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THE LAYING ON OF HANDS: ITS ORIGIN AND MEANING.

IMPOSITION of hands is a rite, as far as I know, quite peculiar to the religion of the Bible. If it is really so, this is a strange circumstance, for the ceremony seems to have its roots in ideas which must have prevailed almost universally. Neither, however, in Hinduism, nor in Graeco-Roman paganism, have I seen or heard or read of anything like it. There is no allusion to such a practice in Frazer's book, *The Golden Bough*, notwithstanding the wonderful extent of the field of magical practices which it surveys. We are therefore justified in regarding the Bible as the sole source of information with regard to it, and we shall do well to consider the Old and New Testaments separately. Our safest course, moreover, will be to follow the inductive method, to get all our facts before us successively, and draw our inferences from them, and, if we can, throw over them a hypothesis which will account for them all, and perhaps enable us to get behind them.

I. THE OLD TESTAMENT.

In the Old Testament, then, we find the following facts.

In certain sacrifices the offerer laid his hands on the head of the victim. This was done in the case of the Burnt-offering,¹ of the Peace-offering,² of the Sin-offering,³ of the Ram of Consecration,⁴ and of the Goat for Azazel (the scape-goat).⁵ Careful examination of these instances reveals four facts well worthy of observation, namely, first, that the ceremony only took place in the case of *zebahim*, i.e., of animal sacrifices for atonement or communion; further it was used only in those sacrifices of which the offerer did not himself partake at all; then, as a rule, where this rite was used, the blood was not applied to the worshipper, the only exception being in the case of the Ram of Consecration; and, lastly, all the statements

¹ Lev. i. 4.

² Lev. iii. 2.

³ Lev. iv. 4, 15, 24, 29.

⁴ Ex. xxix. 19; Lev. viii. 22.

⁵ Lev. xvi. 21.

about this rite in sacrifice are found in the Priestly Code, except the late passage, 2 Chron. xxix. 23.

Since then the laying on of the hands was employed only in atonement-sacrifices, and, as a rule, only in those of them in which the blood was not applied to the worshipper, we shall probably be justified in inferring that it served the same purpose as the application of the blood, the purpose, that is, of all such sacrifices, namely, the renewing of communion, originally the blood-bond, between God and the worshipper. The application of the blood to the altar and to the worshipper was for the renewing of the bond of a common life between God and the man. The laying on of hands, then, was a milder way of doing this, of connecting the life of the victim with the life of the worshipper. That it is found only in the Priestly code fits in well with the inference that it was a milder substitute for the cruder early practice, for we should expect such gentler substitutions to appear and be recorded at a comparatively late date. That the application of the blood survived along with it in the consecration of the Priests is what we should have expected from the principle that religious conservatism is directly proportional to immunity from the influence of the broader stream of human life.

A certain difficulty, however, meets us here. We can easily understand that, where the blood was identified with the life, the application of it to the worshipper was thought to make him share in the life of the victim, but how should the laying on of hands be regarded as a means of doing so? There are two lines of evidence that will assist us in answering this question. First, it was not only the blood, but also the fat of the vitals that was regarded as being the seat of life. In the Mosaic Law the eating of the fat was forbidden as well as of the blood.¹ Just as the blood was applied by sprinkling, so the fat was applied by smearing. It has been thought that the use of unguents originated from this, and one can understand how, in agricultural communities, vegetable oil came to be substituted for this fat of smearing. Robertson Smith tells us² that "the Hebrew word, meaning, to anoint (*māshah*), means properly to wipe or stroke with the hand, which was used to spread the unguent over the skin"; and again the same authority states that this "anointing of the sacred

¹ Lev. iii. 16, 17.

² *Religion of Semites*, p. 233.

symbol is associated with the simpler form of homage common in Arabia, in which the hand was passed over the idol (*tamassoh*).¹ Thus we find anointing and stroking with the hand equivalent to each other. It is but a little step from stroking with the hand to laying on of the hand.

This discussion leads us on naturally to another matter, association by physical contact, which will, perhaps, shed light upon our subject. In this connexion we must refer again to Robertson Smith. He has pointed out² that "the ancient Semites, like other early races, deemed holiness to be propagated by physical contact," and the same rule applies to uncleanness also. This may be abundantly illustrated from Ezekiel and from the Levitical Law. It is enacted in Ezek. xliv. 19, that when the priests go "into the outer court to the people, they shall put off their garments wherein they minister, and lay them in the holy chambers, and they shall put on other garments, that they sanctify not the people with their garments." Again, in the Levitical Law it is written³ that "whatsoever shall touch the flesh thereof (that is, of the Sin-offering) shall be holy: and when there is sprinkled of the blood thereof upon any garment, thou shalt wash that whereon it was sprinkled in a holy place. But the earthen vessel wherein it was sodden shall be broken: and if it be sodden in a brazen vessel, it shall be scoured, and rinsed in water." If a man touched an unclean thing, he became unclean; if his clothes touched a holy thing, they became holy, that is, taboo from ordinary use. Persons might be, as it were, charged with holiness, and contact with them would infect others, as we find in Isaiah lxv. 5, which Robertson Smith translates,⁴ "Touch me not for I would sanctify thee." This is probably only an instance of a still wider principle, that everything has a character of its own which rays out from it, as it were, and infects other things also if they come in contact with it. The more active properties will, of course, overcome the less active; that which has positive properties will impress itself upon that which is neutral.

Thus in the law of the cleansing of a leper,⁵ two clean birds formed part of the sacrifice required. One was

¹ Ibid. p. 233.

² Ibid. pp. 146-156, and add. note B, p. 446.

³ Lev. vi. 27, 28.

⁴ *Religion of Semites*, p. 451, note.

⁵ Lev. xiv.

killed, and association between the man and the living bird was created through the medium of the bird that was killed, for this was applied to both. The man has been positively unclean and the bird neutral, for, though it was clean, it was not "holy." By contact, then, through the blood the man's uncleanness was transmitted to the bird, and it was then allowed to fly away. Afterwards contact was made between God and the man through the medium of the oil, part of which was sprinkled before the Lord, and part poured on the man's head. By this the degree of holiness of a clean Israelite was imparted to the man. With this compare the law of the goat for Azazel,¹ where the contact was made by imposition of hands.² In the case of the scapegoat, Aaron was to act for the whole people in laying his hands on the head of the goat, and by his confession he was to specify what the taint was which he wished to be transferred to the goat. This confession introduces an ethical character into the rite which originally it did not possess. Even here, however, there is nothing to indicate prayer. Let this much suffice in regard to the laying on of the hands in sacrifice and its rationale.

A second Old Testament use of the rite of laying on of hands is that which we find in Lev. xxiv. 10-16. We find there the story of the son of Shelomith, who blasphemed, and it is commanded (v. 14) that the witnesses should lay their hands upon his head before the congregation should stone him. One might conjecture here that the act was an acceptance of responsibility on the part of the witnesses, or a public marking out by them of the offender that no mistake might be made, but probably the true explanation is that the blasphemies that were uttered were conceived of as actually polluting those who heard them, and that, as in the case of the scapegoat, this pollution was conveyed back to the blasphemer by the laying on of the hands.

Another use still is that enjoined in Num. viii. 10. There we are told that the children of Israel were to "put their hands upon the Levites" in the course of their consecration to the service of the Tabernacle. All through that account the Levites are regarded as an offering, as in v. 11, "And Aaron shall offer the Levites before the Lord for an offering³ of the children of Israel." Here, therefore, the act

¹ Lev. xvi.

² v. 21. See also Robertson Smith, *Religion of Semites*, p. 447.

³ *tenuphah*.

clearly had its sacrificial meaning, and expressed association of the people at large with the Levites who represented and acted for them in the Tabernacle. This instance leads up naturally enough to the next, because it also is concerned with what we should call ordination. In Num. xxvii. 18 Moses is commanded by God to take Joshua and to lay his hands upon him. The execution of the command is recorded in v. 23, "And he laid his hands upon him, and gave him a charge." It may be that the significance of Moses' act here was simply association of Joshua with himself for the purpose indicated in v. 20, "Thou shalt put of thine honour upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may obey." It was thus a public acknowledgement of Joshua as the heir of Moses' authority. The qualification for the exercise of this authority Joshua is in this narrative regarded as possessing already, as is plain from v. 18, where it is said, "Take thee Joshua, the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him." But in Deut. xxxiv. 9 a real efficacy is attributed to the act: "And Joshua, the son of Nun, was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him." According to this, "the spirit of wisdom" was actually conveyed through the imposition of hands. In both these passages the significance of the act is clearly the close association which it established. In the first the imparting of a status by physical contact is emphasized; in the second that of a religious quality or energy.

In another case of laying on of hands in the Old Testament the Hebrew verb is a different one. *Shith* is used instead of *Samakh*. It is in the account of Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph.¹ The blessing itself took the form of a prayer.² The passage is much earlier than any we have discussed hitherto, for, according to Dr. Driver, it is a blend of J and E. Here, however, also the conception no doubt is that Jacob possessed a spiritual energy which he was able to impart through physical contact, so that he could not only pray that the boys might be blessed, or predict that they should be so, but was even able to impart the blessing to them. We know that in primitive thought a curse once uttered was a new malign spiritual force introduced into the order of things, which went on executing

¹ Gen. xlviii. 14, 17.

² See vv. 15, 16.

itself. No doubt Jacob's blessing is regarded as a spiritual force, benign in its operation. This explanation brings this instance into line with the others, and it is always better to explain a matter by an independently ascertained *vera causa* than by a mere conjecture.

It might almost seem as if we had something like the laying on of hands for a curative purpose in 2 Kings v. 11, where Naaman said that he had expected that Elisha would "wave his hand over the place." Even if, however, that translation is right, "waving" a hand over a place would hardly be physical contact. The translation of the Authorized Version, "Strike," is manifestly wrong. The best authority¹ explains the meaning to be "wave his hand towards" the place, that is, towards the sanctuary. Better instances of physical contact to convey curative energy are to be found in the account of the restoration to life of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah, where it is said that the prophet "stretched himself upon the child three times,"² and in the somewhat similar account of Elisha's resuscitation of the son of the Shunammite woman³: "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: and he stretched himself upon him." In both these cases, indeed, the cure is attributed to, or connected with, prayer,⁴ and yet it is implied that there was a virtue in the contact. In neither case, however, was this contact made by laying on of hands. Besides the case of Naaman there is no other miracle of healing in the Old Testament, unless, indeed, the restoration of Jeroboam's hand.⁵ There is one other instance of the restoration of a dead person to life. It is that told of in 2 Kings xiii. 21, where a dead man came to life when his body was laid upon the bones of Elisha. That again is a case of physical contact. The bones are conceived of as charged with miraculous power which on contact operates mechanically and restores to life the dead man.

To sum up then, in the Old Testament physical contact is conceived of as the means of conveying status or spiritual energy from one person to another. Broadly

¹ *Oxford Hebrew Lexicon*.

² 1 Kings xvii. 21.

³ 2 Kings iv. 34.

⁴ 1 Kings xvii. 22; 2 Kings iv. 33.

⁵ 1 Kings xiii. 6.

speaking, we may say that this conveyance of status or energy was thought to take place mechanically. It did not depend on prayer at all, and not even in all cases on intention, though the special intention with which it was done did in many cases direct and perhaps modify it. It is in connexion with sacrifice that this principle is most fully exemplified. There originally, in all probability, the contact was made by the application of blood, either the application of the blood of the worshipper to the altar,¹ or the application of kindred blood to both the worshipper and the altar. Afterwards the contact was created by the application of oil instead of blood in the same way in which the blood had been applied, or by the laying of the hands of the worshipper on the victim and the application of the blood of the victim then to the altar. The laying on of hands, therefore, is only the mild attenuated survival of, or substitute for, the original more expressive, if also more barbarous, application of blood. The same significance underlies all three, the smearing of blood or vital fat, the anointing with oil and the laying on of hands.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT.

Now we pass on to the New Testament. We take it as axiomatic that the New is to be interpreted in the light of the Old, which means that, wherever the New Testament facts or statements admit of the interpretation which obtains in the Old, that interpretation is to be taken as the right one.

We find then, in the first place, in the New Testament that in the Gospels and the Acts laying on of hands or touching is frequently spoken of in connexion with healing. In one place² it is said that prayer also was used. St. James, too, in his Epistle lays great stress on prayer for healing,³ though he speaks of anointing also. This anointing for healing of which he speaks, and which is also mentioned in St. Mark vi. 13, is of considerable interest and importance. No one could maintain, as Bishop Burnet does about the laying on of hands, that anointing is "only a gesture in prayer" or "only a designation of the persons

¹ Of which there is probably an instance in 1 Kings xviii. 28.

² Acts xxviii. 8.

³ St. James v. 14, 15.

so prayed over," and, if its significance can be determined, this may throw light on the meaning of the imposition of hands. According to Robertson Smith,¹ in Semitic religion unguents originally had "an equivalent value to blood." The use of oil was, as we saw above, originally an attenuated form of the application of blood, which was the strongest form of the physical contact by which intimate association was brought about. And therefore anointing and imposition of hands are parallel to each other, both being milder ways of doing what was originally done by the application of blood. And so we may conclude that in healing the laying on of hands was not "only a gesture in prayer," but had an efficacy either actual or sacramental.

Prayer, no doubt, often accompanied the anointing or laying on of hands or touching for healing, but we are never told so in the case of our Lord, though perhaps a prayer is implied in His looking up to heaven and sighing, as we are told He did in St. Mark vii. 32-34, and also what He said at the raising of Lazarus² certainly seems to mean that it was His custom to pray when working miracles. And yet it is quite clear that physical contact with Him was thought of as a channel through which healing virtue flowed, quite independently of any definite prayer. This appears in the narrative about the woman with the issue of blood who expected to be healed, and was healed, by touching His garment,³ and in the statement of St. Matt. xiv. 36, that the sick people "besought him that they might only touch the border of his garment: and as many as touched were made whole." This principle is put in a more extreme form in the cases of St. Peter and St. Paul in the Acts, where it is said of the one that the sick were healed by the mere falling of his shadow on them,⁴ and of the other that cures were effected by the application to the sufferers of handkerchiefs or aprons that had been in contact with his body.⁵

Here, then, laying on of hands, or indeed touching in other ways, has exactly the Old Testament significance of association by physical contact, through which spiritual

¹ *Religion of Semites*, p. 383.

² St. John xi. 41, 42.

³ St. Mark v. 28, 29.

⁴ Acts v. 15, 16.

⁵ Acts xix. 12.

force is transmitted. In the matter of healing, however, our Lord so far corrected the old idea, namely, that this contact operated quite mechanically, as to teach that it was not the mere contact, but faith, that was the real medium through which the benefit was received. Thus in the crudest case, that of the woman with the issue of blood, He said to her, "Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole."¹ With Him in such cases the contact was only a help to faith, not itself the means of the transmission of the healing power. Wherever He found strong enough faith, He confirmed it by leading its possessors to dispense altogether with the physical contact. Where faith was very weak, He could not but use that contact.² With our Lord then laying on of hands in healing was more or less a sacramental act, an accommodation to weakness.

Whether it was so also with Him in the conveyance of spiritual blessing is not so clear, though we should have expected to find it even more so. We read that He put His hands on the children in blessing them,³ and after His resurrection He breathed on the disciples in imparting to them the Holy Ghost.⁴ This breathing on them was another form of physical contact.

Bishop Westcott, commenting on Heb. vi. 2, says that the laying on of hands is "the expressive symbol of a solemn blessing," but surely we must interpret it in its use in blessing⁵ just as we have done in the case of healing. In both cases the people expected that our Lord would use imposition of hands because of the underlying, if perhaps unconscious, feeling they had that physical contact was necessary that the healing or blessing force might pass from Him to its object. In the one case almost certainly and in the other probably, if we may judge from the analogy, He accommodated himself to their weakness, and used that contact as a prop to their faith.

In the Acts of the Apostles and in the Pastoral Epistles we find a third use of the rite, quite distinct from its use in healing and blessing. It is found in connexion with

¹ St. Mark v. 34.

² See St. Mark vi. 5.

³ St. Matt. xix. 15; St. Mark x. 16.

⁴ St. John xx. 22.

⁵ As in the instance recorded in St. Matt. xix. 13-15 and St. Mark x. 13-16.

what we should call ordination, the setting apart for a special function of some members of the Christian community. The seven deacons were thus set apart, with prayer.¹ Barnabas and Saul were thus separated for missionary work, also with prayer.² In the three passages in the Pastoral Epistles in which the imposition of hands is spoken of³ there is no mention of prayer, but these passages must be interpreted in accordance with the passages in the Acts. We must therefore hold that while the Apostles acted on the principle of Num. xxvii. 18, that status is communicated by the physical contact of laying on of hands, they yet relied not on this only, but on prayer, for the needful blessing.

There remains only one more set of passages for our consideration, those in which the laying on of the Apostles' hands appears, in the words of Bishop Westcott, as "the complement of Baptism, the outward rite through which the gift of the Holy Ghost was normally made." Those passages are Acts viii. 14-20; ix. 17, and xix. 6. In the first of these it is said that prayer was used,⁴ but the Holy Ghost was not imparted till the Apostles' hands were imposed. These three passages contain the narratives in which we are told how the Samaritan converts of Philip, how St. Paul himself, and how certain converts at Ephesus received the special gift of the Holy Spirit.

At first sight, at all events, the need of a particular status on the part of the imposer of hands seems to be implied. What that status was is not so clear. In the first passage⁵ it seems that Philip, though he could work miracles,⁶ either did not possess the status, or did not exercise the gift in Samaria. Simon, the sorcerer, thought of it as an occult power possessed by Peter and John and communicable by them. Clearly, however, this power was not peculiar to the Twelve, for in the second of our three passages⁷ we find it exercised by Ananias, and in the third⁸ by St. Paul. If Apollos received the gift of the

¹ Acts vi. 6.

² Acts xiii. 3.

³ 1 Tim. iv. 14; v. 22; 2 Tim. i. 6.

⁴ Acts viii. 15.

⁵ Acts viii. 14-20.

⁶ v. 6.

⁷ Acts ix. 17.

⁸ Acts xix. 6.

Holy Ghost at all, as we cannot doubt that he did, he must either have received it by a direct Pentecostal outpouring, as the Apostles did at the first¹ and Cornelius later on,² or else he must have obtained it through the mediation of Aquila and Priscilla.³

On the whole it seems safest to suppose that Peter and John were sent down to Samaria, as we are told in Acts viii., to perform this rite, "the complement of Baptism," with the full authority of the Twelve, solely because its recipients for the first time were not to be Jews but Samaritans. It was not afterwards limited to Apostles. St. Paul in his Epistles to the Corinthians and to the Galatians, while asserting his claim to be regarded as an Apostle, though he adduces several proofs in support of that claim, yet does not speak of the exercise of this power as one of them. This fact makes it fairly clear that the power was not limited to Apostles. If it had been so, since he possessed and exercised it,⁴ his possession of apostolic standing would have been established by it without need of further proof. As far as one can see, in fact, there is no reason for holding that the power of laying on of hands for the imparting of the gift of the Holy Ghost was less widely held and exercised than that of conferring Baptism.

It is clearly in this sense of confirmation that the laying on of hands is spoken of in Heb. vi. 2, for what is spoken of there must clearly be something of universal application to Christians, which neither the laying on of hands for healing nor for ordination would be.

The significance of the act here must be the same as in Deut. xxxiv. 9, namely, the communication of spiritual power by physical contact. Its retention in the Church must be regarded as analogous to that of the matter in the Sacraments, namely, an aid to faith, an accommodation to human nature in its present condition. Its limitation to the Episcopal Order cannot be regarded as a matter of inherent right, but merely of ecclesiastical order.

Our Church will not admit that Confirmation is a "Sacrament of the Gospel," and yet by our discussion we seem to be led to the conclusion that there is really nothing

¹ Acts ii. 1-4.

² Acts x. 44.

³ See Acts xviii. 24-28.

⁴ Acts xix. 6.

here but a question of a word. The laying on of hands is analogous, as we have seen, to anointing. It, therefore, fairly corresponds with the matter of a Sacrament. It was employed by the Apostles with prayer for the Holy Spirit, and, though the exact words of their prayer are not given, yet where the sense of the prayer now offered is the same as that which they offered, this fairly constitutes the form. As for institution by our Lord, one cannot see how what the Apostles began from the first to do under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with God's visible seal of approval upon it in its miraculous effectiveness, in any way lacks the character of Divine institution. It is not necessary to argue, though perhaps it might fairly be done, that in all probability our Lord prescribed it during the forty days in which He spoke with His disciples of "the things concerning the kingdom of God."¹ Certainly the coming of the Holy Ghost was a special subject of His teaching then,² also certainly he "gave commandment" unto the Apostles,³ though we are not told what it was about which He gave commandment. Afterwards we find that they were slow to, or rather would not at all, make any new departure without Divine guidance. When we find, therefore, that without any discussion apparently or difference of opinion they acted in the matter of the laying on of hands as soon as the occasion arose, we may well feel justified in drawing the inference that they had warrant for what they did.

If our reasoning then has been correct the history of the development of the rite of the laying on of hands has been sketched. It had its origin in the smearing of vital fat with the hands for the same purpose as that for which sacrificial blood was applied, namely, to establish a close, nay, a vital connexion between worshipper and victim and God. Gradually, as civilization advanced, oil was sometimes substituted for the fat of the vitals of a sacrifice, or the unguent was even entirely dispensed with. And in the passage from the Old Covenant to the New, that which had originally been magical or mechanical in its operation became sacramental. Its efficacy was made to depend on faith and prayer. It is still needful as an accommodation to human weakness and spiritual imperfection.

A. E. JOHNSTON.

¹ Acts i. 3.

² Acts i. 4, 5.

³ Acts i. 2.