

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Hand of Man and the Hand of God.

THE God of Israel was a living God (Dt. v. 26; Ps. xlii. 2). He was known to His worshippers as one who, by great power and might had brought the world into being, and who, for His own sake as well as for theirs, never relaxed His vigilance but was always actively working in the maintenance of creation and in life and history of the peoples He had created. They knew Him to be the living God by what they had seen, heard, and felt of His working. When they spoke of that experience of Him their language was simple and straightforward, because they used the terms of common speech and of human intercourse. They spoke of His work in the same terms as they spoke of their own, because they knew no other way. Since He was known to them in what He did rather than in what He was, one of the most frequent terms in use was the "hand" or "hands" of God.

In trying to understand all they meant by their language about God we must understand something of their psychology. It differed from ours in this respect (at least)—that whereas we differentiate the organs of the body, both external and internal, and assign proper functions to each, distinguishing the physical from the psychical, they made no such careful distinctions, but ascribed physical and psychical functions to the same organs as occasion demanded. When we use anthropomorphic terms about God we are careful to distinguish, as far as possible, physical from psychical; and are conscious when we use terms of physical life about God that we are using metaphor or symbol behind which we can look to the reality they express; but when we use psychical terms we cannot easily distinguish the symbol from the reality.¹ The Hebrews could use physical terms and not be conscious of using inappropriate terms; that is, they used the terms literally and not as symbols, even when they appear to us to refer solely to physical life.² In speaking of any activity the Hebrews focussed attention on the part of the body employed, and spoke as though, for the time being, all the rest of the man was concentrated in that part.

¹ E. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, pp. 256ff.

² As time went on some of the terms were felt to be inappropriate, and their crude anthropomorphism was concealed by the LXX translation.

Responsibility for what the parts of the body did was not, therefore, always ascribed to the inner man (heart or soul), but to the particular part involved. In speaking of the hands they did not think of them as the organs of activity governed by the will of the person, but rather as quasi-independent organs in which the whole activity, physical and psychical, was situate for the time of their use.

What may often be metaphorical and symbolic to us was literal to them: we might speak metaphorically of a man's open-handedness, but they could say literally, "For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt surely open thine hand unto thy brother. . ." Dt. xv. 11. In course of time metaphor did develop and stereotyped phrases came into use, but their metaphors always remained alive—the literal meaning clung to them.

We can more easily understand what they meant by the hand of God, if we examine how much they meant by the hand of man. It will be seen that they meant not simply the physical organ of manual activity, but also the whole active and dynamic life of the man himself operative through the hand.

In a few passages the term "hands" seems to be used almost as a synonym of the personal pronoun,³ while in four instances the hands are mentioned as the opposite of "heart" (*leb*), that is, just as the heart stands for the whole inner life of man so the hands stand for the whole outward activity.⁴ A man's strength is revealed through his activity, and since that, in turn, is shown largely through what his hands do, the hands may be spoken of where we should speak of strength, power, or influence; thus when the men of Ai saw their city in flames they "had no hands" and could flee neither this way nor that.⁵

The hands were often used when it was desired to transmit some kind of personal influence or power from one to another. The touch of the hand, whether on the hand, or head, or any other part of the body, is a significant and often a solemn thing, since most people are sensitive to touch. Hand-shaking is very common among us as a gesture of friendship and greeting: among the Hebrews it was customary to ratify an agreement or a bargain with a handsake.⁶ When an oath was made the hand was sometimes raised,⁷ but the more solemn procedure was for

³ cf. Prov. xxi. 25; Ps. xviii. 20; this is paralleled by the use of "face" in the same way, 2 Sam. xvii. 11; and the refrain of Pss. xlii., xliii.

⁴ cf. Is. xiii. 7; xxxv. 3, 4; Ezek. xxi. 7; xxii. 14.

⁵ Josh. viii. 20. cf. also Jer. xxxiv. 1; Is. xlv. 9; 1 Sam. xxii. 17.

⁶ Ex. xxiii. 1; Job xvii. 3; Hos. vii. 5; and with the palm of the hand—Prov. vi. 1; xvii. 18; xxii. 26.

⁷ Gen. xiv. 22.

the man making the oath to place his hand under the thigh of the other person.⁸ The full significance of this act is not known, but evidently it was believed that some vital force or influence was conveyed from one to the other through the hand. In the different forms of benediction and consecration that are mentioned in the Old Testament the hands are used.⁹ Joshua was not only consecrated for leadership but also *equipped for it* by the laying on of Moses' hands: "And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him:"¹⁰ The act of laying the hand on the victim in certain sacrifices was intended to identify the offering with the offerer as *his* gift to God. Manual contact might also be made for the purpose of healing or restoring life: "And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands. . ." II Kgs. iv. 34.

There are a few instances of the same sort of influence being conveyed without contact.¹¹ Naaman the Syrian had expected Elisha to come out to him and "wave his hand over the place" and heal him (2 Kgs. v. 11). At the battle of Rephidim the issue of the battle was determined by the holding up of Moses' hands (Ex. xvii.). The priestly benediction was pronounced with the hands raised towards the people (Lev. ix. 22). Here we are on the threshold of the use of the hand in speaking of God, for both Moses and the priests were acting for God. When Moses stretched forth his hand in order to bring the plagues on Egypt he was making a gesture that was normally one of command (Prov. i. 24), but there was more than command in the raising of Moses' hands, for even lifeless things responded to it. Moses was acting for God, and the power of God was at work through his hand. We frequently read of God's hand being outstretched in a similar kind of way to achieve His purpose.

Through his hands a man's strength and vigour find their natural outlet, and through his hands he can both work for, and influence, his children and his fellow-men, whether friend or enemy. They constitute his outer self in a way that no other part of the body can do.

It is but natural that if he knows God to be at work, working for him, and influencing him, he should think of God's work

⁸ Gen. xxiv. 2, 9; xlvii. 29.

⁹ Gen. xlviii. 14, 17, 18: evidently priority in this usage belonged to the right hand—as it did in many other things.

¹⁰ Deut. xxxiv. 9; cf. Num. xxvii. 18, 23.

¹¹ They are of the same kind as in magical practices, see art. "Hands" in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*.

in the same way—as the work of His hands. There is no intention to use symbolism, (though it is a very happy thing that their usage lent itself so easily to development along the lines of metaphor and symbol). What he said about the hands of God—unless he used phrases that were already metaphorical—he meant literally. As far as he knew God's form was like man's, and to Him might be ascribed any part of the body that was used in intercourse with men. The difference lay not in the form, but in the substance: God was spirit, man was flesh (Is. xxxi. 3).

God's strength and power, His goodness and mercy,¹² His capacity to deliver,¹³ or to destroy,¹⁴ to heal¹⁵ or to kill,¹⁶ are all suggested by the Hebrew use of the term "hand of God". Nearly one sixth of the instances of the word "hand" in the Old Testament are references to God's hand or hands. Naturally they have not all the same importance, and some occur in stereotyped phrases that mark them immediately as metaphorical or figurative, e.g. "in the hand of", "by the hand of", "from the hand of", to stretch out (Heb. send) the hand".

God's work in creation, and in history, is likened to that of the craftsman making and fashioning with his hands.¹⁷ The world itself, or any part of it, could be spoken of as the work of God's hands,¹⁸ but so also could mankind,¹⁹ and since God was always controlling the events of history they too were called the work of His hands.²⁰

Israel's experience of Yahweh's work was not confined to His creative work or to His power to conserve what He had made; they had experienced His power to redeem and to deliver. He revealed Himself to them more intimately in His redeeming activity: it was to redeem His people that He came in person, and we read of theophanies and of the expectation of theophanies to come. It is no wonder that a people who knew God to have come in person to redeem them should speak of the deliverance wrought by His hands.²¹ There were always two sides to deliverance—the rescue to freedom or pardon, and the conquest of the enemy or the evil. The picture underlying many

¹² Ps. xvi. 11, civ. 28.

¹³ Ps. cxxxviii. 7.

¹⁴ Ex. ix. 3, 15.

¹⁵ Job v. 18.

¹⁶ Ex. xxiv. 11.

¹⁷ Ps. xcvi. 5; Is. xlvi. 13; Job x. 8; Is. xli. 20.

¹⁸ Is. xlv. 11, Pss. viii. 6, xix. 1, cii. 25.

¹⁹ Is. xix. 25, Job xiv. 15.

²⁰ Is. v. 12, Pss. xxviii. 5, xcii. 4, cxi. 7.

²¹ Ps. xcvi. 1.

of the references to God's deliverance of His people is that of the warrior with strong hand and outstretched arm fully able to challenge and to overcome all adversaries :

Thy right hand, O Lord, is glorious in power,
Thy right hand, O Lord, dasheth in pieces the enemy.

Ex. xv. 6.

It was thus that He delivered His people from the land of bondage, and they remembered that act as the work of God's strong hand till the term became a technical one for the power of God shown at the Exodus : " For they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy mighty hand, and of thy stretched out arm " 1 Kings viii. 42, and in one instance it is abbreviated to " hand " simply (Ps. lxxviii. 42). His hand was never 'found to be too short to redeem His own people,²² but it could also be stretched out to smite such foes as the arrogant Assyrian,²³ and was heavy and harsh against other enemies.²⁴

Man's hand can be bountiful, especially that of a king,²⁵ but God's hand " satisfieth the desire of every living thing ",²⁶ A beginner must be helped by the expert in a number of ways, and his hands must be guided and steadied by the hands of his teacher : Israel's experience of Yahweh had sometimes been that of teacher and taught (Ps. xviii. 35, Gen. xlix. 24, Ps. lxxxix. 21).

More in keeping with the spirit of later Yahwism in which prowess in the field began to give place to the dignity of moral life is the idea of Yahweh's hand as the compelling force behind the prophet, strengthening him and inspiring him for his work. There is far more in this thought than that of the laying on of hands to consecrate to office, though doubtless that is taken up into it. Ezekiel, knowing himself to be filled with power more than his own, to be given a message not entirely (if at all, as far as he knew) of his own making, and to be urged onward even physically from outside himself, spoke of the hand of God being upon him,²⁷ and at another time of a hand thrust out before him in which was the roll of a book for him to devour.²⁸ Jeremiah, when he first felt within him the urge to prophesy, demurred because he felt himself incompetent to undertake it : " Then said I, Ah, Lord God, behold I cannot speak, for I am but a child. . . . Then the Lord put forth His hand, and

²² Num. xi. 23, Is. i. 2.

²³ Is. xiv. 26, 27.

²⁴ 1 Sam. v. 6, 7.

²⁵ 1 Kings x. 13.

²⁶ Ps. cxlv. 16, cf. also civ. 28.

²⁷ Ez. i. 3, iii. 22, viii. 1, xxxiii. 22.

²⁸ Ez. ii. 9ff.

touched my mouth; and the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words into thy mouth. . . ." ²⁹ Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah ascribe their prophetic inspiration to the direct working of God in (and on) them, a working of God which was semi-physical and which they described as the immediate work of His hands. There is a similar tactual consciousness in the consecration of Isaiah to his prophetic work, but his description of it in his inaugural vision is that a seraph touched his lips with a live coal from the altar and thus purged his lips. Once Isaiah speaks of the hand of God: "For the Lord spake thus to me with a strong hand (Heb. with strength of hand) and instructed me that I should not walk the way of this people. . . ." ³⁰

God was always at work in the world; sometimes with great power overthrowing one nation in order to plant another, punishing this nation for its arrogance and another (His own people not excepted) for its sin, sometimes more intimately entering into the life of an individual and strengthening him for his task, purging him of his sin, equipping him for his mission or giving him the words he must utter in God's name. In many ways and at all times men might be aware of God at work, might be aware of Him shaping their lives, moulding their character, imposing His will on them. All these things they knew to be the work of the living God who could come personally and take into His own hands the course of their lives. If God was at work, and if they could often feel His activity—physically as well as psychically or spiritually—it was natural that they should speak of His hands as the instruments of that work. If a man's whole active life found its proper outlet in what his hands did, was it not natural to think that God's activity should have a similar outlet? When they spoke of God's hand they meant His activity in the world of men—an activity against which there could be no withstanding. His hand was His power. "Therefore, behold, this once will I cause them to know mine hand and my might: and they shall know that my name is Yahweh."³¹ The Hebrews have left us a great inheritance of religious vocabulary in their use of language about God, and the use of the word hand is a good example of this. They were using language that could be readily understood and which has lent itself to adaptation. They spoke simply of God's hand where we should probably say God's power as symbolized by His hand. The Septuagint translators did not stumble over this particular anthropomorphism as they did over others (viz. "face"), and though in seven instances they paraphrased the clause where "hand" is

²⁹ Jer. i. 6, 9.

³⁰ Is. viii. 11.

³¹ Jer. xvi. 21, cf. Ps. cix. 27, Job xxvii. 11.

mentioned, in only two did they render it by "power."³² We still speak of the hand of God, and though we know it to be a symbol it is such a forcible symbol that we should only relinquish it with difficulty. "The figure of the hand makes us feel God's action as the simple direct act of an Almighty Person more vividly."³³ As a striking example of the devotional use of the figure, we may instance a sentence from the *Theologia Germanica*, that notable anticipation of Luther's faith: "I would fain be to the Eternal Goodness, what his own hand is to a man."

L. H. BROCKINGTON.

³² Josh. iv. 24, Ezra viii. 22.

³³ E. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, p. 259.

THE LOWER MEETING, NEWBURY. Baptismal Registers belonging to the Independents in Berkshire, now deposited at Somerset House, contain the following entry, relating to some activities of Francis Lewis, the Baptist minister:—

"In the years 1769 and 1770 the Anabaptists, by their usual methods (which are well known to those who are acquainted with them), made an attack upon the above church; and nine persons were prevailed upon to deny their infant baptism; however, the church having met and resolved that whoever were Anabaptists amongst us should be only considered as occasional communicants, presently after this four of the members left us and joined the Anabaptist church. But the Lord blessed the following methods to prevent the error spreading any further, viz. :—Preaching upon the infant's right to this seal of the Covenant; and public baptizing—which I pray God may never more be disused in this church. J. Reader."

W.T.W.