That Unbiblical, Hand-Raising, Contemporary Worship (Part I)

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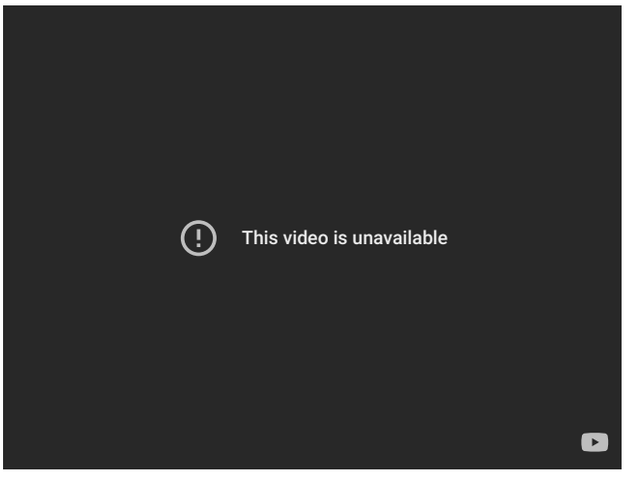
Like 23

Friday, August 04, 2017

I was raised in a rather hyper-conservative form of Modern Fundamentalism (what I now call Neo-Fundamentalism, for a variety of reasons). I recall one conversation during that stage of my life (one representative of many others) where a group had derided an image of a contemporary worship service. The image, as I recall, had shown a setting of lights, smoke, and hands raised in the air. A friend likened it to a modern rock concert. It was "liberal, compromising, not honoring to God, empty emotionalism," etc. (Some have gone so far as to call it satanic.) But one phrase always stuck with me. Someone referred to "that unbiblical hand-raising." I can't fault my friends for their sentiments. They were once my own sentiments. They are the target of good-natured humor by the famed Babylon Bee, or Tim Hawkins below. Nor would I ever accuse everyone who is part of the group I once belonged to of such an uncharitable appraisal of contemporary worship models. And besides all this, the much broader question of worship styles goes far beyond the bounds of the small movement I was raised in.

Nonetheless, I've been told on more than one occasion that raising your hands in the excitement of worship is likely "unbiblical emotionalism." I once said the same kind of things; a fact that I now regularly apologize for. I now hold what I hope is a more biblical position. I could recommend numbers of works on worship (I found D.A. Carson's and Allen Ross' works especially helpful). Perhaps the most helpful treatment I've seen, which I highly recommend, is the sermon series on Biblical Worship by Sam Storms here.

I'd like to look briefly at the concept of "raising hands" in prayer and worship. What does the Bible really say? Is this some form of compromise, where accommodating churches are simply attempting to mirror the secular world? Is it an example that proves that contemporary worship has been more influenced by a modern rock concert than by deep biblical theology? "Reach the world by being like the world," is what some see reflected in a church service today where hands are raised across the room. Is that what's happening? Is it an abandoning of the ancient Christian heritage for a novel fad that will be forgotten tomorrow? Or is something more going on? Something fundamentally more, well, *biblical*?



We'll start with a simple survey of some of the Biblical data relating to OT Israel in this post, and then look in later posts at some extra-biblical sources (what scholars call 'second temple literature') that also show patterns that emerged in Israelite worship. Then we'll look at some NT data, and some patristic sources that show continuing Christian worship after the NT period. Finally, we will note some of the ways that gestures of worship were modified in the early church, and why this change was significant to their message. I will try, where possible, to either present a brief exposition of the text being looked at, or at least to note quotations from careful scholars who have done work on the passage (or both), so that you can see that these are not just my idiosyncratic opinions, but a common scholarly consensus among those who study the Bible carefully for a living.

Raising of Hands as a Common Posture of Prayer and Worship in Judaism

The Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament, or OT) speaks often of the prayer and praise posture of "raised hands." There are a little over a half-dozen different Hebrew phrases used in the OT to represent the raising of the hand/hands in worship, praise, supplication, or prayer. They are basically a variety of combinations of the different words for "raise/lift" and "hands/palms," with a few lexical curve balls thrown in. In the configurations found in the OT, they can perhaps best be seen to constitute a variety of different idioms related to raising the hands in worship.

Lift Your Hands (*nāśā' yādayim*)

The first idiom found in the Hebrew Bible is *nasa yadayim*, used in Psalms 28:2, Psalm 134:2; and Habakkuk 3:10. The word *nasa* means to "lift" or "raise." The word *yadayim* means "hand," but typically refers specifically to the open hand, rather than the closed fist. Note how this phrase is used. HALOT notes that the phrase in this context means the, "**raising of the hand**...in prayer." DCH notes that the phrase in this context means to, "lift [the] hand in prayer..." and notes that it often takes the "worshipper" as its subject. The older BDB concurs, noting that it means, "to lift up [the] hand in prayer." Let's look at how the phrase is used in the OT.

PSALM 28

In Psalm 28, the psalmist is calling on the Lord to help in the midst of the threats of evildoers against the community. His psalm is an individual lament for the workings of the evildoers. Verses 1-5 contain his lament proper, after which, he breaks into the praise which occupies verses 6-9. Some kind of danger or threat has come upon him (and maybe the larger worshipping community as well), and so he goes to God, his Rock, to seek help in prayer. He cries for help, saying,

"Unto thee will I cry, O LORD my rock; be not silent to me: lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit. Hear the voice of my supplications, when I cry unto thee, when I lift up my hands toward thy holy oracle."
(Psalms 28:1–2 KJV)

The phrase denotes a posture that has connotations of supplication and entreaty here. Interestingly, the hands are lifted towards the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle. (The KJV oddly translates the word as "oracle," which is the language it often uses to translate this reference to the inner part of the sanctuary, described I Kings 6:16-23). When Solomon had dedicated the temple (I Kings 8), he had prayed and made known that when the Jews were unable to worship and pray in the temple proper, they were to do so facing the direction that the temple was from them. Thus, the Psalmist makes his plea in obedient posture, facing the temple. And he does so with raised hands. Peter Craigie explains the symbolism,

> *"The words of prayer were accompanied by actions, so that both mind and body were engaged in the ritual proceedings. The suppliant's hands were lifted and directed toward the holy place, in a gesture typical of supplication in the Near East in general... It may be that the hands were raised in a gesture symbolizing the anticipation of receiving something in the hands, namely the divine response to prayer. But the reference to the "pit" (v 1) suggests an alternate symbolism; the psalmist is like one standing on the edge of the pit of death in danger of falling in, and his hands are stretched out in desperation. If God would only answer his prayer, it would be as though he had taken his hands and rescued him from that threatening abyss."*
> (Craigie, P. C. (2004). *Psalms 1–50,* 2nd ed., WBC, Vol. 19, p. 238)

The Psalmist prays, and he does so with raised hands that engage not only his mind, but his whole body in a posture of desperate supplication.

"Sometimes the lifting of our hands is the only way to visibly convey the deep desperation of our hearts before God as we stand at the edge of the pits of life."
(Tweet This)

PSALM 134
In Psalm 134, the final "Song of Ascents" (see superscription), the psalmist gives a call to worshippers to raise their hands in public worship. Psalm 134 comes at the end of the processional psalms, a position likely not an accident, revealing the intent of the editor. Apparently a liturgical occasion, it may describe the closing of a festival or the close of a worship service. The Psalmists calls the servants of the Lord, urging them;

"Behold, bless ye the LORD, all ye servants of the LORD,
which by night stand in the house of the LORD.
Lift up your hands in the sanctuary,
and bless the LORD.
(Psalm 134:1-3, KJV)

Here, the context is clearly *corporate worship*, probably in the temple. "Lifting the hands" is placed parallel to the common "blessing the Lord" in praise. Leslie Allen sets the scene for us well,

> *"The time and place—especially the place—are plainly indicated. The occasion is a cultic one, evidently a service held at night, not improbably at the Feast of Tabernacles. Is it a priestly voice we hear urging the gathered people to praise Yahweh (cf. Ps 135:19a)? They stand in the temple courts ready to raise their hands toward the temple, hallowed as the earthly dwelling place of Yahweh. Concerted praise of voices and hands will acknowledge God's power and their dependence on and commitment to God through the covenant..."*
> (Allen, L. C. (2002). *Psalms 101–150*, WBC, Vol. 21, p. 283)

One can almost smell the incense burning. And in the darkened hues of the night, one can almost see the flickering lights of the flames, as they cast their shadows over the worshippers, and lend a slightly smokey atmosphere to the setting. And all across the temple courts, at the call of the priest, the people raise their hands towards the temple and worship the God who created them (134:3), Whom they exists to serve. And of course, they do so with raised hands.

HABAKKUK 3:10
The third use of this idiom occurs in the context of a metaphorical description in Habakkuk 3:10, where Habakkuk prays of the way creation trembled before God. The prophet uses graphic imagery to describe the cosmic impact on the creation of God as divine warrior. Among the cataclysmic images, the oceans are said to have acknowledged God's power by (metaphorically) "lifting their hands on high." This probably has in view the violent rising and falling of the waves, experiencing the tempest of God's presence, which calls to the prophet's mind the image of raising and lowering the hands in common worship posture. There's also a note of extreme trepidation in the image, lost so often in some worship contexts. The older Hebrew commentator Franz Deltitzsch explains;

> *"To this mass of water, which is called ["the deep"] from its roaring depth, the prophet attributes a voice, which it utters, to express the loud, mighty roaring of the waters as they rush forth from the bursting earth. As at the time of the flood, which was a type of the last judgment (Isa. 24:18), the windows of heaven and the fountains of the deep were opened, so that the upper and lower waters, which are divided by the firmament, rushed together again, and the earth returned, as it were, to its*

> *condition before the second day of creation; so here also the rivers of the earth and rain-showers of heaven come together, so that the abyss roars up with a loud noise (Delitzsch). This roaring outburst of the mass of waters from the heart of the earth is then represented as a lifting up of the hands to heaven, with reference to the fact that the waves are thrown up... The lifting up of the hands is not a gesture denoting either an oath or rebellion; but it is an involuntary utterance of terror, of restlessness, of anguish, as it were, with a prayer for help (Delitzsch)."*
> (Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 10*, pp. 423–424.)

Thus, "lifting your hands" (here, probably the repeated motion of raising and lowering them) seems to be a common phrase to denote a common posture of worship in Judaism, and perhaps, here, one with especially grave and serious tones that even nature recognizes to be appropriate in the presence of the Divine Creator.

Lift Your Palms (nāśā' kappayim)

The second idiom used is nāśāʾ kappayim, which uses the same verb "lift" with a different word for "hand" that technically usually refers to "the flat of the hand," or the "palm." TWOT explains that in contrast to the word for "hand" that we just looked at, this word usually means, "the palm of the hand, hand (opened or turned upward so as to expose the hand, in contrast with *yad* "hand" in general, whether open or closed in a grasp or fist); flat of the hand..." Thus it refers to "lifting the palms," with hands open, probably having in mind the posture of hands raised with palms facing upward. It is used in Psalm 141:2; Lamentations 3:41; Psalm 63:4; and Psalm 119:48.

PSALM 63

In Psalm 63, David starts what seems to be another lament (ps. 63:1). But as he turns to the beauty of God seen in the sanctuary (63:2) and in the corporate praise and worship there (63:3-4), it changes his perspective, and instead finds cause to praise the Lord with joyful lips. Thus in verses 1-4, the Psalmist expresses his longing and trust. In verses 5-8 he describes the joys of life lived with God. And in verses 9-11 he describes the ultimate fate of God's enemies. The superscription gives us a setting of David, in the wilderness, on the run from Saul, turning to God for help, and longing for the corporate worship of the holy sanctuary. Just as the thirsty body craves the water it needs to live, the thirsty soul craves the public worship it needs to thrive. And meeting God in worship, the psalmist's soul is filled.

"Thus will I bless thee while I live:
I will <u>lift up my hands</u> in thy name."
(Psalms 63:2–4 KJV)

Marvin Tate sums up how meeting God in worship has calmed the heart of the Psalmist here;

> *"Worship has made the speaker aware of the surpassing value of Yahweh's loyal-love (v 4), which is better than life itself. A vow of life-long praise follows in v 5. The lifted up hands refer to a posture of prayer, probably denoting that the empty hands wait in trust to be filled with the blessings of God..."*
> (Tate, M. E. (1998). *Psalms 51–100*, WBC, Vol. 20, p. 127.)

Here, the context is again that of remembering the corporate worship of the assembly, and the lifting of hands is associated with the cooperate praise of the Lord with joyful lips.

PSALM 141

In Psalm 141, the Psalmist again raises an individual lament to God, apparently facing the trouble of enemies and the temptations to insincerity. He implores the Lord to hear his prayer (141:1-2), prays to be kept from the temptations of the evildoers (141:3-5), and expresses confidence that God will judge righteously (141:5-10). He cries,

"Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense;
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.
Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.
Incline not my heart to any evil thing,
to practise wicked works with men that work iniquity:
and let me not eat of their dainties."
(Psalms 141:1–4 KJV)

The overall context is that of individual lament. However, his likening of prayer to "incense" and "the evening sacrifice" probably mean that again the corporate worship of the temple is in view, during which his own individual experience comes into focus. Lifting the hands is placed parallel to this prayer of entreaty, likened to the sacrifices offered to God in the temple. Tremper Longman explains,

> *"The psalm begins on an urgent note. The psalmist prays, pleading with God to answer quickly by drawing close to him (come quickly to me), and asks that his prayer receive a favourable reception from God. He desires that his prayer be like incense before God (v. 2a) and like the evening sacrifice (v. 2b). He reveals that his prayer posture is to lift his hands heavenwards as he appeals to God, thus expressing his openness to him. Incense and evening sacrifice come from the realm of formal worship (Exod. 29:38–42; 30:34–38), which would also be the primary setting of the psalm."*
> (Longman, T., III. (2014). *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 458.)

Once again, we see the Psalmist envisioning the public worship of the Lord who is his help. And once again, his prayers, supplication, and hands lifted in worship, are offered to the Lord as a sacrifice.

LAMENTATIONS 3

In Lamentations 3, the author speaks of his sufferings (3:1-24), confesses belief in God's goodness and sovereignty in the midst of suffering (3:25-39), prays for renewal (3:40-47), and expresses his lament over Jerusalem, but also his confidence that God will judge righteously (3:48-66). In 3:40-47, he expresses his prayer;

"Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD.
Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens.
We have transgressed and have rebelled:
thou hast not pardoned. Thou hast covered with anger,
and persecuted us: thou hast slain, thou hast not pitied."
(Lamentations 3:40–47 KJV)

Here, the overall context is personal lament for the nation's demise. But the specific surrounding context is a call to the nation to repent and turn back to God. The lifting of hands is placed parallel to a call to "search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord." And interestingly, the call to "lift hands" physically is grammatically intermingled with the call to "lift our hearts" metaphorically to God in heaven. Here the lifting of hands is a posture of repentant prayer that the nation should corporately heed the call to.

PSALM 119

lastly, in Psalm 119:48, one finds a striking use of the phrase. In the acrostic structure of the psalm (with each section divided according to the Hebrew Alphabet) that covers the Hebrew letter "waw," (Ps. 119:40-48) the psalmist expresses his trust and delight in God, climaxing by stating that,

"My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments, which I have loved;
and I will meditate in thy statutes."

(Psalms 119:48 KJV)

The temple was only a physical place, yet was the sacred space where God could be encountered. Thus, the Hebrews could follow Solomon's admonishment to worship towards the temple. But now, strikingly, the psalmist, in a context that breathes regularly the beauties of the Divine Law, can speak the same way of the Torah. God's very presence can be encountered in the Temple. But God's very presence can *also* be encountered in the Law. In what appears to the unbeliever to be only a dusty scroll, the Psalmist can encounter God Himself. And he does so, in this case, (at least metaphorically speaking) with lifted hands.

LAMENTATIONS 2

Finally, in Lamentations 2:19, the phrase is used in the context of the author's section of lament (2:11-19) over the demise of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon. He concludes this section of lament with a call to mourning and prayer.

"Arise, cry out in the night: in the beginning of the watches pour out thine heart like water before the face of the Lord: lift up thy hands toward him for the life of thy young children, that faint for hunger in the top of every street."
(Lamentations 2:17–19 KJV)

Here, the surrounding context is lament and call to mourning, so we might suggest that the gesture has connotations of lament. But more specifically, the phrase is used in the context of desperate entreaty "for the life of your young children." And in fact, is so associated with such entreaty, that it is not related to it, but rather the phrase is used as a metonym for such prayer. Lifting the hands is so closely associated with prayer that the author can call Israel to pray by calling them to "lift your hands."

Stretch Out Your Palms (pāraś kappayim)

The third idiom is one of the most common used in the OT to describe the lifting of hands, especially in prayer. The phrase means, "to stretch out your hands" or literally, "to stretch out your palms." It uses the same phrase for "palms" that we just examined, with a different verb for lifting them or spreading them out. DCH explains that the phrase means "to stretch out a hand...or the hands, as a gesture in prayer," and often has Israel or the "worshipper" as its subject. TWOT explains that,

> *"Most frequently the direct object of [the verb] is "hand" (..."palm," thirteen times; ["hand"] five times). This is, of course, a reference to the spreading of one's palms before God in prayer. The OT data would indicate that the prayer could assume a number of different postures in his prayer time: (1) standing, 1Sam 1:26; 1Kings 8:22; Jer 18:20; (2) kneeling, 1Kings 8:54; Ezr 9:5; Dan 6:11 ; (3) prostration, Josh 7:6; (4) head bowed, Gen 24:26; Neh 9:6; (5) face between the knees, 1Kings 18:42; (6) sitting, 2Sam 7:18."*

EXODUS 9

In the account of the ten plagues against Pharaoh and Egypt, God tells Moses to stretch his hands out to pray to bring the plagues (9:22), and then Pharaoh (temporarily) recants, and Moses assures him that,

"As soon as I am gone out of the city, I will spread abroad my hands unto the Lord;
and the thunder shall cease, neither shall there be any more hail;
that thou mayest know how that the earth is the Lord's."
(Ex. 9:29, KJV)

He does as promised (9:33) and God works. Here again, the posture of hands raised, arms spread apart, palms outward, reflects a spirit of petition.

I KINGS 8

In I Kings 8, Solomon dedicates the Temple, and as he does so, standing before all the people, he, "spread forth his hands toward heaven." (I Kings 8:22). And he assures the people that God will hear their prayers, when they pray with their own hands stretched out towards the temple, in obedient posture of praise.

"Whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, 39 then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind), 40 that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers."
(I Kings 8:28-30, KJV. See also verse 38, and parallels in II Chron. 6:12, 13, 29)

ISAIAH 1:15
Isaiah chapters 1-5 serves a kind of "preface" that introduce the rest of the book as a whole, and set the tone for all that will follow of the prophets vision. After the heading in 1:1, the first section (1:2-31) relates Isaiah's inspired word from the Lord that decries the corrupt spiritual state of Judah. They are entirely corrupted, rebellious against their Creator, and engaged in perfunctory and empty shells of spirituality. Nationally and politically, they are facing the destitution that smacks of God's judgment (1:2-9), and socially, injustice, greed, oppression of the poor and needy, run rampant (1:21-31). But between these two poles of failure lies the ultimate reason for their departure from the Lord - their empty spiritual life (1:10-20). They have continued to go about the motions of ritual worship, offering sacrifice, coming to the temple, observing the Sabbath and the required holy days, praying, praising, singing, etc. But while they have gone through all the motions, their hearts have been far from the Lord. And thus, the prophet makes it clear, all of their religious rituals are for naught. Not because the rituals have no value - they are in fact commands from the Lord. But because God has never been a God who wanted only our bodies but not our affections. He is, and ever has been, concerned with the heart. In the midst of this denunciation of their perfunctory worship, the prophet explains;

12 When ye come to appear before me,
Who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts?
13 Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me;
The new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with;
It is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.
14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth:
They are a trouble unto me;
I am weary to bear them.
15 And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you:
Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear:
Your hands are full of blood.
(Is 1:12–15, KJV)

In describing the empty motions God's people are going through, the prophet describes their prayers of entreaty and supplication as times when they "spread forth their hands." And yet, because it is only an outward physical posture not accompanied by the actions of love and justice that reflect God's own heart, God will not hear their prayers. There is an important lesson here that we would do well not to skip over. We've looked closely at the physical posture of raising the hands in prayer and worship, but the prophets stinging words remind us that while physical posture and bodily actions can be and are an important element of worshipping God, they are entirely meaningless when not accompanied by the Godward direction of the heart. Fortunately, the prophet doesn't leave God's people without hope. If they will repent and seek the forgiveness of God, he can and will cleanse and forgive (1:16-20). Oswalt explains the dangers of this empty ritualism;

"This was the kind of religion to which Isaiah and the other prophets objected. Of what use to God were sacrifices and festivals, sabbaths and blood, if they were not accompanied by the kind of devotion that manifested itself in lives lived according to his holiness? Such sacrifices were not pleasing to God; they were an abomination (v. 13). He was not happy they had come into his courts; he wished they would leave (v. 12). He did not find their endless worship services a pleasure; rather, they were a terrible burden (v. 14). The repetition of terms throughout the passage contributes to the general atmosphere. The reader (or listener) gets the impression of an endless round of activities all repeated continuously to no effect. The weariness of God becomes palpable...

In the same way, prayer which lifts bloody hands to God is revolting to him. He will not look at such a worshiper or listen to what he says. It is not because prayer is displeasing in itself. What is displeasing is the attitude of the one praying. He wants to separate his religion from his life—in fact, to have God confirm him in his sin. But God will not do so.
(Oswalt, J. N. (1986). *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, pp. 96–98)

Raising hands was so much a part of Israelite worship that the prophet can speak of prayer and petition by referring to the hands being spread out. But when the hands spread out are covered in the blood of injustice and evil, they serve only to disgust the righteous God. Repentance must be sought, that holy hands might be raised in worship.

"Repentance must be sought, that holy hands might be raised in worship."

EZRA 9

In Ezra 9, when Ezra returns to Jerusalem with a new group of exiles who come for the first time to the newly rebuilt temple, he is informed that the new Jerusalem community has allowed for an idolatrous mixture of religion and marriage, contrary to the Mosaic Law. He immediately moves into mourning, confession, and repentance, and leads the people into the same in Ezra 9:3-7ff.

"And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, <u>and spread out my hands unto the Lord my God</u>, 6 And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. 7 Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of

"unto this day, and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day."
(Ezr 9:5–7, KJV)

As Ezra falls on his knees and expresses his heartfelt contrition and repentance to God, he spreads his palms outward and upward. Here the spirit is one of contrition, confession, and repentance. And the gesture that naturally conveys this spirit is that of kneeling down with hands raised in the air.

PSALM 44

In Psalm 44, the Israelites have experienced some great calamity, and come before God with their complaint about it. They rehearse God's faithfulness to them in the past (44:1-8), but complain that it seems that now He has allowed them to be disgraced (44:9-16), which doesn't make sense to them, since they have been innocent (44:17-22). Because they haven't rejected God, they make the appeal that he should help them in their suffering (44:23-26). In their exclamation of their innocence, they explain that they have not broken the first commandment to not worship other gods. They explain in vs. 20-21,

"If we have forgotten the name of our God,
Or stretched out our hands to a strange god;
Shall not God search this out?
For he knoweth the secrets of the heart."
(Ps 44:20–21, KJV)

Interestingly, the Psalmist describes their protest that they have not committed idolatry by explaining that they have not, "stretched out [their] hands to a strange god." The physical posture of palms spread outwards to God has become such a staple of worship, that it can serve as a metonym for worship itself.

Spread out Your Hands Upward (pēraś (bə)yādayim)

PSALM 143

While classically regarded as one of the seven penitential psalms, this interpretation of Psalm 143 may place more stress on verse 2 than it ought to have relative to the rest of the psalm. In verses 5-6, David expresses his confidence in the Lord that comes from remembering the Lord's past faithfulness, and exclaims his passion for the Lord;

"5 I remember the days of old;
I meditate on all thy works;
I muse on the work of thy hands.
6 I stretch forth my hands unto thee:
My soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land. Selah."
(Ps 143:5–6)

As a part of his confident worship of God, he explains that he will "stretch forth [his] hands unto [the Lord]." Respected Hebraist Bruce Waltke explains,

> "Having aroused his spiritual strength—that is to say, his faith and hope—he adds, *I spread out (pēraśtî) my hands (yāḏay)*, as in swimming (Isa. 25:11), but *upwards, to you* (*ʾēlêḵā*). The context suggests the gesture pertains to prayerful petitions (Ps. 28:2; 1 Kgs. 8:38; Lam. 2:19; cf. Isa. 65:2; Lam. 1:17). His raised, spread-apart, and open hands (1 Kgs. 8:54; Ps. 141:2; Isa. 1:15; 1 Tim. 2:8) may symbolize wafting the prayer upward (Ps. 141:2) or lifting the heart toward heaven (Lam. 3:41). (Waltke, B. *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*, p. 278).

Here then David is pictured as raising and lowering his hands (almost in a swimming motion) and thus "wafting his prayer" upward to heaven.

Lift Up Your Hands (mōʿal yādayim)

Another unusual phrase referring to the lifting of hands occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible. In this case, it is not the verb, but the noun that is unusual. The noun *moal* is only used in one passage, Neh. 8:6.The noun means, "exaltation, raising (of the hands)" (HALOT) or "raising…raising of their hands" (DCH). TWOT explains that the noun means, "lifting" and notes that "This noun occurs only in Neh 8:6 where the lifting up of the hands is associated with worship of the Lord."

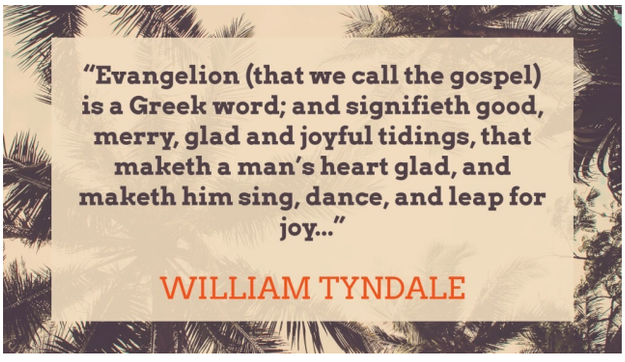
Nehemiah 8:6

Nehemiah 8 provides an interesting context. The regathered Jews stand in Jerusalem in the seventh month, 444 B.C., with Ezra leading them. With the walls of the broken-down city now rebuilt, they enter into a covenant renewal ceremony (Neh. 7:73-10:39). Some have suggested that the ceremony depicted here became the basis of the Synagogue service that would come to mark later second temple Judaism. Ezra reads the entirety of the law of God, and the people recommit themselves to it. The scene is a striking one. The people all gather, and Ezra reads the law. Then;

> *"And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. 6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground."*
> *Neh. 8:1–6, ESV*

Breneman explains the response of the people to the reading and what it signified;

> "All the people … responded" is a splendid example of unified worship as the leader raised his voice in praise and the people responded. They responded (1) by lifting their hands in worship and showing a sense of need; (2) by saying, "Amen! Amen!" and thus affirming their submission to the authority of Scripture; and (3) by bowing down to the ground with a sense of humility and submission before God. (Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, The New American Commentary*, p.225.)



As Ezra sets out the demands of the law, the people respond with what would seem like appropriate mourning and weeping. But Ezra explains that what the law was meant to facilitate was not mourning but celebration (8:9-12). In any case, we see again that both in holy moments of reverence and heightened movements of jubilation, hands were raised to God. And if this scene set the stage for the synagogue worship that would mark Israel for the next 400 years, then we have an early hint of what second temple Jewish worship looked like as well (which we will look at in the second part of this post). At the least, we can say that it was marked by "raised hands."

Fully Stretch Out Your Hands (yadi nagar)

In Psalm 77, a very unusual phrase occurs that describes the lifting of hands in praise. The normal word for "hand" is used, but the verb that is used with it is a verb that is more at home describing the running of the eyes than the lifting of the hands. And this choice is probably deliberate on the part of the psalmist. HALOT defines the phrase as meaning, "be fully stretched out (hands)." DCH explains that the verb can in a rare instance mean, "be stretched out" with "hand" as the subject. The older BDB, and the Gesenius lexicons both give the verb the same meaning. But let us look at the one and only text where this phrase is used.

PSALM 77

2 In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night <u>my hand is stretched out</u> without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
(Ps 77:2, ESV)

We have normally been quoting from the KJV as we have shared Scripture passages in this post for consideration, but in this case we quote instead from the ESV. The reason is that the KJV mistranslates the phrase "my hand is stretched out in the night without becoming feeble" as "my sore ran in the night and ceased not," which would cause one to miss the relevance of the passage to this study, were that text all one knew. To be sure, there is some unusual verbiage at play. The verb that's used essentially means "gushed out," which is an odd thing to say about one's stretched out hands. It would appear that rather than follow the Hebrew of the Masoretic text here (which decidedly reads, "hands,") the KJV translators followed a medieval rabbinic interpreter who had suggested correcting the Hebrew "hands" to read, "sore," because the phrase, "my sore gushed in the night" would make more sense in the context. And this was an intentional choice to reject the MT reading. The Geneva Bible had read, "my hand is stretched out without wearying," the Coverdale had, "I helde up my handes unto him in the night season," while the Bishop's Bible which they were directly revising read, "my hande all the nyght catched & ceassed not." The KJV translators instead chose to revert back to the reading of the Great Bible. The WBC volume by Marvin Tate explains the unusual nature of the verb, and why the KJV translators chose to follow a medieval rabbinic tradition of altering the noun instead of following the Hebrew word of the Masoretic Text;

> *"An unusual meaning for the verb... which normally means "pour out," like water. Commentators frequently note that the verb would be suitable with tears and assume that the original reading was "mine eye poured out in the night and slacked not"... The peculiar reading of kjv ("my sore ran in the night, and ceased not") derives from the kjv translators taking..."hand," to mean "blow/wound/sore" (with Rashi)."*
> (Tate, p. 269.)

W. A. VanGemeren further explains,

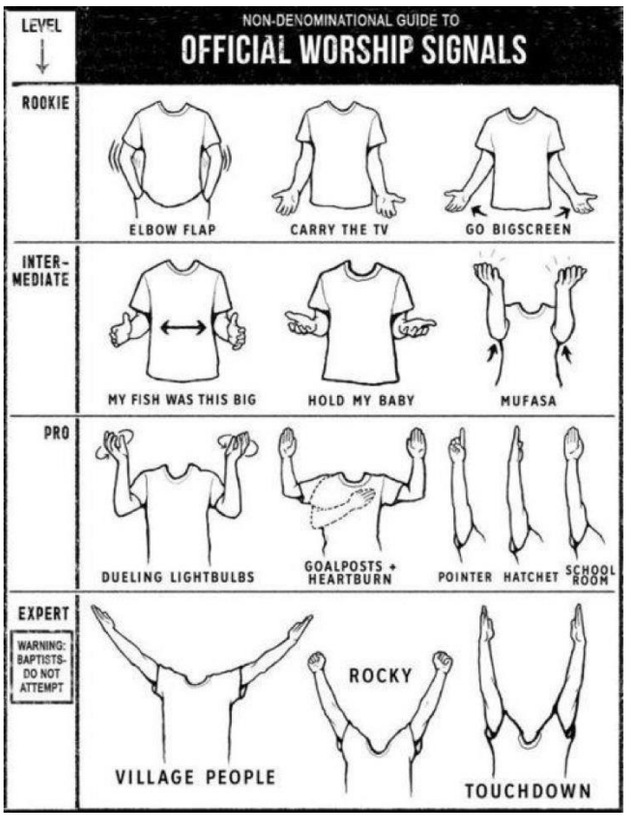
> *"The MT is problematic because of the unusual phrase...("I stretched out untiring"; lit., "[my hand] is gushed forth and does not grow feeble")...The verb "gushed forth" has suggested to some an emendation to "my eye flows," i.e., with tears. Briggs, 2:170–72, favors, "My hand is extended without growing numb"), but see NEB, "and by night I lifted my outspread hands in prayer. I lay sweating and nothing would cool me." Since the idiom probably is a metaphorical extension of the hands outstretched in prayer, the NIV gives a satisfactory rendering (cf. Kraus, 2:529–30)."*
> (VanGemeren, W. A. (2008). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms (Rev. Ed.), Vol. 5*, p. 585.)

Charles Spurgeon likewise concluded that the KJV translators had missed the Hebrew text here (which he considers them to have simply mistranslated, not recognizing that they have actually emended the text). He notes, "It appears that this sentence is wrongly translated, and should be, 'my hand was stretched out all night;' this shews that his prayer ceased not, but with uplifted hand he continued to seek succour of his God." (Spurgeon, C. H. (n.d.). The treasury of David: Psalms 56-87 (Vol. 3, p. 312). London; Edinburgh; New

York: Marshall Brothers.) In any case, what is in view in the (admittedly unusual) phrase is the simple orans posture of both hands raised in the air which we have seen to be so common already. Hebrew commentators Hossfeld and Zenger explain of the phrase;

> *"The petitioner's hand is stretched out, as in the orans posture. In a deliberately novel linguistic construction, an unusual verb is used for the pouring of liquids on a rigid part of the body. As in Lam 3:49, this is probably meant to indicate a devotion that never subsides. In v. 3c the petitioner refuses to have this lament stilled by being comforted. The absence of comfort is in Lam 1:2, 9, 17, 21 an indication of the most extreme misery. By insistently remaining in his state of comfortlessness, the petitioner expresses the enormity of his need."*
> (Hossfeld, F.-L., & Zenger, E. (2005). *Psalms 2: a commentary on Psalms 51-100*, p. 277.)

Here, the outstretched hands are not only outstretched in a posture of worship, but specifically in a posture of mourning before the Lord, and refusing to be comforted.



There are a dozen or so additional OT texts which space and time don't allow us to consider here. They would serve only to reinforce what we have seen here. But let us note two other factors. The raising of hands in worship is an element of the broader topic of biblical gestures of praise, and of what we might call "bodily movement" in worship. These notions are often lost on us as westerners. So it's worth quoting at length an older work and a few modern ones that sets before us the attitude of the Hebrew Bible. We will then end with a hint of Puritan thought.

First, the older work, the ISBE, under "Gesture," explains;

> "The Oriental is rich in gestures by which feelings are expressed and force added to words. Of this we have abundant illustration in the Bible. Almost every available part of the body was employed in gesture. In salutations the whole body was bowed, sometimes to the ground (Gen 18:2; 19:1; 33:7; 42:6; 33:3, 7), falling on the face to the ground and bowing to the ground, 3 times (1 Sam 20:41; compare Gen 23:7; 2 Sam 9:8; 18:21; 1 Ki 2:19); it was common also to embrace and kiss (Ex 18:7), etc., weeping for joy. Esau "fell on (Jacob's) neck, and kissed him: and they wept" (Gen 33:4); compare Joseph and his brethren (Gen 45:14,15); David and Jonathan (1 Sam 20:41), and the father of the prodigal (Lk 15:20). We have the kiss also in the story of Judas with his Master (Mt 26:49). Bowing the knee was also in Egypt an act of homage to a superior (Gen 41:43); bowing the knee and bowing down were common in prayer and worship (1 Ki 19:18; 2 Ch 6:13; Ezr 9:5; Isa 45:23); in prayer the head and whole body were also bowed (Gen 24:26; 2 Ki 5:18; 2 Ch 29:28). The rabbins decreed that in prayer "in bowing down, the back must be bent so low that every vertebra becomes conspicuous," and endless questions arose as to what it was lawful to do during prayer (Edersheim). We read also of prayer offered standing (1 Sam 1:26; 1 Ki 8:22; Mt 6:5; Mk 11:25), lifting up and spreading forth the hands (1 Ki 8:22; 2 Ch 6:13; Ezr 9:5; Neh 8:6; 1 Tim 2:8); "lifting up the hands" was synonymous with prayer (Ps 77:2; 141:2; Lam 2:19; 1 Tim 2:8); falling on the knees in pleading (1 Ki 1:13). Reverence for the aged was expressed by rising up in their presence (Lev 19:32, "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head"; compare Lam 5:12). The hand was also laid on the mouth in token of respect (Job 29:9); in token of blessing the right hand was placed on the head (Gen 48:14; compare 49:26; Prov 10:6). The hands were laid on the head of the animal to be sacrificed; on the scapegoat and sin offering as denoting the transference of sin; on the burnt offering, perhaps as representing the offerer (Lev 1:4; 16:21). The hands were lifted up in blessing (Lev 9:22), in solemn swearing (Gen 14:22; Ex 6:8 m; Dt 32:40), in defiance and threatening (2 Sam 20:21); extended in pleading (Isa 65:2). Giving the hand or joining hands as a pledge of friendship and fidelity (2 Ki 10:15; Prov 11:21) was the origin of the widespread custom of "shaking hands"; "striking hands" signified the clenching of a bargain or agreement (Prov 6:1 the Revised Version (British and American)); as a solemn pledge the hand was placed under the thigh of the person to whom it was given (Gen 24:2; 47:29); plucking the hand out of the bosom was a sign of action (Ps 74:11); clapping the hands, of rejoicing (2 Ki 11:12; Ps 47:1; 98:8; Isa 55:12), also of ridicule, contempt and rejoicing over one (Job 27:23; Lam 2:15; Nah 3:19). We read of "beckoning with the hand" (Lk 5:7; Jn 13:24), preliminary to speaking (Acts 12:17; 13:16; 19:33; 21:40; 26:1, he "stretched forth his hand"); drooping of the hands indicated failure, weakness or distress (Heb 12:12; compare Isa 35:3; Ecclesiasticus 25:23); washing the hands (publicly) was a declaration of innocence, "of freedom from complicity" (Dt 21:6,7; Mt 27:24)."

Second, In John Goldingay's marvelous *OT Theology*, he takes up the interesting question of passages that seem to describe nature as praising God (like Psalm 69:35; 96:11-3; 98:7-9, etc.). He explains why modern Western readers often struggle with such texts;

> *"The idea of the cosmos praising Yhwh may seem pure metaphor to a modern reader, but it is less so within the First Testament. For modern readers, praise is essentially an activity of the spirit, the mind and the will, and it is essentially addressed to God. Inanimate, unthinking, unfeeling entities can no more praise than dead people can, and praise is just as natural when one is on one's own as in the company of other people. In contrast, the First Testament understands praise as essentially a matter of body and sound, not merely of mind and spirit (e.g., Ps 95:1–2, 6–7). One cannot praise God silently or in a way that does not involve body movement. The animate and inanimate creation thus has most of the capacities or potentials required for praising Yhwh. Perhaps the First Testament implies an awareness that there is a personal liveliness within nature. But in any case, nature's physicality is its asset. As human beings can shout and groan or clap and bow, so animals can howl and birds can shrill, trees can swish their branches and wind can roar. Like humanity, the rest of creation can also naturally respond to God's awesome majesty and power. As humanity shrinks in terror, so earth trembles, mountains jump, heavens burst, seas and rivers run away, trees shatter, leaves fall (e.g., Ps 29:3–9; 68:8; 114:3–7). The moments when nature does so in these psalms are not everyday ones and the responses are not everyday. They are out of the ordinary. Yet they are just as "natural" as more everyday events, even if they are acts of God in the sense used by insurance policies. (Goldingay, J. (2006). Old Testament Theology: Israel's faith, Vol. 2, pp. 662–663).*

"One cannot praise God silently or in a way that does not involve body movement."
- John Goldingay
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To any who would cry "unbiblical" at the raising of hands in worship and prayer, I would simply point out all of the "Bible" about raised hands in worship that they seem to have missed, (to say nothing of the biblical texts that would admonish them not to make such rash and unchristian attacks on a brother or sister in Christ). This isn't to say that a modern church that *doesn't* raise their hands in worship is *unbiblical*. Far from it. There is total liberty and freedom to worship God as you see fit, and God's concern has always been with the direction of your heart, informed by biblical truth. I care little what worship style a church uses. But the above references do mean that someone who maintains their hands constantly at their side has little space to look at a church whose movement in worship is more vivid, and uncharitably declare that they are therefore wrong or *unbiblical* on account of this motion.

While this is not the place to examine all the details of the "worship wars" and debates about various worship styles in the church, it is notable that at least one commentator on modern worship styles (sometimes critical of elements of flamboyant charismatic worship, while deeply supportive of many elements) sees in the growth of "movement" in modern worship a return to a commonly lost biblical reality. Robert Webber notes;

> "A rebirth of the use of outward motions in the church has occurred widely. The Bible is full of examples of actions in which the people of God give outward expression to that which is in their hearts. These actions include clapping, bowing and kneeling, dancing to the Lord and the lifting up of hands. In the past, churches have usually been opposed to this kind of activity. For the most part, this opposition has been based on cultural experience or style. Now, praise-and-worship services have returned to a more biblical precedent rather than following cultural orientation. Admittedly, this is difficult for many people and many churches, because our experience says, "We've done it this way for years; why change now?" The answer is this: God deserves our best, and he is worthy of our all. If there are numerous creative ways to worship him, then let us utilize them to glorify his name. This biblical type of praise includes the whole person—spirit, soul, and body. If we can shout and clap and get excited at athletic events, how much more should we be excited about Jesus our Savior, King of kings and Lord of lords? Psalm 47:1 invites us, "Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy." Psalm 81:1–4 also says:
>
> "Sing for joy to God our strength
> Shout aloud to the God of Jacob!
> Begin the music, strike the tambourine,
> Play the melodious harp and lyre.
> Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon,
> And when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast;
> This is a decree for Israel,
> An ordinance of the God of Jacob.""
>
> (Robert Webber, *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, The Complete Library of Christian Worship, 2:351.)

But perhaps this resurgence is not entirely new. Perhaps, opposition to such "movement" in a church stems from more recent, but genuine, fear that emotion in worship will lead to *emotionalism*. Perhaps this at times motivates a worship style that represses emotion. This is part of what stood behind Jonathan Edward's writing of his famous *Religious Affections*. Sam Storms, in a contemporary interpretation of that work, (*Signs Of The Spirit* pg. 53-54) brings the Puritan's opinion of such a tactic into our modern age. And with Edwards' thought (via Sam Storms' words) we fitly end;

> "Some actually orchestrate worship in such a way that the affections of the heart are reined in and, in some cases, even suppressed. People often fear the external manifestation of internal zeal and love and desire and joy. Though they sing, they do so in a way that the end in view is the mere articulation of words and declaration of truths. But if that were what God intended, why did he not ordain that we recite, in prose, biblical truths about him? Why sing? It can't be simply for the aesthetic value of music or because of the pleasure it brings, for that would turn worship manward, as if we were now the focus rather than God. We sing because God has created not only our minds but also our hearts and souls, indeed our bodies as well, in such a way that music elicits and intensifies holy affections for God and facilitates their lively and vigorous expression."

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Timothy Berg

For context, Sam Storms explains the background to Edwards' comments; "Chauncy was especially offended by what he perceived to be fanatical excess in the behavior of those who participated in the revival. True religion, Chauncy said, was primarily a matter of the mind, not the affections, and was characterized by self-control, cultural sophistication, and strict moral propriety. “The plain truth is [that] an enlightened mind, and not raised affections, ought always to be the guide of those who call themselves men; and this, in the affairs of religion, as well as other things.”

Sam Storms, Signs of the Spirit: An Interpretation of Jonathan Edwards’ Religious Affections, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 31.

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Ans, "In hopes of putting an end to what they deemed extravagant and “enthusiastic” behavior on the part of a number of students, the administration at Yale invited Edwards to deliver the commencement speech on September 10, 1741. What they heard instead was a spirited defense, in general, of the spiritual authenticity of the revival.
Edwards later expanded on the work and published it that same year with a preface by the Rev. William Cooper of Boston. The complete title is:

The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, Applied to that Uncommon Operation that has lately Appeared … See more

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