

The Power of the Hand: χεῖρ in the Acts of the Apostles

The Greek word for hand, χεῖρ, occurs more frequently in the book of Acts than in any of the four Gospels of the New Testament (Strong's Greek 5495 – χεῖρ) excluding compound words in which χεῖρ is a root, some of which are only found in Acts, such as χειραγωγέω (Acts 9:8, 22:11), some only found in Luke-Acts, such as ἐπιχειρέω (Lk 1:1; Acts 9:29, 19:13), and some found both in Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament, such as χειροποίητος (Mk 14:58; Acts 7:48, 17:24). In his commentary on Acts, Mikeal Parsons notes that the author of Acts “expected his audience to experience the text aurally and communally” (Parsons 2008). A hearer of this text recited, or performed, in Greek may have noted the repeated use of χεῖρ throughout the book of Acts. This repeated use of χεῖρ is sometimes lost in English translation. Fitzmeyer, in his commentary on Acts, repeatedly gives a literal translation of the Greek for verses containing the word χεῖρ; for example, he writes “Lit. ‘through the hands of...’ for διὰ χειρὸς in Acts 11:30 (Fitzmeyer 1998). This paper investigates the repeated use of χεῖρ in various contexts throughout the book of Acts and situates these uses and contexts in the greater purpose and mission of the early community as told in the book of Acts.

The author of Acts sets forth the book's purpose in several verses basically documenting the continuation of the early apostolic community as witnesses of Jesus' ministry and resurrection (Acts 1:1, 8) with the goal of “validat[ing] the Christian movement” (Schauf 2015). The apostles, chosen witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, are empowered by the Holy Spirit to teach (διδάσκειν) and to perform (ποιεῖν), or act, many signs and wonders (πολλὰ τε τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα), as Jesus did (Acts 2:22, 43); The phrase τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα is found several times throughout Acts as well (2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12; Fitzmeyer 1998) . The use of χεῖρ in its various contexts emphasizes the physical instrumentality of the apostles in their mission. The hand brings healing or empowerment via physical touch (4:30; 5:12; 9:12, 17, 41;

11:30, 14:3, 19:11, 28:8), the hand writes and provides for others (15:23; 20:34). The hand of God either provides deliverance (4:28; 7:25, 35, 50; 11:21; 12:7, 17) or infirmity (13:11), while the hands of men produce idolatrous works (7:41; 17:25; 19:26) or violently persecute the early believers (2:23; 4:3; 5:18; 12:1, 21:11,27; 23:19, 28:3,4, 17). While not necessarily signs and wonders and more violent and destructive in nature, the instances of χεῖρ used for persecution is explained by Waters who notes in his commentary that persecution is the means by which the gospel is advanced (Waters 2013). The hands, particularly by performing signs and wonders, authenticated the apostles as” eyewitnesses to the risen Christ,” validated the teaching of the apostle and “publicly certify the truth of the message” (Waters 2013; Fitzmeyer 1998). The use of χεῖρ throughout Acts not only provides an aural emphasis, but also a visual one. The hand, of both God and man, both healing and destructive, is a physical, tangible instrument and image through which the apostles demonstrate their power and witness to other nations and whose emphasis through repetition was designed to extend that demonstration to the readers and hearers of the book of Acts.

Bibliography

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