that underlies many studies of nonverbal communication in the New Testament is that of identifying the most relevant context for Jesus’s and the apostles’ gestures. Surveys of gestures in Bible dictionaries tend to assume a continuity between Old and New Testament body language.⁵ Some other studies, however, dwell exclusively on comparisons with Greco-Roman nonverbal communication.⁶ This issue is related to the historicity of the Gospels and Acts. If the actions of Jesus and the apostles spring primarily from the imagination of the writers, then there is a possibility that the most relevant context is that of an early Christian culture that was hellenized and largely gentile. But if the accounts report the gestures of Jesus and the apostles with a reasonable degree of historical accuracy, then one should look to a Semitic background. The abundant evidence of Aramaic and Hebrew linguistic influence in the Gospels lends support to the second possibility.⁷ The problem of Jesus’s gestures is similar to that of reconstructing Jesus’s *ipsissima verba*, or the precise words that he spoke. Ultimately, both of these things—Jesus’s actions as well as his words—

are impossible to reconstruct in complete detail on the basis of sources at hand; they must instead be reconstructed in broad strokes with the help of comparative research.

The present article assumes (1) that the Gospel accounts and Acts present an essentially realistic description of Jesus's and the apostles' gestures, and (2) that the primary background of these gestures is that of the Semitic culture of the working class in Roman Palestine during the early first century AD. This view finds support in the continuity of gestures described in ancient Near Eastern sources, the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the New Testament. To be sure, Hellenistic culture also exerted a strong influence on the society in which Jesus lived, and this probably included the emulation of Greek gestures and manners of speaking among the elite elements of society. The members of the Herodian ruling family, some religious leaders such as the Sadducees, publicans such as the apostle Matthew, and Roman citizens such as Paul certainly fell into this category. But for the working-class families of Jesus and most of the apostles, as well as the majority of those among whom Jesus ministered, the body language most often employed would be the same that had been passed down from ancient generations of Semitic ancestors.

After the New Testament itself, the most important primary sources for the study of nonverbal communication in the New Testament are the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature (including the Mishnah, the later but more extensive Palestinian Talmud, and the Aramaic translations of the scriptures known as the Targums), and early Christian writings. Jewish and early Christian iconography helps to shed light on some gestures. Our necessary reliance on these ancient sources means that we are limited to certain kinds of body language that were thought to be important enough to record in writing or to memorialize in art, such as gestures used in performing miracles and in ritual. This, of course, represents only a small fraction of the nonverbal signs that Jesus and those around him must have used when they communicated. Nevertheless, the gestures that are mentioned in the New Testament record are an important witness to the faith of early believers, who sought not only to hear the words of Jesus and his apostles but also to know and emulate their actions.

The discussion that follows progresses from gestures employing individual body parts to postures of the whole body and finally to vocalics. The gestures are organized according to the body part that performs the gesture: first the hands, including the extending of one hand, the extending of two hands, and gestures involving physical contact with another person; then other parts of the body, including the eyes and the lips.

Raising the Right Hand in Oath

In Revelation 10:5–6, John sees an angel who with one foot on the earth and the other on the sea, raises his right hand and swears that certain signs are about to be fulfilled. The Greek expression used here is *airō tēn cheira tēn dexian eis ton ouranon*, “lift up the right hand toward heaven.” The raising of the right hand in oath is frequently attested in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 14:22–23; Exodus 6:8; Numbers 14:30; Deuteronomy 32:40–41; Ezra 10:18–19;

Nehemiah 9:15; Job 31:21–22; Psalm 106:26–27; Ezekiel 20:5–6, 15, 23, 28, 42; 36:7; 44:12; 47:14). David Seely provides a thorough discussion of this gesture in his article “The Raised Hand of God as an Oath Gesture.”⁸

Many have noted the similarity between Revelation 10:5–6 and Daniel 12:7, in which an angel lifts both hands toward heaven and swears that certain signs will be accomplished at a specified time. This suggests that the imagery of the passage in John’s revelation is influenced by the Daniel passage.⁹ However, the angel lifts only one hand here, while in Daniel 12:7 it is explicit that both the right and the left hands are used. So even if the imagery is influenced by the Daniel passage, the gesture itself bears independent witness to a one-handed oath gesture.

Other sources indicate that raising the hand in oath was also a common practice in the Holy Land around the time of the New Testament. In a scroll of Genesis and Exodus from the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QGen-Exod^a), the phrase *ns’ty ’tydy* “I lifted up my hand” in Exodus 6:8 is replaced by the word *nšb ’t[y]* “I swore.” In Targum Neofiti (an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, dating to sometime in the first four centuries AD), the translation adds the word *bšbw ’h* “in oath” to phrases describing the lifting of the hand in Genesis 14:22 and Deuteronomy 32:40. These expansions are likely intended to prevent confusion with other hand-lifting gestures that have other meanings. Thus, even though it is a heavenly being that performs the gesture in Revelation 10:5–6, the gesture would have been easily recognizable to John the Revelator.

The raising of the hand in oath remains a common practice in the Near East today.¹⁰ The current form of the gesture, with the hand raised approximately to the square, the palm facing forward, is found in iconography from the time of the Old Testament and likely represents the New Testament–period form of the gesture as well.¹¹

Extending the Hand to Speak

Five passages in the book of Acts describe a gesture using one hand in the context of addressing a group of people. Three different Greek idioms are used, the first two of which use the same verb: *kataseiō tē cheiri* “motion with the hand,” *kataseiō tēn cheira* “wave the hand,” and *ekteinō tēn cheira* “extend the hand.” The instances are as follows:

Reference	Greek idiom	Complete phrase	Larger context
Acts 12:17	<i>kataseiō tē cheiri</i>	“he motioned to them with his hand to be silent”	Peter speaking to a small group of saints gathered at a woman’s house in Jerusalem, he having just appeared after his deliverance from prison.
Acts 13:16	<i>kataseiō tē cheiri</i>	“he motioned with his hand”	Paul at a synagogue, addressing the congregation after the rulers of the synagogue have invited men of the congregation to speak.

Reference	Greek idiom	Complete phrase	Larger context
Acts 19:33	<i>kataseiō tēn cheira</i>	“he waved his hand”	Alexander (a Jew) attempting to address a rioting crowd in a theater in Ephesus; his speech is cut off by the people’s shouting.
Acts 21:40	<i>kataseiō tē cheiri</i>	“he motioned with his hand to the people”	Paul addressing an angry crowd on the stairs between the temple and the Roman fortress in Jerusalem; the gesture is followed immediately by the people becoming silent, after which Paul speaks to them in Hebrew/Aramaic.
Acts 26:1	<i>ekteinō tēn cheira</i>	“he extended his hand”	Paul addressing King Agrippa after the king has given him permission to speak.

In each case, the phrase mentioning the gesture is immediately followed by a phrase describing speech (or, in the case of Acts 19:33, an attempt to speak).

Some interpreters consider the gesture in all of the passages above to be the same. According to Burke, the phrases with *kataseiō* all describe “the gesture a public speaker uses either to gain the crowd’s attention or quiet it down before beginning his speech,” and the instance with *ekteinō* in Acts 26:1 refers to “the same motion.”¹² The New International Version (NIV) echoes this interpretation by rendering all three phrases consistently as “he motioned (with his hand).” However, some other translations, including the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), distinguish between the two verbs that are used, rendering only the instances with *kataseiō* as the motion for silence.¹³

On a basic level, the gesture descriptions and the contexts in which they occur point to a single gesture. All the passages describe a person lifting one hand toward a group of people immediately before delivering a speech. However, as Ray Birdwhistell has shown in studies of modern gesture, it is possible for a single gesture to have multiple forms or modulations. For example, one can modify a military salute by exaggerating it, performing it in a casual way, performing it stiffly, or holding it longer or shorter.¹⁴ This seems to be the case with the speech gesture. One can discern two forms corresponding to the verbs *kataseiō* “motion, wave” and *ekteinō* “extend,” the one denoting movement and the other a static pose. The different verbs also correspond to a crucial difference in context. Where *kataseiō* is used, the speaker does not already have the attention of the audience, and the text sometimes mentions the quieting down of the audience as a purpose or a result of the gesture. In the one case where *ekteinō* is used, the speaker (Paul) already has his audience’s attention and has just been given permission to speak. The two idioms in Acts 19:33 and 26:1, one with *kataseiō* and the other with *ekteinō*, are so similar otherwise that one suspects the difference of verb to be significant, especially since we are dealing with a single composition. Thus, it seems that the speech gesture, although basically one gesture, has one form involving rapid movement to gain the attention of the audience and a more static form for addressing an audience that is already listening.

The literature on this speech gesture generally places it in a Greco-Roman context.¹⁵ In favor of this view is the fact that Jesus is never described as performing this gesture (the idiom *ekteinō tēn cheira* describes a gesture Jesus performs before speaking in Matthew 12:49, but the context indicates that this is more of a pointing gesture than a rhetorical accompaniment to speech), and those who perform it are mostly hellenized Jews (Peter in Acts 12:17 is an exception to this). However, it is also possible to put the gesture in a Semitic context. In Proverbs 1:24, the personified Lady Wisdom says, “I called, but you refused; I extended my hand, but none heeded.” The Hebrew gesture idiom, *nātâ yād*, is a precise equivalent to the Greek *ekteinō tēn cheira*. The expected outcome of the gesture, “giving heed,” corresponds to the results following the use of the gesture in such passages as Acts 21:40 (in particular, the refusal to give heed recalls Acts 19:33). The Greek translation of Proverbs 1:24 in the Septuagint renders the gesture idiom as *exeteinon logous* “I spoke at length” (literally “I extended words”), showing that this Israelite gesture was understood as one of rhetorical speech. Returning to the examples of the gesture in Acts, the ones who perform it are consistently Jews, and Paul does it while speaking Aramaic. Peter does it when addressing Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. In Acts 19:33–34, the crowd recognizes that Alexander is a Jew before he starts speaking, which casts doubt on the idea that his gesture is Greek; in fact, it may be Alexander’s gesture that gives away his Jewish identity.

Lifting the Hands in Prayer

In 1 Timothy 2:8, the author expresses to Timothy his wish “that the men in every place should pray lifting up pure hands, free of anger or disputation.” The gesture idiom here is *epairō cheiras* “lift up the hands.” Although the date of 1 Timothy is disputed (proposals range from ca. AD 65 to ca. AD 100), the earliest date is near the end of Paul’s ministry, so those who are to lift their hands in prayer would be mostly gentile converts—particularly at Ephesus, where Timothy was the bishop. Nevertheless, as a sanctioned ritual action, this gesture may be rooted in earlier Jewish Christian practice.

Lifting both hands in prayer is perhaps the best-attested ritual gesture of antiquity. The gesture is found both in iconography and in texts from the Holy Land, starting in the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000–1500 BC) and continuing throughout late antiquity. The Hebrew Bible contains twenty-two occurrences of the gesture, denoted by six different Hebrew idioms, the most common of which are *pāraś kappayim* “spread the hands” and *nāšā’ yādayim* “lift up the hands.” Discussion of the biblical examples and of the parallels in inscriptions and iconography from the biblical world appears in works by Mayer Gruber, Othmar Keel, and David Calabro.¹⁶

The gesture of lifting both hands in prayer is also found in the Apocrypha (2 Maccabees 3:20; 14:34; 15:12, 21; 3 Maccabees 2:1; 5:25; Tobit 3:11; Sirach 48:20), as well as in many ancient pseudepigraphic texts. One instance found in 1 Enoch 84:1 is particularly comparable to the one in 1 Timothy: “Then I lifted up my hands in righteousness and blessed the Holy and Great One.” There are references to this gesture in 1 Clement 2:3; 29:1, attesting to

the practice of prayer with uplifted hands in the early Christian church. John Tvedtnes has assembled further sources on this gesture, although even this represents only a fraction of the textual and iconographic sources bearing witness to this gesture.¹⁷

In this gesture, the hands were raised in front of the shoulders, or sometimes high above the head, the palms facing forward. This is identical to the gesture, known from ancient Near Eastern iconography, of a supplicant approaching a king; it is likely that the use of this gesture in prayer comes from a notion that prayer is similar to approaching a king with a petition (see Luke 18:1–8).¹⁸ The gesture was also understood symbolically as an exposure of the hands and heart to divine examination (see Isaiah 1:15; Psalm 24:3–4).¹⁹ Ralph F. Wilson contrasts the expression of “openness, invitation, surrender” inherent in the lifting of hands with “childhood instruction to fold little hands in prayer, . . . to keep them out of mischief”—a gesture that, from the ancient Israelite standpoint, would have opposite connotations.²⁰

In Judaism, the lifting of hands in prayer was gradually replaced during the first two centuries AD by a posture of standing with the hands clasped in front, which was understood symbolically as the attitude of a servant before a master.²¹ In western Christianity, the lifting of hands continued until about the thirteenth century AD, when it yielded to the gesture of joining the hands in front of the torso, a gesture similar to that of a vassal taking vows before a suzerain.²²

Lifting the Hands to Bless

According to Luke 24:50, Jesus, addressing his disciples immediately before his ascension into heaven, “lifted up his hands and blessed them.” The Greek idiom here, *epairō tas cheiras*, is practically identical to that in 1 Timothy 2:8; but the context indicates a different gesture, one associated with the blessing of a congregation instead of prayer by a congregation.

A two-handed blessing gesture like the one in Luke 24:50 is mentioned in Leviticus 9:22, in which Aaron lifts up both hands to bestow a blessing on the Israelites. Another instance is found in Sirach 50:20, in which the high priest Simon blesses the congregation at the temple with uplifted hands. The Mishnah and Talmud contain information on the circumstances in which the priest would or would not perform the priestly blessing, and on the ways in which this ritual action differed when performed at the temple in Jerusalem and when performed in other places (Mishnah Berakhot 5:4; Ta’anit 4:1; Megillah 4:3–7; Tamid 7:2; Talmud Bavli Ta’anit 26b).

From the descriptions in the rabbinic sources, it seems that the priestly blessing gesture around the time of Jesus was performed with the palms facing forward, both hands being raised to the height of the shoulders (except when a priest other than the high priest would perform the gesture at the temple, in which case the priest would raise his hands above his head). The gesture is still performed by Kohanim (descendants of Aaron) in Jewish synagogues; it is not known when the distinctive finger articulation of the modern gesture, with the thumbs touching and the fingers of each hand forming a V shape, came into practice.

Laying On of Hands for Healing and Blessing

Many passages in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) describe Jesus healing people by the laying on of hands or by other forms of touch:

Instance	Matthew	Mark	Luke
healing people and casting out devils	—	—	4:40 “he laid his hands on each of them”
healing a leper	8:3 “he extended his hand and touched him”	1:41 “he extended his hand and touched him”	5:13 “he extended his hand and touched him”
Jairus asking Jesus to heal his daughter	9:18 “lay your hand upon her”	5:23 “lay your hands on her”	—
healing two blind men (first instance)	9:29 “he touched their eyes”	—	—
healing sick people in Nazareth	—	6:5 “he laid his hands on them”	—
healing a deaf man	—	7:32–33 “that he might lay his hand on him, . . . he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue”	—
healing a blind man	—	8:22–23, 25 “that he might touch him, . . . he spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him. . . . He laid his hands on his eyes again”	—
healing a crippled woman	—	—	13:13 “he laid his hands on her”
blessing little children	19:13, 15 “that he might lay his hands on them and pray, . . . he laid his hands on them”	10:13, 16 “that he might touch them, . . . he laid his hands on them and blessed them”	Luke 18:15 “that he might touch them”
healing two blind men (second instance)	20:34 “he touched their eyes”	—	—

The most frequent phrase in this context is “lay hands on” (in Greek, *epitithēmi tas cheiras*). The part of the body on which the hands are laid is not usually specified; although we may tend to think of laying hands on the head of the person being blessed, the account of the healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22–23, 25 indicates that the idiom could describe contact with the afflicted part of the body. People asking Jesus to heal in Matthew 9:18 and Mark 7:32 refer to only one hand, but whenever Jesus actually performs the gesture, the phrase includes

both hands (also note that the parallel to Matthew 9:18 in Mark 5:23 refers to both hands). In some instances, the text uses the more ambiguous word *touch* (Greek *haptō*).

In Mark 16:18, as part of Jesus's commission to his disciples after his resurrection (a portion not found in the earliest manuscripts of Mark), he explains that those who are baptized "shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." This is fulfilled in Acts 9:12, 17, in which Ananias lays hands on Paul to restore Paul's sight (note that the KJV has the singular *hand* in verse 12, but the Greek here has the plural, with no significant textual variation). Paul also uses the laying on of hands to heal a man of fever and dysentery on the island of Malta (Acts 28:8). Although the laying on of hands was carried out by mortal men, the early saints believed that there was also an action on the part of God, "extending the hand to heal" (see Acts 4:30).

Some studies have pointed out parallels with Greek sources in which gods and human wonder-workers heal others through touch.²³ However, these similarities do not preclude a Hebrew background for healing and blessing by the laying on of hands in the New Testament. The Old Testament accounts of the miracles of Elijah and Elisha include examples of reviving the dead through touch, although the form of touch in these instances is dissimilar to the New Testament examples (1 Kings 17:21; 2 Kings 4:34–35). More similar from the standpoint of gesture form is the practice of laying hands on another's head to bestow a blessing. We find this gesture in the story of Jacob blessing his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, in which Jacob lays one hand on each child's head (Genesis 48:14, 17–18). In the book of Jubilees, Rebekah lays both her hands on Jacob's head to give him a matriarchal blessing (Jubilees 25:11–15). This gesture of laying hands on another's head has a healing function in an Aramaic text from the Dead Sea Scrolls known as the Genesis Apocryphon, which tells of Abraham praying for the afflicted pharaoh and laying hands on his head, after which the pharaoh recovers from his affliction (1QapGen ar 20.21–22, 28–29).

Laying On of Hands for Confirmation and Ordination

Several passages in Acts and in the New Testament epistles also refer to the laying on of hands (using the same Greek idiom, *epitithēmi tas cheiras*) in the context of bestowing the Holy Ghost, ordaining to an office, or setting apart for a mission:

Acts 6:6: Apostles "appointing" (Greek *kathistēmi*, Acts 6:3) seven men to administer to the temporal needs of the church

Acts 8:17–19: Peter and John bestowing the Holy Ghost on Samaritan believers

Acts 13:3: Saul and Barnabas being "set apart" (Greek *aphorizo*, Acts 13:2) for a mission

Acts 19:6: Paul bestowing the Holy Ghost on baptized believers in Ephesus

1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6: Paul and a group of Ephesian elders bestowing "a gift (of God)" on Timothy, possibly a reference to Timothy's setting apart as bishop of Ephesus

In addition, in Hebrews 6:2, we find mention of “the doctrine of laying on of hands,” indicating that this was not just a customary practice but an established part of church teachings.

The laying on of hands in the Old Testament also occurs in the context of ordination or setting apart. It is this gesture by which the Israelites set apart the Levites for their service (Numbers 8:10), and by which Moses appointed Joshua as his successor (Numbers 27:18; Deuteronomy 34:9). The gesture was also performed on sacrificial animals (Exodus 29:10, 15, 19, and fourteen other verses in Leviticus, Numbers, and 2 Chronicles), on the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:21), and on a person accused of blasphemy (Leviticus 24:14). Some previous studies have argued that there were two different gestures, namely a one-handed gesture used on the sacrificial animal and a two-handed gesture used in other contexts; more recent research, however, indicates that the gesture in all these cases employed both hands.²⁴ This same gesture of the laying on of hands was also used in early Judaism to ordain a rabbi, as described in rabbinic sources.²⁵

Scholarly discussions of the laying on of hands as it appears in the Old and New Testaments most frequently describe it as a gesture of transfer: the hands are understood as a medium by which power, spiritual gifts, and authority are channeled from the one performing the gesture to the one receiving it. For instance, Luke Timothy Johnson, discussing Paul’s reference to the laying of hands on Timothy (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6), states that it is a “ritual gesture for the transmission of power and the bestowal of authority.”²⁶ This understanding is in harmony with Old Testament passages such as Leviticus 16:21 and Numbers 27:16–20. The latter passage also supports an interpretation of the gesture as one of appointing the recipient to a particular status or role, which agrees with Acts 6:3, 6; 13:2–3. Further, the connection with the laying on of hands in the Old Testament means that the rites of confirmation, ordaining, and setting apart in the early church would recall the Jewish rite of sacrifice, which early Christians understood as a type of Christ’s sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:1–13).²⁷

The Healing Handclasp

In addition to healing by the laying on of hands, Jesus often raised others from death or sickness with a handclasp. The Greek idiom is *krateō tēs cheiros* “grasp by the hand,” denoting a firm, sustained handclasp (without any other connotation of movement, unlike the various forms of the modern Western “handshake”). In Mark 1:31, Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law of fever by taking her by the hand and lifting her up (the parallel passage in Matthew 8:15 mentions only touching her hand, while the other parallel in Luke 4:39 does not mention a gesture at all but merely the rebuking of the fever). When Jesus visits the dead daughter of Jairus, he takes the girl by the hand and says to her in Aramaic, *Talitha, koum!* “Little girl, arise!” (Matthew 9:25; Mark 5:41; Luke 8:54). Also relevant, perhaps, is an instance in which Jesus casts an evil spirit out of a boy, and while the boy is then lying down as if dead, Jesus takes him by the hand and lifts him up (Mark 9:27). One can suppose that the boy had gone unconscious and Jesus brought him out of this state with the handclasp as a separate act of

healing. Finally, in Acts 3:7, Peter emulates the Master in healing a crippled beggar, taking him by the right hand and lifting him up.

Self-Lowering Gestures

The gestures of grasping another's feet and washing another's feet may be grouped together because they both involve a very low posture relative to the other person, being therefore similar to prostration (see below). These two gestures were generally performed by women toward men in ancient Israelite society. The first, grasping another's feet, occurs in Matthew 28:9, in which Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, having met Jesus, "came and took hold of his feet, and they prostrated themselves before him." This is comparable to the gesture of the Shunammite woman whose son died, who then beseeched Elisha by grasping his feet (2 Kings 4:27).

In ancient Israel, the washing of the feet of guests was a hospitality rite generally delegated to female servants. If the household had no female servant, water would be provided for the guest to wash his or her own feet (see Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; 1 Samuel 25:41; 2 Samuel 11:8; Song of Solomon 5:3). This custom seems to have continued into New Testament times. Thus, Jesus pointed out to his host, "You gave me no water for my feet, but she has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair" (Luke 7:44). Paul mentions washing the saints' feet (in other words, giving hospitality to members of the church) as one of the characteristics of a righteous widow (1 Timothy 5:10). It may be that Peter's initial objection to Jesus's washing of his feet (John 13:5–9) was a reaction not just to Jesus's humility but to the fact that he was acting in what was traditionally a woman's role.

Rending the Garments

In Matthew 26:65 and the parallel passage in Mark 14:63–64, after Jesus testifies to the Sanhedrin that they will see him sitting on the right hand of God, the high priest tears his own clothes, saying, "He has blasphemed!" Similarly, in Acts 14:14, Paul and Barnabas, after having performed a healing miracle in Lystra, realize that the people believe them to be gods and are about to sacrifice to them; the two missionaries then rend their garments and cry out to the people to desist.

Rending the garments is a well-known sign of grief in the Old Testament. A dramatic example is found in 2 Samuel 13:31, which describes King David tearing his clothes on hearing that his son Absalom has slain all his other sons. The tearing of the clothes at the hearing of blasphemy is a related custom, expressing intense shock like that of hearing for the first time about the death of a loved one. We see this in Numbers 14:6, in which Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes when they hear the people murmur against Moses.

Another illustration of this custom comes from the Palestinian Talmud:

Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish was riding in the street. There met him a Samaritan who went along blaspheming, and each time Rabbi Simeon would rend his garment. This happened again and again, until finally Rabbi Simeon got down from his donkey, struck the Samaritan on the chest, and said to him: “Wicked one! Does your mother have clothing sufficient for me?” Thus it was customary to tear one’s clothes against blasphemy; this custom still survives.²⁸

Lifting the Eyes to Heaven

In addition to lifting the hands, prayer often involved lifting the eyes toward heaven. The Gospels describe Jesus looking up to heaven when blessing the loaves and fishes that miraculously multiply (Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16). He also lifts his eyes toward heaven as he heals a deaf man (Mark 7:34) and as he begins his intercessory prayer (John 17:1). This contrasts with the penitent publican who, considering himself unworthy, will not lift his eyes to heaven as he prays (Luke 18:13).

The lifting of the eyes in prayer is attested in the Old Testament—for example, in Psalm 123:1: “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who sit enthroned in heaven.” It is also found in the Apocrypha (2 Maccabees 15:34; 4 Maccabees 6:26; Tobit 3:12).

This gesture obviously differs from the modern custom of praying with the eyes closed. As the contrast between Jesus’s prayer and that of the publican shows, the lifting of the eyes expresses confidence in God’s favor toward the person doing the gesture. The choice to lift or to lower the eyes thus presupposes an evaluation of one’s current status before God.

Kissing

Kissing in first-century Roman Palestine was a common practice in situations of greeting and leave-taking; the kiss could be exchanged between members of the same gender and did not carry the romantic implications that it does in some cultures today. However, it did carry implications of friendliness and fellowship. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father runs to his returning son and kisses him, a purely nonverbal exchange that leaves no doubt of the father’s readiness to welcome his son (Luke 15:20). The kiss by which Judas betrays Jesus is accompanied by the words “Greetings, Master!” (Matthew 26:49; compare Mark 14:45; Luke 22:47). In Acts 20:37, the Ephesian elders kiss Paul as he takes leave of them, weeping as they do so. Paul exhorts various congregations in his epistles to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26), and Peter also exhorts people similarly (1 Peter 5:14).

Kissing as a gesture of greeting or leave-taking is also frequently attested in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha (Genesis 29:11, 13; 31:28; 32:1; 33:4; 45:15; 48:10; 50:1; Exodus 4:27; Ruth 1:9, 14; Tobit 5:17; 7:6; 10:12). Gruber points out, however, that the examples in the Old Testament are generally between close relatives.²⁹ For instance, three of the instances of kissing in greeting are between brothers (Genesis 33:4; 45:15; Exodus 4:27). This could

provide a key to understanding the “holy kiss” exchanged between Christians: after being brought into the church as children of God, Christians greet one another as siblings.

Although specific evidence of the form of the kiss used in greeting and leave-taking is lacking, it may have been similar to the light kiss on the cheeks used in similar contexts in southern Europe and in Latin America today. It would thus differ from the romantic kiss on the lips (Song of Solomon 1:2; 7:9).

Standing to Pray

Postures of prayer in the New Testament include standing, kneeling, and prostration. The standing posture is attested in Matthew 6:5; Mark 11:25; and Luke 18:11, 13. It is also found in the Old Testament (Psalm 106:30; Jeremiah 18:20; Nehemiah 9:2). In later Judaism, this becomes the posture of the Jewish *‘Amidah* (“standing”) prayer. The symbolism of this posture, as explained in rabbinic literature, points to the posture of a servant before his master, ready to serve.³⁰

Standing to Read or Exhort

In modern Western culture, standing is the usual posture for any situation of public speaking. This posture was used for some of the same situations in the Jewish culture of Roman Palestine, but not for all such situations. In particular, one would stand to read from a text or to deliver a testimony, defense, or exhortation. Thus, Jesus stands to read from the book of Isaiah at a synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16) and to deliver the Sermon in the Plain, a sermon in Luke similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (Luke 6:17). Paul also stands to deliver his witness of the doctrine of Christ (Acts 13:16; 21:40). This is comparable to the Old Testament, in which, for example, Jeremiah stands at the city gate to exhort people (Jeremiah 7:2; 17:19), and Ezra stands to read from the Torah before the congregation (Nehemiah 8:4).

Sitting to Teach or Expound

While standing was used for some kinds of public address, sitting was the expected posture for the teaching or expounding of doctrine. Thus, after standing to read from Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus sits down to expound on what he has read (Luke 4:20). It is also in a sitting posture that Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1). The difference between the sitting posture of the Sermon on the Mount and the standing posture of the Sermon in the Plain corresponds to a difference in the overall tone of the two discourses. The Sermon on the Mount contains numerous quotations of legal sayings from scripture, which Jesus then comments on, all of which reinforces the impression that this is an expounding of doctrine. By contrast, the Sermon in the Plain lacks these references to scripture and is easily interpreted as more of a hortatory sermon. In Matthew 13:1–2, Jesus delivers a series of parables, sitting first on the shore and then, when the multitude becomes

too great, on a boat a short distance from the shore. According to Matthew 26:55, Jesus sat daily to teach in the temple.

Kneeling and Prostration

The typical postures of supplication were kneeling (*gonupeteō*, *tithēmi ta gonata*) and prostration (*proskuneō*, *piptō epi prosōpon*, *piptō pros/para tous podas*, *prospiptō*). There is no discernible difference in function between the two postures, although it would be logical to assume that prostration, with the face all the way to the ground, was a more intense form of self-lowering than mere kneeling. Both postures are attested for those who approached Jesus to beseech him:

Petitioner	Matthew	Mark	Luke
leper	8:2 <i>proskuneō</i>	1:40 <i>gonupeteō</i>	5:12 <i>piptō epi prosōpon</i>
man possessed by demons	—	5:6 <i>proskuneō</i>	8:28 <i>prospiptō</i>
Jairus	9:18 <i>proskuneō</i>	5:22 <i>piptō pros tous podas</i>	8:41 <i>piptō para tous podas</i>
Canaanite woman	15:25 <i>proskuneō</i>	7:25 <i>prospiptō pros tous podas</i>	—
father of epileptic boy	17:14 <i>gonupeteō</i>	—	—
wife of Zebedee	20:20 <i>proskuneō</i>	—	—

The verb *proskuneō* is usually rendered as “worship” in the KJV, and some other translations (NIV, NRSV) render the word as “kneel.” Both of these translations lead to misunderstanding of the text, as the correct meaning of the verb, when used in reference to a physical posture, is “prostrate oneself before.”³¹ Gruber posits that Matthew consistently mentions kneeling in this context, and that Luke consistently mentions falling on the face, while Mark mentions both postures; however, this is based on the understanding of *proskuneō* as “kneel.”³² With the correct understanding of the verb, only the story of the leper shows a difference in posture in the parallel accounts: Mark 1:40 has *gonupeteō* “kneel,” while the parallels in Matthew 8:2 and Luke 5:12 mention prostration.

As attitudes of supplication, kneeling and prostration were also appropriate for prayer. As with the lifting of the hands, the use of these postures in prayer indicates a notion that prayer is like bringing a petition before a king. Both Matthew 26:39 and Mark 14:35 mention Jesus prostrating himself with his face to the ground as he prayed in Gethsemane, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as you will.” The parallel in Luke 22:41 mentions Jesus kneeling and does not mention prostration. This is not necessarily a conflict in the sources, as Jesus could obviously have done both—indeed, prostration typically includes kneeling.

The New Testament records several examples in which a person, having witnessed a miracle, comes to Jesus with prostration. In these cases, the function of the posture seems to be that of worship (which is the meaning of the verb *proskuneō* when used in an abstract sense); it expresses the recognition of Jesus's divinity. In Matthew 14:33, some of Jesus's disciples prostrate themselves to him after seeing him walk on the water. Peter, James, and John prostrate themselves to Jesus after seeing his glory and hearing the voice of the Father bear witness of the Son (Matthew 17:6). A leper whom Jesus has cleansed "falls upon his face" at the feet of Jesus and thanks him (Luke 17:16). The blind man who has been healed prostrates himself to Jesus after Jesus testifies of his divine sonship (John 9:38). Kneeling may have the same function in Romans 14:11 and Philippians 2:10, where Paul states that "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess" when we appear before Christ to be judged.

The Old Testament contains many examples of kneeling (1 Kings 8:54; Daniel 6:10; Psalm 95:6) and especially of prostration (Genesis 18:2; Exodus 34:8; Nehemiah 8:6; Ezekiel 44:4) in contexts that are closely analogous to those in the New Testament, including supplication, prayer, and worship.³³ Kneeling and prostration are also found in the context of prayer in 2 Maccabees 3:20–21 and 3 Maccabees 2:1.

The most obvious formal feature of kneeling and prostration is the lowering of the body. This communicates the basic idea of declaring one's own status to be low relative to another person, which is appropriate for beseeching as well as for worship.

Groaning and Weeping

The Gospels record Jesus sighing (Mark 7:34; 8:12), groaning (John 11:33, 38), and weeping (Luke 19:41; John 11:35), all expressions of sorrow or pity. There is no record in the Gospels of Jesus laughing, although he does speak of his own joy in John 15:11. Others "laughed him to scorn" (Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:40; Luke 8:53).

In several passages, Jesus speaks of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in the context of the punishment of the wicked (Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). The gnashing of teeth (Greek *brugmos tōn odontōn*) in these passages is a sign of intense physical or emotional pain. Elsewhere it is an expression of rage, as when the members of the Sanhedrin gnash their teeth at Stephen after hearing his testimony (Acts 7:54).

Loud Voices

In several instances while making a speech, Jesus is said to "cry" or "call out" the words he is speaking. One passage in Luke uses the Greek word *phōneō* in this context, while the few instances in John use the verb *krazō*; both verbs have to do with calling out in a loud voice. The things Jesus says immediately after his voice raises include the following:

Luke 8:8: "he who has ears to hear, let him hear" (expounding a parable)

John 7:28: "you know me, and you know where I am from" (teaching in the temple)

John 7:37: “if any man thirst, let him come to me, and drink”

John 12:44: “he that believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me”

Whitney Shiner points out the contrast between some modern portrayals of a soft-spoken Jesus and the volume that would be necessary to preach in an ancient environment:

Even when the scene specifies a large crowd, we often think of Jesus speaking as if he were in a rather intimate setting. Movie portrayals of Jesus also perpetuate this image, since even the most lavish spectacle movies do not hire and costume ten thousand extras for crowd scenes and the close-ups of Jesus speaking bring him closer to the viewer. No movie Jesus could ever be heard in the crowds the Gospels report.³⁴

But we should be careful not to overgeneralize this statement. While Jesus must have used a loud voice while speaking in public (and the same would be true for Peter, Paul, and other apostles and missionaries), this does not necessarily apply to other situations. In private situations reported in the Gospels, it is those who are beseeching Jesus who cry out, and his response seems to be softer in contrast (Mark 10:47–52 is representative).

Conclusion

This brief survey shows that gestures and other nonverbal signs have a story to tell. They carry information about the culture of the speaker as well as reflecting the speaker’s communicative intentions, even if we who read the text centuries later may not grasp the full import in the same way that a member of the ancient society would. Paying attention to nonverbal signs is one way in which modern readers can glimpse the multiple layers of meaning of the scriptural text.



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Further Reading

Burgoon, Judee K., David B. Buller, and W. Gill Woodall. *Nonverbal Communication: The Unspoken Dialogue*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996.

Calabro, David M. “Gestures of Praise: Lifting and Spreading the Hands in Biblical Prayer.” In *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, edited by David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey, 105–21. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013.

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- Ehrlich, Uri. *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach to Jewish Liturgy*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004.
- Shiner, Whitney. *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003.

Notes

1. To accurately reflect the Greek gestural idioms, which are often rendered inconsistently in modern translations, I use my own translations of the Greek except where otherwise noted. Likewise, the translations from Aramaic and Hebrew are my own.
2. See Judee K. Burgoon, David B. Buller, and W. Gill Woodall, *Nonverbal Communication: The Unspoken Dialogue* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 18–19.
3. Fernando Poyatos, *New Perspectives in Nonverbal Communication: Studies in Cultural Anthropology, Social Psychology, Linguistics, Literature and Semiotics* (New York: Pergamon, 1983), 175–214.
4. W. Ewing, “Gestures,” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark), 201.
5. David G. Burke, “Gesture,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:449–57; and Mayer I. Gruber, “Gestures,” in *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 372–73.
6. Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 127–42.
7. The literature on this topic is extensive; as a starting place, see Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).
8. David Seely, “The Raised Hand of God as an Oath Gesture,” in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Astrid B. Beck et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 411–21.
9. Eugene P. McGarry, “The Ambidextrous Angel: Inner-Biblical Exegesis and Textual Criticism in Counterpoint,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 2 (2005): 212–14.
10. Robert A. Barakat, “Arabic Gestures,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (1973): 772.
11. See David M. Calabro, “Ritual Gestures of Lifting, Extending, and Claspings the Hand(s) in Northwest Semitic Literature and Iconography” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014), 393–493.
12. Burke, “Gesture,” 453.
13. The NIV, NRSV, and the NJB often clarify the interpretation of the passages with *kataseiō*, adding the phrase “for silence” even when it is not present in the Greek.
14. See Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 79–80.
15. See, for example, Ernst Fuchs, “*Ekteinō*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:460, 463; many sources cite Quintilian’s Latin treatise on oratorical technique, *Institutio oratoria*, 11:3:84ff.
16. Mayer I. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1980), 1:22–50; Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 307–23; David M. Calabro, “Gestures of Praise: Lifting and Spreading the Hands in Biblical Prayer,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 105–21.
17. See John Tvedtnes, “Temple Prayer in Ancient Times,” in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 81–84.
18. See David M. Calabro, “Prayer, Jewish,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall et al. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 10:5505–7.
19. Tvedtnes, “Temple Prayer,” 84; and Calabro, “Gestures of Praise,” 117.

20. Ralph F. Wilson, "Lifting Hands in Worship," *Paraclete* (1986): 6–7.
21. Uri Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach to Jewish Liturgy* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 110–19.
22. See Gerhart B. Ladner, "The Gestures of Prayer in Papal Iconography of the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries," in *Didascaliae: Studies in Honor of Anselm M. Albareda*, ed. Sesto Prete (New York: B. M. Rosenthal, 1961), 245–75; and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 295–97.
23. Eduard Lohse, "Kheir," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 9:425.
24. See David M. Calabro, "A Reexamination of the Ancient Israelite Gesture of Hand Placement," in *Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement in Early Judaism and Christianity: Constituents and Critique*, ed. Henrietta L. Wiley and Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 99–124. As explained in that article, some biblical passages (such as Leviticus 1:4) seem to mention only one hand, but this is due to an error in the vowel markings that were added to the Hebrew text around AD 700.
25. Lohse, "Kheir," 429.
26. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 345.
27. See Calabro, "Reexamination."
28. J. T. Marshall, *Manual of the Aramaic Language of the Palestinian Talmud: Grammar, Vocalized Text, Translation and Vocabulary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), no. 114.
29. Gruber, "Gestures," 373.
30. Ehrlich, *Nonverbal Language of Prayer*, 113.
31. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 882–83.
32. Gruber, "Gestures," 373.
33. See further Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 90–143.
34. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 129.