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“WHEN YOU SPREAD YOUR PALMS,
I WILL HIDE MY EYES”:
THE SYMBOLISM OF BODY GESTURES IN ISAIAH

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A study of body gestures in Hebrew scripture is one way of uncovering multiple levels of meaning that are embedded in the text.¹ Most studies of gestures in the Hebrew Bible have focused on the accurate translation of phrases describing gestures, a major approach being to categorize a given gesture as, for example, a “gesture of prayer” so that the phrase describing that gesture (“he spread his palms”) can be provided with an accurate gloss (“to pray,” “he prayed”) in a lexical entry, translation, or commentary.² Biblical scholars have sometimes also sought to link individual gestures with symbolic meanings; for example, some have addressed the question of whether the gesture of “spreading the palms” in prayer symbolizes a request for the hands to be filled, an offering (as if one’s prayer were an object presented with the hands), or an exposure of the hands and vitals to divine examination.³ These

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a lecture series for Students of the Ancient Near East at Brigham Young University on October 2, 2008. I would like to thank those who shared comments with me following that presentation, especially John Thompson and James Carroll.

2. Examples of this approach include Mayer Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980); Paul Kruger, “Nonverbal Communication and Symbolic Gestures in the Psalms,” *The Bible Translator* 45/2 (1994): 213–22. Similar concerns are evident in surveys such as P. R. Ackroyd, “*yad*,” in G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), vol. 5, 393–426; David Burke, “Gesture,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 2:449–57. This approach lies behind several modern Bible translations, some of which render gesture expressions like “I lifted up my hand” (Ezekiel 20:5) with paraphrases like “I swore,” “I pledged my word” (NRSV, NJB), or with expansions like “I swore with uplifted hand” (NIV).

3. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 25–37; John Tvedtnes, “Temple Prayer in Ancient Times,” in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 79–98, on p. 84. For other gestures, cf. Meir Malul, “More on *pachad yitschâq* (Genesis 31:42, 53) and the Oath by the Thigh,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35/2 (1985): 192–200; David Rolph Seely, “The Raised Hand of God as an Oath Gesture,” in Astrid B. Beck et al., eds., *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

approaches treat gestures as isolated carriers of meaning, much as words are isolated as lemmas and provided with glosses in dictionaries.

In addition to these aspects of meaning, anthropologists and scholars of nonverbal communication have shown that gestures are linked to each other as parts of a coherent nonverbal system within a culture; even aside from consciously constructed sign languages, every culture has what might be called a grammar or logic of gestures.⁴ An example of such a grammar or logic is described by Raymond Firth:

Like other forms of salutation the handclasp can be used as a status differentiator. It has been reported of the Bambara that traditionally a man saluted his superior by extending his palm upwards, whereupon the superior put his own hand palm downwards over it. Inversely, when a man greeted an inferior he extended his hand with palm down; but for an equal his palm was held perpendicular to the ground.⁵

In this example, the contrast between taking the “upper hand” with palm downward and offering the hand with palm upward corresponds symbolically to a contrast between high and low status. Relationships and contrasts also exist between the gestures described in ancient texts; paying attention to these allows one to tap a level of meaning beyond the analysis of isolated gestures. The meanings attached to these relationships and contrasts, like the grammatical rules of ancient languages, are rarely if ever stated explicitly in the texts, but they can be discovered through assembling examples of gestures and noting patterns of how they are used in context. Specifically, one can note the following: Who does the gesture to whom? What is the relationship between the one performing the gesture and the recipient of the gesture? What effect or function does the gesture have?

1995), 411–21. Similar to these approaches, which rely primarily on textual evidence, is the approach developed by the so-called “Fribourg School” in Germany, which involves studying Near Eastern iconography to elucidate the symbolism of gestures (*inter alia*) mentioned in literature. For an example of this approach, see Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 307–23.

4. The relevant literature is enormous; I mention here only a few key publications: Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, “The Repertoire of Nonverbal Behavior: Categories, Origins, Usage, and Coding,” *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 49–98; Ray Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970); Raymond Firth, “Bodily Symbols of Greeting and Parting,” in idem, *Symbols Public and Private* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 299–327; Judith Irvine, “Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting,” in Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 167–91; Adam Kendon, “Gesture,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 109–28; John Haviland, “Gesture,” in Alessandro Duranti, ed., *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 197–221. Among studies of biblical gestures, the one that comes closest to an approach to this issue is a short and neglected article by Zeev Falk, “Gestures Expressing Affirmation,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4/3 (1959): 268–69. This article may be profitably compared with Malul, “More on *pachad yitschāq*,” and Seely, “The Raised Hand of God,” both cited above, which discuss the same gestures from a different point of view.

5. “Bodily Symbols,” 320–21. Examples from a variety of other cultures, including our own, could be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

The purpose of this paper is to explore just a few aspects of the nonverbal “grammar” of ancient Hebrew gestures as found in the book of Isaiah. Specifically, I will discuss the contrast between gestures that can be performed at a distance (like extending or raising the hand) and those performed in contact with another (like grasping another’s hand). I will argue that this contrast corresponds to an ancient Hebrew notion of distant (public, politically based) and close (intimate, kin-based) social relationships. I will also discuss nonverbal means of moving from a distant position to a situation of contact. In my discussion, I will draw attention specifically to how the gestures are used in context, as described above.

I have chosen the book of Isaiah as the main text for this paper, not because the nonverbal patterns I discuss are unique to Isaiah, but because of the relatively high concentration of these patterns and the high stakes involved in interpretation of the book for modern readers. Indeed, some of the examples I will discuss from Isaiah compare very well with examples from other Near Eastern sources. I would not, therefore, claim that these nonverbal patterns are a literary invention of Isaiah, but rather that they are part of the cultural background of the book—a background that is masterfully and meaningfully exploited in the book.

I. Displaying the Arm and Hand at a Distance: The Political Sphere

Revealing the Arm

I begin with the gesture of “revealing the arm,” a gesture which does not involve contact and can be performed at a distance. In Hebrew, the gesture is described by three different expressions, all of which occur in Isaiah:

Yahweh will cause the majesty of his voice to be heard; he will let the strength of his arm be seen [נַחַת זְרוּעוֹ יִרְאֶה] (Isaiah 30:30).⁶

Yahweh has bared his holy arm [חָשַׁף יְהוָה אֶת-זְרוּעֵ קִדְשׁוֹ] in the eyes of all the nations (Isaiah 52:10).

Who has believed our report? And as for the arm [זְרוּעַ] of Yahweh, against whom is it revealed [נִגְלָתָהּ]? (Isaiah 53:1).

All of the expressions for “revealing the arm” employ the Hebrew word זְרוּעַ “arm.” Both the word and the body part are closely associated with the notion of power or might. The Arabic word *dar’un*, from the same root, means “power, ability, capability.”⁷

6. The Hebrew word נַחַת is most probably a loanword from Egyptian *nht* “strength, victory” as found in Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Aegyptisches Handwörterbuch* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1921), vol. 2, 314–17. See Maximilian Ellenbogen, *Foreign Words in the Old Testament: Their Origin and Etymology* (London 1962), 112; Donald Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 385. Others, following the traditional view, take the noun to mean “descent.” Cf. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), 629, 639.

7. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz,

In the first two passages cited above, the reference to revealing the arm occurs in the context of judgment against the nations, a large-scale political context. In Isaiah 30:30, the context refers to sifting the nations and striking terror into Assyria by smiting it with a rod.⁸ The gesture in these passages, therefore, is part of a large-scale, politically based interaction.

The significance of the gesture in Isaiah 53:1 is more obscure. In terms of the parallelism in this verse, the gesture phrase is apparently equivalent to the “report,” literally the “thing heard” (שְׁמָעָה). The two are similar in the sense of acting as a sign, the report being an audible sign and the gesture being a visible sign. The pair of questions in this verse could be interpreted in one of two ways: either they are rhetorical questions to which the answer is “nobody,”⁹ or they refer to the suffering servant described in this chapter. An interpretation of the gesture as one of judgment, like the other two examples discussed above, is possible, though it is not clearly evident from the context.

Outside of Isaiah, the gesture of revealing the arm occurs only once, in Ezekiel 4:7. There the expression used is הִשׁוֹפֵה זְרֻעָדָא “bare the arm” (cf. Isaiah 52:10) and the context is an action prophecy in which Yahweh commands Ezekiel to perform the gesture against besieged Jerusalem, symbolizing the Lord’s judgments that are about to fall on Jerusalem.

In all four instances of this gesture, the one performing the gesture is either God or, in Ezekiel 4:7, his prophet who performs the gesture symbolically on God’s behalf. In three of the four instances (all but Isaiah 53:1), the gesture is directed against nations. The function of the gesture appears, at least in these three instances, to be hostile.

Extending the Hand

The use of the expression “extend the hand” in the clause “his hand is still extended” (KJV “his hand is stretched out still”) forms a binding link for chapters 2–14 of Isaiah, that is, the oracle concerning Judah and Jerusalem (chapters 2–12) and the oracle against Babylon (chapters 13–14). The expression occurs eight times in this section of Isaiah.¹⁰ Each time, the context is one of large-scale destruction, as in the following sampling:

Therefore, the anger of Yahweh being kindled against his people, he extended his hand [וַיִּט יָדוֹ] against them, he smote them, the mountains trembled, their corpses were like offal in the streets. In all this, his anger was not turning away, his hand still being extended [וְעוֹד יָדוֹ נֹטִיָּה] (Isaiah 5:25).

YHWH raised up the adversaries of Rezin against him and stirred up his enemies: Aram from the east and the Philistines from the west. They ate

1994), 356.

8. See Isaiah 30:28, 31–32; note that NIV, NRSV, and NJB translate הִתְנַפְּהָה in v. 32 as “blows of the arm,” “brandished arm,” and “uplifted hand” respectively; see comments on the gesture of “raising the hand” below.

9. On rhetorical questions in Biblical Hebrew, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 18.1a, c; 18.2g; 18.3g; 40.3.

10. Isaiah 5:25 (*bis*); 9:11, 16, 20; 10:4; 14:26–27 (*bis*).

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up Israel in one mouthful. In all this, his anger was not turning away, his hand still being extended (Isaiah 9:10–11).

He cut on the right hand but was hungry; he ate on the left hand but was not satisfied. Each man was eating the flesh of his own arm—Manasseh eating Ephraim, Ephraim eating Manasseh, and they together against Judah. In all this, his anger was not turning away, his hand still being extended (Isaiah 9:19–20).

This is the counsel determined for the whole land; this is the hand extended [הַיָּד הַנְּטוּיָה] against all nations. For YHWH of Hosts has determined it; who can frustrate it? It is his hand that is extended [יָדוֹ]; who can turn it back? (Isaiah 14:26–27).

Outside of Isaiah, the expression **יָד נְטוּיָה** occurs thirty-seven times in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹ For example, in the narrative of the deliverance from Egypt in Exodus 7–14, the expression describes the gesture performed by Moses to bring about the plagues and to part the sea. It is evident from these examples that the gesture is not just one of stretching forth the hand to strike somebody, use a tool, or the like. It seems, rather, that it is a gesture of power that can be efficacious without contact. One having the necessary power or authority extends his hand (with or without a weapon or symbol of authority) and causes the elements to move and enemies to be destroyed.¹²

In each of the Isaiah passages quoted above, the one performing the gesture is Yahweh, the recipient is a nation or nations, and the function of the gesture is violent.¹³ These observations accord with the use of the gesture

11. See Exodus 7:19; 8:2, 5, 13; 9:22; 10:12, 21–22; 14:16, 21, 26–27; 15:12; Joshua 8:18–19, 26; 2 Samuel 24:16; 1 Chronicles 21:16; Isaiah 23:11; 31:3; Jeremiah 6:12; 15:6; 51:25; Ezekiel 6:14; 14:9, 13; 16:27; 25:7, 13, 16; 35:3; Zephaniah 1:4; 2:13; Proverbs 1:24; Job 15:25.

12. All of these passages have the specific idiom **יָד נְטוּיָה**. However, contrast the similar idiom **יָד שְׁלָח**, which is often used to describe reaching out the hand for the purpose of actual contact and concrete manipulation of objects. On the significance of **יָד נְטוּיָה** and the gesture it denotes, see Paul Humbert, “Etendre la main,” *Vetus Testamentum* 12/4 (1962): 383–395; H. P. L’Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World* (New Rochelle, New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1982), ch. 16; Othmar Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen im Alten Testament: Ikonographische Studien zu Jos 8:18–26; Ex 17:8–13; 2 Kön 13:14–19 und 1 Kön 22:11* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974); Nicolas Wyatt, “Arms and the King,” in Manfred Dietrich and Ingo Kottsieper, eds., “*Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf*”: *Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient, Festschrift für Oswald Loretz zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 833–82.

13. Some scholars at Brigham Young University have posited that the extended hand in these Isaiah passages can be interpreted both as destructive and as reaching out in mercy. See Donald Parry, *Understanding Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 59; Ann Madsen, “‘His Hand is Stretched Out Still’: The Lord’s Eternal Covenant of Mercy,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald Parry, Daniel Peterson, and Stephen Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 703–21. In this interpretation, the meaning could depend on whether the recipient of the gesture chooses to be an enemy or a friend of the one performing it. Nevertheless, the plain meaning of the gesture, as indicated by the context in the passages quoted above, is one of judgment and destruction.

elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In all but two instances,¹⁴ the one who performs the gesture is either Yahweh or his specially commissioned servant, and the gesture is violent, performed against political entities (Egypt, the city of Ai, Judah, Edom, and so forth) with large-scale destructive results.

Raising the Hand

Another gesture that is performed at a distance is that of “raising the hand.” In the two examples of raising the hand found in Isaiah, the gesture is parallel to raising a standard, and it appears to function as a sign to gather to a specific location.

On a bare mountain lift up a standard [שׂאו־סַנִּי]; raise your voice to them. Elevate your hand [הִנִּיפוּ יָדְךָ], that they might enter the doors of the nobles (Isaiah 13:2).

Behold, I will lift up my hand [אֶשׂאֵ יָדִי] to the nations; and to the peoples I will raise my standard [אֶרְיִם גִּסִּי]. They will bring your sons at their bosom; they will carry your daughters on their shoulders (Isaiah 49:22).

These verses use two synonymous idioms, הִנִּיף יָדְךָ and אֶשׂאֵ יָדִי, to describe the gesture of “raising the hand.” Thanks to a study by Jacob Milgrom,¹⁵ we know that הִנִּיף means not “wave,” as it was traditionally translated, but simply “raise.” The expressions in these verses appear to be synonymous, both using יָדְךָ and both parallel to סַנִּי “banner, standard.”

In both passages, while the raising of the standard and the parallel lifting up of the hand seem to be best understood as signals to gather, other interpretations are possible. In Isaiah 13:2, the “doors of the nobles” could be interpreted as tent-doors, and the scene could be understood as the muster of Yahweh’s armies prior to an assault on Babylon, the elevating of the hand being the signal to muster.¹⁶ In another interpretation, however, the “doors of the nobles” are the gates of Babylon, and the elevating of the hand constitutes an order to charge through them in an attack on the city.¹⁷ In Isaiah 49:22, the gathering of the nations can be understood as a peaceful gathering, the gesture being a signal to the nations to assemble, or the picture could be of Yahweh

14. The other two instances are in Proverbs 1:24, where personified Wisdom extends her hand to call out to others in the streets and at the gates, and Job 15:25, where a wicked man is said to extend his hand in rebellion against God.

15. Jacob Milgrom, “The Alleged Wave Offering in Israel and in the Ancient Near East,” *IEJ* 22 (1972): 33–38.

16. Ackroyd, “*yad*,” 415: “All three expressions [i.e. the three imperatives in Isaiah 13:2] would then refer to summoning the warriors.”

17. Thanks are due to James Carroll for explaining (and demonstrating!) this interpretation to me. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Anchor Bible: Isaiah 1–39* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 274, 278; John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 224. Blenkinsopp’s discussion is hampered by misunderstanding the verb הִנִּיף as “wave” (see above); however, Hayes and Irvine, though they translate the verb correctly as “lift,” still understand “the goal of the signalling” to be “that the attackers will enter ‘the noble gates,’ probably the gates of Babylon.”

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personally waging battle against the nations with uplifted hand and thereby forcing them to return the children of Israel to their homeland.¹⁸ In my opinion, the parallelism of phrases in both passages, as well as a comparison of the passages themselves, supports the interpretation of the gesture as a signal to gather with no implied hostility toward the recipient of the gesture. However, no matter which interpretation is adopted, the context is that of large-scale political events (military action and the relocation of peoples), and the relationship between the one performing the gesture and the warriors or nations who are the recipient of the gesture is presented as politically based: commander-warriors, leader-nation, or attacker-foe, but not father-son, brother-brother, etc.

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and in other Near Eastern literature, gestures of raising the hand (expressed in Hebrew with the phrases הִנֵּי יָדִי , נִשְׁאַל יָדִי , and also הִרִים יָדִי) have a variety of functions. They can denote destructive military action (like נִטְּהָ יָדִי , discussed above), rebellion against a king, oath-taking, or other legal action such as claiming possession of property.¹⁹ Almost without exception, symbolic gestures of raising one hand take place in a public (legal or political) context. In many cases, the raising of the hand seems to constitute a formal, performative action, as if the gesture were equivalent to saying, “I hereby . . .” with the specific content of the action made clear either by means of speech or by the context surrounding the gesture. The two examples in Isaiah, in which the raised hand constitutes a signal to gather, an official order, or possibly a hostile action, fit well in the overall set of contexts and meanings associated with symbolic gestures of raising the hand. The main point here is that raising the hand, like revealing the arm and extending the hand, is associated with public actions between people whose relationship (at least as represented in the immediate context²⁰) is based on political or official functions.

18. Cf. Ackroyd, “*yad*,” 411–12; Joseph Blenkinsopp, in Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Hebrew Bible, 1048.

19. For the biblical material, see Falk, “Gestures Expressing Affirmation”; Johan Lust, “*Ez.*, XX, 4–26 une parodie de l’histoire religieuse d’Israël,” *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 43 (1967): 488–527; idem, “For I Lift up my Hand to Heaven and Swear,” in F. García Martínez et al., eds., *Studies in Deuteronomy in Honour of C. J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 155–64; idem, “The Raised Hand of the Lord in Deut 32:40 according to MT, 4QDeut-q, and LXX,” in Alexander Rofé, ed., *Textus: Studies of the Hebrew University Bible Project*, Volume 18 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 33–45; Åke Viberg, *Symbols of Law: A Contextual Analysis of Legal Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1992), chapter 2; Seely, “The Raised Hand of God”; Eugene McGarry, “The Ambidextrous Angel (Daniel 12:7 and Deuteronomy 32:40): Inner-Biblical Exegesis and Textual Criticism in Counterpoint,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124/2 (2005): 211–228. For Mesopotamia, see A. Leo Oppenheim, “Idiomatic Accadian (Lexicographical Researches),” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 61 (1941): 251–71, especially 267–71; Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 60–62, note 2.

20. People whose relationship is represented in the immediate context as formal and official may, in reality, be relatives who would interact quite differently in other contexts. Though Yahweh might act as a father to Israel in some contexts, he might be represented in other contexts as a political enemy of Israel, extending his hand to destroy. The important factor in the analysis of gesture patterns is the immediate context in which the gesture occurs.

II. Gestures Involving Contact with Another: The Family Sphere

Yahweh Grasping the Hand of His Chosen

We turn now to a gesture that involves contact between two parties, that of “grasping the hand.” Six passages in Isaiah describe Yahweh performing this gesture to his servant or chosen.

I who have grasped you [הִחֲזַקְתִּיךָ] from the ends of the earth and have called you from its corners, and have said to you, “You are my servant. I have chosen you and have not forsaken you” (Isaiah 41:9).

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not gaze about fearfully, for I am your God; I have strengthened you, I have helped you, I have held you with my saving right hand [תִּמְכֶתִּיךָ בְיָמִין צְדָקָי] (Isaiah 41:10).

For I am Yahweh your God, he who grasps your right hand [מְחַזֵּק יְמִינְךָ], who says to you, “Do not fear, I will help you” (Isaiah 41:13).

Behold, as for my servant whom I hold [אֶתְמַךְ-בּוֹ], my chosen in whom my soul delights, I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring judgment to the nations (Isaiah 42:1).

I am Yahweh. I have called you in righteousness, and I will grasp your hand [אֶחֱזַק בְּיָדְךָ], watch over you, and make you a covenant of the people, a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6).

Thus says Yahweh to his anointed, to Cyrus whose right hand I have grasped [הִחֲזַקְתִּי בְיָמִינוֹ] to subdue nations before him—I will loose the loins of kings!—and to open doors before him—the gates will not be shut! (Isaiah 45:1).

In these examples, two verbs referring to grasping or holding are used: הִחֲזַק “grasp” and תִּמְךָ “hold, support.” These examples of grasping the hand are similar to four examples in the Psalms that use the verbs תִּמְךָ “hold, support” and אֶחֱזַ “grasp” to describe Yahweh grasping the hand of his chosen (with תִּמְךָ : Psalms 41:13; 63:9; with אֶחֱזַ : 73:23–24; 139:9–10).

In Isaiah 41:9 and 42:1, Yahweh calls the recipient of the gesture his “servant” (עֶבֶד). However, this does not appear to be an ordinary master-servant relationship but a special, intimate relationship, one more naturally associated with close kinship. Yahweh makes promises to be with and help the recipient of the gesture (Isaiah 41:10, 13, 14; 43:2; 44:2; 45:2), and Yahweh acts as a גֹּאֵל (kinsman redeemer) to the recipient (Isaiah 41:14; 43:1, 14; 44:6, 22, 23, 24). Yahweh gives his servant a new name (Isaiah 43:1; 45:3–4), acting in a role similar to that of a parent at the birth of a child.²¹ Yahweh also says

21. See Genesis 4:25, 26; 5:3, 29; 16:11, 15; 17:19; 19:37, 38; 21:3; 25:25, 26; 29:32, 33, 34, 35; 30:6, 8, 11, 13, 18, 20, 21, 24; 35:18; 38:3, 4, 5, 29, 30; 41:51, 52; Exodus 2:10, 22; Judges 13:24; 1 Samuel 1:20; 4:21; 2 Samuel 12:24; Isaiah 7:14; 8:3; 48:8; Hosea 1:4, 6, 9; Job 42:14; Ruth 4:17; 1 Chronicles 4:9; 7:16, 23. Of these 48 instances of

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that he has formed his servant in the womb (Isaiah 44:2, 24; cf. 43:1). He uses similar language to refer to his “sons” and “daughters”:

I will say to the north, “Give (up)!” and to the south, “Do not keep back! Bring my sons from far and my daughters from the end of the earth, / each one who is called by my name and whom I created for my glory—I have formed him, I have made him” (Isaiah 43:6–7).

Although there is no explicit connection in these Isaiah passages between the gesture of grasping the hand and kinship, two considerations support the idea that such a connection exists. First, some textual passages outside of Isaiah that mention Yahweh or an earthly king grasping another’s hand do have an explicit connection with kinship. One of these is found in the book of Jeremiah:

Behold, days are coming, says Yahweh, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors in the day that I grasped their hand [הַחֲזִיקִי בְיָדָם] to bring them out of the land of Egypt, which covenant of mine they broke, though I had become their husband, says Yahweh (Jeremiah 31:31–32).

This passage mentions a day in which Yahweh grasped Israel’s hand to bring them out of Egypt. This is very similar to Ezekiel 20:5–6, where Yahweh describes having lifted up his hand (יָרַדְתִּי) to bring Israel out of Egypt. Both Jeremiah 31:31–32 and Ezekiel 20:5–6 also mention or allude to Yahweh making a covenant with Israel. The two passages therefore describe different gestures being used in nearly identical contexts; however, there is one important difference in the context, namely that in Jeremiah 31:31–32, where the gesture is that of grasping the hand, Yahweh says that he had “become the husband” of the recipient of the gesture (בָּעַלְתִּי בָּךְ). In other words, the difference in the gesture (grasping the hand versus raising the hand) corresponds symbolically to a difference in kinship status (husband-wife versus God-nation).

One might also mention Isaiah 56:4–5, an oracle to eunuchs who take hold of Yahweh’s covenant:

For thus says Yahweh to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what I delight in and take hold of my covenant: I will give them in my house, within my walls, a hand and a name better than sons and daughters. It is an eternal name that I will give them, one that will not be cut off (Isaiah 56:4–5).

bestowing a birth name, 15 clearly describe the father bestowing the name, and 16 clearly describe the mother bestowing the name. Four instances describe Jacob’s principal wives, Leah and Rachel, bestowing names on sons born of their handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah. Eleven instances are somewhat ambiguous or show textual variation, though in almost all of these instances it is certain that the parents had the primary role in bestowing the name. One passage (Exodus 2:10) describes an adopted mother bestowing a name. Only one passage stands out in presenting a different custom: In Ruth 4:17, the neighbors of the parents give the name. It is useful to compare this general pattern with Genesis 32:25, 28–29, in which a “man” wrestles (וַיִּלָּחֶם), another contact gesture) with Jacob and afterwards gives him a new name. In verse 31, Jacob realizes that the “man” is God.

Here Yahweh promises to “give . . . a hand” (וְנִתַּתִּי . . . יָדַי) to the eunuchs, which will be “better than sons and daughters.” This could refer to a handclasp, or, as some have suggested, it could refer to the giving of a stela to be placed in the temple.²² If the former interpretation is adopted, then this passage also makes a connection between the handclasp and kinship. The connection with kinship is seen in the expression “better than sons and daughters,” in the bestowal of a name (see above), and in the general sense of the passage, promising people who have been denied certain kin relations, specifically marriage and fatherhood, that God will recompense them.

In a Phoenician inscription from the ancient city-state of Sam'al (modern Zinjirli in Turkey), the king Kilamuwa describes having “held” a subject people “by the hand”:

I held MŠKBM by the hand [*tmkt . . . lyd*], and they regarded (me) as an orphan regards a mother (Kilamuwa I, line 13).

Here Kilamuwa's holding MŠKBM by the hand marks the formation of a relationship between the two parties, and this relationship is equated symbolically with the relationship between an orphan and his mother.²³ In this instance, it is not Yahweh but an earthly king who performs the gesture; however, the uneven relationship between the one performing the gesture and the one receiving it is analogous to the other examples discussed above. Here it may be noted that the kinship relationship that is described is not one that existed prior to the gesture; a mother-son relationship between Kilamuwa and MŠKBM was not a precondition for the king grasping MŠKBM's hand. Rather, the gesture marks the formation of a kinship relationship. What was before a king-subject relationship is transformed into a mother-son relationship. This may be true for the other examples quoted above, Yahweh's gesture marking a symbolic transition from a distant God-mortal relationship to a closer kinship relationship.

The second consideration supporting the idea that Yahweh's grasping of the hand is connected with kinship in the passages quoted above is that the gesture in these passages is associated with kingship, which is associated in turn with divine sonship. Cyrus is called Yahweh's “anointed” in Isaiah 45:1, recalling Psalm 2:2, 6–7, in which the king is called Yahweh's “anointed” and his “son.” Blenkinsopp describes the motif of the deity grasping the ruler's hand in these Isaiah passages as “part of official court language in the ancient

22. Another possibility, which could be alluded to even if another interpretation is adopted as the primary meaning, is that ַיָּד refers to the male reproductive organ (that is, the eunuchs are symbolically promised procreative power that will never again be “cut off”). See Ackroyd, “*yad*,” 401–03.

23. Since *ytm*, translated here as “orphan,” can mean either “fatherless” or “deprived of both parents,” it is not known whether the reference is to the child's birth mother, emphasizing the king's role as sole provider, or to an adopted mother, emphasizing the king's roles as deliverer and life-giver. In my opinion, the latter option provides a better sense. It is possible, though not certain, that the gesture here is a figure of speech referring to giving help, a possibility that is also present in the other passages quoted above. These issues (the precise meaning of *ytm* and whether the gesture of grasping the hand is to be interpreted figuratively) do not have a major impact on the points made here. As the evidence presented here shows, if the grasping of the hand is figurative, then the figure of speech employs the same symbolism that the actual gesture would have.

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Near East” and as part of the “Babylonian *Hofstil*, the protocol and ceremonial of the Babylonian court,”²⁴ and Eaton points out that God grasping the hand of the king and claiming him as son are two of the hallmarks of Israelite kingship in the Psalms.²⁵ This may be compared with the Egyptian Pyramid Texts, in which the gesture of a deity grasping the hand of the deceased king is often explicitly connected with the king’s status as son of the deity.²⁶

In view of these considerations, it appears likely that the gesture of Yahweh grasping the hand of a human was generally understood as symbolically forming or reaffirming a relationship of kinship. The fact that this is not always explicitly mentioned could be because, as part of the cultural world of the biblical authors and their intended audience, it was thought to be commonly understood and therefore not in need of explanation. It was enough simply to mention the gesture and the actors involved, and the implications of the gesture could be deduced by the audience. In fact, this underscores the importance of careful, comparative study of nonverbal communication patterns in scripture, since this can lead to an understanding of aspects of the message that are not readily available otherwise.

Grasping the Hand of a Parent

Aside from passages in which Yahweh grasps the hand of a human, one passage in Isaiah makes reference to a son grasping the hand of his mother to lead her:

Of all the sons she has given birth to, there is no one to lead her along; of all the sons she has raised, there is no one to grasp her hand [מְחַזֵּק בְּיָדָהּ] (Isaiah 51:18).

In this passage, the mother is a personification of Jerusalem, who has become intoxicated by drinking from the cup of Yahweh’s wrath (verse 17). There are similar examples in the Ugaritic *Tale of Aqhat*, in which one of a son’s duties is said to be that of grasping his father’s hand when his father is intoxicated, and in the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*, in which one is admonished to reach out the hand to an elder who is intoxicated, thereby treating him as his children would.²⁷ In all three cases, the grasping of the hand is clearly cast as a duty associated with kin relationships: son to mother, son to father, and child to father. It is interesting to note that in these cases, in contrast with the gesture of Yahweh grasping the hand of his chosen, the kin

24. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Anchor Bible: Isaiah 40–55* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 211, 249.

25. John Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 2nd edition (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 143–44, 146–47. I wish to express my thanks to Matthew Brown for pointing out these sources and their implications for this topic.

26. See Spells 269 (380a), 305 (473c), 422 (756a), 468 (902d), 480 (997a). Other passages in the Pyramid Texts make a similar explicit connection between divine sonship and the embrace, another contact gesture: see Spells 217 (160b), 222 (208b, 212b, 213a). In the foregoing, the numbers in parentheses refer to the numbers in Sethe’s publication of the Pyramid Texts.

27. *Aqhat*, first tablet, column 1, lines 30–31 (also line 48 and column 2, lines 5–6, 19–20); *Instruction of Amenemope*, chapter 26. These parallels are noted by Johannes De Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 228, note 31.

relationship is understood as a precondition of the gesture. It is a child's duty to grasp the hand of the parent; it is not the case that grasping the hand of an intoxicated person marks the formation of a child to parent relationship.

III. At the Threshold: Gestures That Transition from Distance to Contact

Prostration

Finally, we turn to gestures that are performed at a distance but that can, at least in some situations, transition to contact gestures. First among these is the gesture of prostration. The most common verb used to describe this gesture, *הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה*, occurs twelve times in Isaiah. Of these, six instances refer to worshipping idols or foreign deities (Isaiah 2:8, 20; 37:38; 44:15, 17; 46:6), three refer to bowing down to Yahweh or before his altar (Isaiah 27:13; 36:7; 66:23), and three refer to humans prostrating to other humans. In addition, the same or a similar gesture is described using different verbs in Isaiah 44:19 (*סָגַד*), 45:23 (*בָּרַע*), and 60:14 (*שָׁחָה*), which refer to worshipping an idol, worshipping Yahweh, and bowing down to other humans respectively. Here we will focus on the four examples of humans prostrating to other humans, since these provide the most detailed information on the gesture and its significance.

The products of Egypt, the merchandise of Kush, Sabeans bearing tribute—they will come over to you and will be yours; they will walk behind you; they will come over bound in fetters. They will prostrate [*יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ*] to you and make supplication to you (Isaiah 45:14).²⁸

Thus says Yahweh, the redeemer of Israel, his holy one, to the one despised of soul, to the one nations abhor, to the servant of rulers: Kings will see and arise; princes also, and they will prostrate (Isaiah 49:7).

Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens will be your nursing mothers. They will prostrate to you with their nose to the earth and will lick the dust of your feet (Isaiah 49:23).

The children of your persecutors will come to you bowed down [*שָׁחָה*]; all those who spurned you will prostrate at the soles of your feet (Isaiah 60:14).

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the symbolism of this gesture is that of self-lowering, expressing one's inferiority and humility with respect

28. Most translators (KJV, NIV, NRSV, NJB) translate *אֲנָשֵׁי מְדָה* in this verse as “men of stature,” based on the similar phrases *אִישׁ מְדָה* “man of stature” (1 Chronicles 11:23; 20:6) and *אֲנָשֵׁי מְדוֹת* “men of stature” (Numbers 13:32). However, parallelism and the general context in this passage make it more likely, in my estimation, that a metathesis has occurred, changing an original *מְדַה נְשָׂאֵי מְדָה* to *אֲנָשֵׁי מְדָה* (both *ש* and *שׁ* being represented by the same grapheme, the letter Shin). This error was perhaps influenced by the above phrases meaning “man of stature” and “men of stature.” The word *מְדָה* meaning “tribute” is attested in Nehemiah 5:4.

to the recipient of the gesture. The Hebrew word *הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה* appears to derive from a root *hwy* “to beat” (attested as such in Egyptian and in a few Ugaritic passages).²⁹ It is thus an etymological parallel to English *kowtow* from Chinese “strike the head” (i.e. on the ground). As this etymology implies, the gesture is one of humility or subordination, lowering oneself to the maximum extent possible.

In addition to self-lowering, however, prostration can involve movement toward the recipient of the gesture. Among the passages quoted above, this is most clearly seen in Isaiah 60:14. The children of Israel’s persecutors are said to “come . . . bowed down” until they are finally at the soles of Israel’s feet. In Genesis 33:3, Jacob is said to have “prostrated to the ground seven times until he approached his brother.” In 1 Samuel 20:41, as Jonathan comes into view, David rises and then prostrates three times before finally kissing Jonathan. Ancient Egyptian depictions of people from Asiatic tribes doing obeisance to the Pharaoh show the prostrating Asiatics with one knee drawn forward, which would facilitate forward movement.³⁰

In some instances, the gesture of prostration is consummated in contact with the recipient. In Isaiah 49:23, the kings and queens prostrate themselves and “lick the dust of [Israel’s] feet.” Whether actual contact is achieved in Isaiah 60:14 is not as clear, though either contact or close proximity is implied in the statement that the gesture is performed “at the soles” of the recipients’ feet. Examples of contact immediately following prostration can also be found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 33:3–4, for example, after Jacob prostrates seven times, his brother Esau runs to meet him, and the two embrace and kiss. As has already been mentioned, David and Jonathan kiss after David prostrates in 1 Samuel 20:41. Second Samuel 14:33 describes the formerly rebellious and now seemingly repentant Absalom entering the presence of his father, king David, and prostrating to him, whereupon the king kisses him. An interesting case is found in 1 Kings 2:19, in which Solomon rises and prostrates to his mother Bathsheba; the Septuagint, instead of having “prostrated to her,” reads “kissed her.” This variation could be explained in a number of ways; one possibility is that both phrases were present in the original text, in which case this would provide another example of prostration consummated by contact.

Two important observations from the above examples may be mentioned. First, in every case where contact following prostration is explicitly mentioned, there is also a relationship of kinship, either actual or surrogate, between the participants. In Isaiah 49:23, the kings and queens who lick the dust of Israel’s feet are called “nursing fathers” and “nursing mothers.” Likewise, those who come prostrating in Isaiah 60:14 seem from context to be the same as those

29. Cf. Wilfred Watson, “An Egyptian Cognate for Ugaritic HWY (II):” in Gabor Takacs, ed., *Egyptian and Semito-Hamitic (Afro-Asiatic) Studies in Memoriam W. Vycichl* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 155–59.

30. James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), Nos. 45, 46, 47, 52. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 310, suggests that the purpose of having one knee forward was to facilitate rising; however, from a purely physiological standpoint, it is difficult to rise from a crouching position with one and not both knees forward, while having only one knee forward seems more in harmony with the purpose of crawling forward.

mentioned in verse 16, who are said to suckle Israel. The relationships of brother to brother in Genesis 33:3–4, father to son in 2 Samuel 14:33, and son to mother in 1 Kings 2:19 are straightforward.³¹ In the case of 1 Samuel 20:41, David and Jonathan are brothers-in-law, David having married Jonathan's sister Michal (1 Samuel 18:27). Later, in 2 Samuel 1:26, David refers to Jonathan as "my brother" (cf. also 1 Samuel 18:1, 3; 20:17). By contrast, numerous other references to people prostrating to each other mention neither contact nor kinship. This implies that prostration can end in contact when, and only when, there is a relationship of kinship between the participants. This principle also seems to be at work in an Egyptian inscription from the Old Kingdom (fifth dynasty), in which the Memphite high priest Ptahshepses boasts that the king allowed him to kiss the king's feet instead of the ground; Ptahshepses had earlier married the king's daughter, thus becoming his son-in-law.³²

Second, these examples show variation in the relative height of the participants when they make contact, as well as in who initiates the contact. In Isaiah 49:23, the contact is at the level of Israel's feet; here it is the ones performing the prostrating gesture who appear to initiate the contact, they being the subject of the verb "lick." In Genesis 33:3–4, however, the fact that the contact consists of embracing, falling on the neck, and kissing implies that the two participants end up physically positioned at an equal level; in this case, it is Esau who runs to meet his prostrating brother and initiates the contact. King David and his son also make contact on a physically equal level in 2 Samuel 14:33, David being the one who takes the initiative in kissing his son. The latter two examples are also similar in that the younger family member, who performs the prostration, is seeking to be reconciled to the elder. As these examples show, after one symbolically lowers himself or herself through prostration, the recipient of the gesture may choose to equalize the roles through initiating contact on an equal level.

To summarize, prostration, which is a way of lowering oneself symbolically with respect to another, has some dynamic elements. These include the possibility of movement toward the recipient, contact, and being restored to an equal height with respect to the recipient. When contact is achieved, it affirms a relationship of kinship with the recipient. In Isaiah 49:23 and 60:14, in which the one performing the gesture achieves contact with (or at least close proximity to) the feet of the recipient, the gesture signals both subordinate status and a kin relationship (the ones performing the gesture being foster fathers and nursing mothers of the recipients).³³ In all four Isaiah passages,

31. Generally, in the Hebrew Bible, the embrace is exchanged only between blood relatives (uncle-nephew, brother-brother, grandfather-grandson, mother-son, etc.) and between lovers. The kiss is also usually exchanged between kin and lovers, though there are exceptions. See Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 328–335, which includes a table showing examples of kissing between kin. For the embrace specifically, cf. Genesis 29:13; 33:4; 48:10; 2 Kings 4:16; Proverbs 5:20; Song of Solomon 2:6; 8:3.

32. Kurt Sethe, *Urkunden des Alten Reichs* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1933), 52:2–3; 54:2–3. Cf. Emma Brunner-Traut, "Gesten," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* II (1977), cols. 573–85, on col. 578. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 264–78, gives many examples from Akkadian texts of kissing the feet, many of which are apparently between non-kin, suggesting that the pattern described here (if it is, indeed, correct) was not universally found in the ancient Near East.

33. While the licking of the feet may be repulsive to modern readers, it is possible that

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there is no equalizing of height, signifying that the unequal status of the participants is retained throughout the encounter.

There are many issues related to prostration that I have not touched on here, including the many examples of prostration to a deity in prayer or worship. A thorough study of the issues related to prostration is beyond the scope of this paper.³⁴ In the context of the other gestures discussed here, however, I have shown that prostration fits the general pattern of contact and non-contact gestures being indices of kinship and non-kinship. I have also discussed the contrast between high and low, which is an index of relative status in an interaction. Prostration can function as a means of symbolically moving between contrasting poles, from distant to contact and from low to high, thereby affirming one's kinship or renewing one's status.

Spreading the Hands/Palms

We turn, finally, to the non-contact gesture of spreading the hands or palms (פָּרַשׁ כַּפַּיִם , פָּרַשׁ יָדַיִם). There are two neatly contrasting examples of this gesture, one near the beginning and one near the end of the book of Isaiah:

And when you spread your palms [וּבְפָרְשֵׁיכֶם כַּפֵּיכֶם], I will hide my eyes from you; even as you keep on praying, I am not listening (Isaiah 1:15).

I have said, "Here I am, here I am!" to a nation that did not call on my name; I have spread my hands [פָּרַשְׁתִּי יָדַי] all day to a rebellious people (Isaiah 65:1–2).

While the first instance refers to people spreading their hands in prayer to God, the second instance describes the opposite scenario, God spreading his hands to his people.

Others have discussed the significance of spreading the hands as a Hebrew gesture of prayer.³⁵ However, juxtaposing the example in Isaiah 1:15 with that of God spreading his hands in Isaiah 65:2 raises the interesting question of

even this form of contact would have been considered beneficial for the one performing the gesture, since it would imply some degree of favor and privilege in the sight of the high-status recipient. Following my oral presentation of an earlier version of this paper, John Thompson pointed out to me a connection with Genesis 3:14, in which the serpent in the Garden of Eden is said to "go on his belly" (cf. prostration) and "eat the dust" (cf. licking the dust of the feet). The imagery of going on the belly and being crushed under the feet compare well with Egyptian representations showing chiefs of some of the same nations mentioned in these chapters of Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 45:14) being dominated by the king of Egypt. A thorough study pursuing these connections would be very interesting.

34. For more discussion of this and related gestures, one may consult Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 90–346.

35. See Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 25–32, 41–44; also note 3 above. Passages mentioning this gesture include Exodus 9:29, 33; 1 Kings 8:22, 38, 54; Psalm 44:21–22; Job 11:13–15; Ezra 9:5; 2 Chronicles 6:12–13 (*bis*), 29–30. All of these examples use the Qal stem of the verb, פָּרַשׁ "spread." Instances using the Piel stem פָּרַשׁ are rarer; aside from the examples in Isaiah 1:15 and 65:1–2, see Jeremiah 4:31; Psalm 143:6; and Lamentations 1:17. Isaiah 25:10–11 uses this idiom to refer to a swimmer spreading his hands to swim.

how these gestures might relate to one another. It is noteworthy that in both passages, the gesture phrase is parallel to a speech act: prayer in Isaiah 1:15, and saying "Here I am, here I am!" in Isaiah 65:1–2.

I would suggest that both gestures, people spreading the palms in prayer and God spreading the hands to his people, are gestures that symbolically seek to establish contact with the other.³⁶ A very common, if not universal, gesture used by young children is that of stretching out the hands toward a parent, communicating a desire to be picked up.³⁷ Parents use a similar gesture of reaching out toward a child, and children recognize this as an invitation to come and be held.

In close proximity to these passages mentioning spreading the hands or palms, at opposite ends of the book of Isaiah, are passages mentioning a father to child relationship between God and his people:

Hear, O heavens; listen, O earth; for God has spoken: "I have raised and brought up children, but they have rebelled against me!" (Isaiah 1:2).

He (God) said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; then he became their Savior (Isaiah 63:8).

For you are our Father, for Abraham did not know us, and Israel was not acquainted with us (Isaiah 63:16).

Now, Yahweh, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our Potter; we are the work of your hands (Isaiah 64:7 [four verses before 65:1]).

Given these references to kinship between God and his people occurring in the same literary contexts as the gestures of spreading the hands or palms, it is possible to suggest that the gestures themselves have some connection with this kinship relationship. In both cases, the context makes it clear that the relationship of kinship has been severed or hurt through the rebellion of the child. The gestures may express a desire to renew or reaffirm the parent-child relationship through contact. In both instances, however, this purpose fails; contact is not achieved, for God averts his eyes from the gesture of his rebellious children in Isaiah 1:15, and Israel does not heed God's gesture in Isaiah 65:1–2.

IV. Conclusions

I have presented evidence for the existence of an ancient Israelite symbolic pattern, namely that physical contact between people was symbolically associated with kinship, while gestures that did not involve contact and could be performed at a distance were associated with non-kin, generally politically based relationships. I have also touched on another pattern, that of high or low physical position being associated with relatively high or low status.

36. Cf. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 322.

37. It is interesting that the gesture of spreading the hands in both Jeremiah 4:31 and Psalm 143:6 is accompanied by a prayer mentioning the speaker's thirst; this could invoke the image of a nursing child wanting to breastfeed, or perhaps that of an older child appealing to a parent for a drink.

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These symbolic patterns may also be found in the semantics of Biblical Hebrew. Some uses of words from the roots רחק “be distant,” קרב “be near,” and דבק “cling” show a metaphorical extension to include concepts of relative social proximity and kinship.³⁸ The roots רום “be high” and שפל “be low” also show a connection between relative height and relative status.³⁹

It is interesting that some contact gestures seem to create a new relationship where one did not exist before. This is the case with Yahweh grasping the hand of his chosen; it is also the case with the recipient of prostration equalizing the status between participants by embracing and/or kissing the one performing prostration. In all the examples of this use of contact gestures to create a new relationship, the one performing the gesture is of higher status, and it is possible that only one of higher status has the prerogative of offering kinship or equal status to another. In cases where the one performing the gesture is of lower status, such as grasping the hand of a parent and licking the dust of the feet in prostration, the gesture has a different character, presupposing rather than creating a relationship with the recipient.⁴⁰

It is hoped that this study will prompt further investigations into the “grammar” of gestures mentioned in scripture. This is a neglected area of study that has great potential to deepen our understanding of these texts and of the cultures that produced them.

38. See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 179–80, 897–98, 934–35.

39. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 926–29, 1050.

40. Cf. Michael Silverstein, “Shifters, Linguistic Categories and Cultural Description,” in Ben G. Blount, ed., *Language, Culture, and Society: A Book of Readings*, 2nd edition (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1995), 187–221, on 204–6. The indexical properties of language discussed by Silverstein are also relevant to nonverbal signs, including gestures.