1 Gestures of Jesus: touch, laying on of hands and lifting by the hand

1.1 Abstract

The article undertakes a biblical-theological analysis of the gestures of Jesus in which God's closeness to humans is revealed: touch (ἅπτομαι), laying on of hands (ἐπιτίθημι τὰς χεῖρας), and taking and lifting by the hand (κρατέω τῆς χειρός; ἐγείρω/ἀνίστημι). In the perspective of the Incarnation and Christ's paschal victory key pericopes are read: the cleansing of the leper (Mk 1:40–45), the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage (Mk 5:25–34), the opening of the ears and tongue of the deaf-mute (Mk 7:31–37), numerous healings by the laying on of hands (Lk 4:40–41), the straightening of a woman "bound" by Satan (Lk 13:10–17), the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29–31 and parallels), the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:35–43) and the liberation of the boy tormented by a spirit (Mk 9:14–29). Particular emphasis is placed on the distinction between touch and exorcism: in classical accounts of liberation Jesus acts by authoritative word, while touch primarily serves relation, healing, restoration of dignity and lifting up of the person. The theology of physical closeness shows that the body participates in the work of salvation and becomes a space of revelation of God's reign. The article concludes with a pastoral synthesis which on the one hand draws criteria for reading the evangelic gestures in the Church's ministry and on the other underscores the necessity of prudence: symptoms of crisis do not allow for self-diagnosis of possession and require responsible medical and psychological assessment. The gesture of Jesus is not a technique nor a transmission of energy, but an incarnate language of love that touches, lifts and reintegrates into relationship with God and community.

1.2 Keywords

Jesus; touch; laying on of hands; lifting by the hand; exorcism; Incarnation; Pascha; dignity of the person; body; the Synoptic Gospels

1.3 Introduction

The Gospels present Jesus whose word has power over sickness, evil spirits and death. However, the incarnate Logos is not known only through teaching and commands: the Son of God meets the person in their body — he looks, draws near, touches, takes by the hand, lays on hands, lifts. These gestures are theologically significant because they are not an addition to the word but an element of revelation: God does not save "beside" corporeality but enters into the condition of the human body, wounded by illness, exclusion, fear, sin and death.[1] Jesus' bodily closeness — visible, concrete — becomes a sign of God's compassion, restoration of relationship, breaking of isolation, recovery of subjectivity and his dominion over disease, impurity, powers of evil and death.

Methodologically the article combines exegesis of pericopes with theological and anthropological reflection. A decisive partition is the distinction between touch and exorcism: the Gospels do not present touch as a technique for expelling evil spirits. In classic exorcisms Jesus acts by authoritative word; touch appears mainly in healings and — in some narratives — as a gesture that completes a liberation

[1] Cf. the programmatic thesis on the participation of the body in the work of salvation in the evangelic narratives; the incarnational framing gives meaning to Jesus' gestures.

already effected.[2] At the same time one must distinguish the evangelic description from contemporary diagnosis: the ancient accounts do not provide clinical criteria for recognizing disorders. In pastoral practice symptoms of crisis — psychological, somatic or spiritual — do not permit autonomous recognition of possession and require responsible medical and psychological evaluation, and spiritual discernment must respect the integrity of the person, their consent and safety. The article does not describe methods or procedural techniques but interprets Jesus' gestures as revelation of God's relational closeness and as indication of the goal: the recovery of the person in their full integrity.

1.4 Chapter I. Vocabulary and hermeneutics of gestures

1.1. The body in the economy of salvation The Incarnation establishes the body as the place of God's action: the Son becomes a body (sarx) in order to save the body. Consequently Jesus' gestures — touch, laying on of hands, taking by the hand and lifting — participate in the same economy of salvation as his word. They are sacramental in a broad sense: they make visible what is invisible — the Father's love, the power of the Spirit, the reign of God in relation to the frail human body. Understanding them requires historical-cultural sensitivity: ancient semantics of gestures include blessing, identification, transmission of task or authority, prayer and healing; simultaneously Jesus accomplishes the eschatological fulfillment of these meanings.

1.2. Basic Greek vocabulary

- ἅπτομαι (haptomai) — "to touch." It covers both a light brushing and a grasp in direct contact. In Jesus this is not a neutral gesture: touch creates a relation between the One who brings life and the person wounded by illness or impurity.[3]
- ἐπιτίθημι τὰς χεῖρας (epitithēmi tas cheiras) — "to lay on hands." A biblically polyvalent gesture (blessing, identification, transfer of mission, prayer, healing). In Jesus' activity it does not mean a mechanical "transmission of energy" but is a bodily sign of his personal and sovereign presence.[4]
- κρατέω τῆς χειρός (krateō tēs cheiros) — "to take by the hand." Krateō indicates a strong grasp, support. It appears where a person lies, is powerless, resembles a dead one: a gesture that comes in response to radical limpness.[5]
- ἐγείρω and ἀνίστημι (egeirō, anistēmi) — "to raise/awaken" and "to get up/stand." They belong to the basic vocabulary of resurrection. Consequently lifting the sick or the liberated has a paschal meaning: it foreshadows Christ's victory over death.[6]

1.5 Chapter II. Jesus' touch

2.1. The touching of the leper (Mk 1:40–45) The leper's request synthesizes faith and desire for communion: "If you will, you can make me clean." Jesus "stretched out his hand and touched him" (ἐκτείνας τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ ἥψατο) and said, "I will; be made clean."[7]

[2] The distinction is already present in the descriptions: healing by touch/laying on of hands contrasted with exorcisms effected by authoritative word (cf. Lk 4:40–41; Mk 1:23–27).

[3] See Mk 1:41; 5:27–31; the semantics of ἅπτομαι in healing pericopes.

[4] Cf. the biblical tradition of the laying on of hands and its functions (blessing, identification, mission, prayer, healing); in the Gospels as a sign of Jesus' presence (Lk 4:40).

[5] See Mk 1:31; 5:41; 9:27.

[6] Cf. the use of ἐγείρω and ἀνίστημι in paschal contexts (e.g., Mk 16:6), which deepens the meaning of healing and lifting narratives.

[7] Mk 1:40–45.

2.1.1. Touch precedes the word of cleansing The narrative sequence is theologically expressive: stirring, stretching out the hand, touching, word, the leaving of impurity. Jesus could have healed at a distance, as other pericopes confirm; touch is not necessary for the effectiveness of the miracle but is necessary to fully reveal the meaning of the encounter. The isolated person is first accepted as a person — "he may be touched" — before the cleansing becomes socially visible.[8]

2.1.2. Touch as overcoming isolation Biblical leprosy (ṣāraʿat) is not a simple equivalent of Hansen's disease; in biblical categories the state of impurity caused social exclusion.[9] Jesus does not see a "case" but a person: touch abolishes the definition of "untouchable." This is not a contrast between Jesus and Judaism; rather it is the revelation of a purifying power stronger than what excludes. Jesus acts within the world of Jewish concepts of purity, giving them an eschatological fulfillment.[10]

2.2. The woman suffering from hemorrhage (Mk 5:25–34) Here the person initiates contact: "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well (σωθήσομαι)."[11] The vocabulary of salvation (sōzō) links physical and spiritual dimensions.

2.2.1. From anonymous touch to a personal encounter The woman seeks healing in secrecy. Jesus does not let the event remain at the level of anonymous contact: "Who touched my clothes?" The question does not express ignorance but calls to come out of anonymity, fear and shame. Public confession becomes the path to a personal word: "Daughter, your faith has made you well." Touch is incorporated into the relation — it is not contact with fabric but turning by faith toward Jesus.[12]

2.2.2. Touch does not act magically The story could be read in the key of ancient notions about a force emanating from a miracle-worker. Mark, however, corrects the magic of impersonal power: the power comes from Jesus; it is not an energy to be "taken away"; touch becomes a language of trust; healing leads to relation; the woman does not "steal" power — she is gifted by a Person.[13] It is not the garment that heals but Jesus.

2.3. Touch of the afflicted organ The Gospels sometimes specify the place of touch: the ears and tongue of the deaf-mute (Mk 7:31–37), the eyes of the blind man in Bethsaida (Mk 8:22–26), the eyes of two blind men (Mt 9:29), the eyes of blind men near Jericho (Mt 20:34), the ear of the high priest's servant (Lk 22:51).[14]

2.3.1. Mk 7:33–35: the language of gestures Jesus takes the deaf-mute aside, puts his fingers into his ears, touches his tongue with spittle, looks up to heaven, sighs, and says, "Effatha" — "Be opened."[15] The gestures answer the person's condition: since he has difficulty hearing, communication becomes bodily. Jesus "speaks" with gestures that he intends to open what is closed. Physical closeness has communicative meaning: God enters the world of limited communication to restore it.

2.3.2. Individualization of the encounter The diversity of ways of acting — word, touch, healing at a distance, complex gestures, permission to touch Jesus — excludes a magical procedure. There is no

[8] In the structure of the account touch precedes the word; the intention to break isolation is evident.

[9] Cf. priestly rules of ritual purity in the Law; "leprosy" (ṣāraʿat) covered various states of impurity, not only the modern Hansen's disease.

[10] See the remark on the Jewish context of purity and its eschatological fulfillment in Jesus; cf. also the reflection: C. Wassen, "The Jewishness of Jesus and Ritual Purity."

[11] Mk 5:25–34; sōzō ("save/heal") joins bodily and salvific dimensions.

[12] Transition from anonymity to public encounter: "Daughter, your faith has saved you."

[13] Mark corrects magical imaginations: the Person bestows, not the garment "transmits" power.

[14] Mk 7:31–37; 8:22–26; Mt 9:29; 20:34; Lk 22:51.

[15] Mk 7:33–35; "Effatha."

technique here; there is an encounter of person with Person. Jesus is sovereign, and the gestures are indicators of relation.

1.6 Chapter III. Laying on of hands

3.1. Jesus lays his hands on each sick person (Lk 4:40–41) Luke reports: "He laid his hands on each one of them and healed them"; he emphasizes individualization (ἑνὶ ἑκάστῳ αὐτῶν).[16] Immediately the evangelist adds: "And demons also came out of many" — but he does not equate those phenomena. He distinguishes healings by the laying on of hands and demons departing in response to Jesus' authoritative word.[17] From the beginning it is clear that the healing gesture and the word of exorcism perform different functions.

3.2. The bent-over woman (Lk 13:10–17) A woman "had a spirit of infirmity" (πνεῦμα ἀσθενείας) for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not straighten up. Jesus said, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity," then laid his hands on her; she straightened up and glorified God.[18]

3.2.1. The word of liberation precedes the gesture The sequence is theologically important: noticing — calling — proclamation of liberation — laying on of hands — straightening up — praise. The perfect form (ἀπολέλυσαι — "you have been freed") highlights the efficacy of the word: liberation has become reality; the laying on of hands makes it visible and bodily.[19]

3.2.2. Illness and the action of Satan Jesus states that Satan had "bound" this woman for eighteen years. This does not imply that every illness has a direct demonic cause. The Gospels do not identify all the sick with the possessed; here there is no typical exorcistic dialogue: there is no addressing of the spirit, question about a name, command to come out and violent reaction. The emphasis is on loosening bonds and restoring the woman's place in the assembly.[20]

3.2.3. Straightening as recovery of dignity The straightening has bodily dimension (the infirmity departs), spiritual (loosening of bonds), social (standing in the midst of the synagogue), religious (the title "daughter of Abraham"), eschatological (Sabbath as a day of liberation). The laying on of hands is a sign that God's liberating power reaches a concrete body.

1.7 Chapter IV. Lifting by the hand

4.1. Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29–31 and parallels) Mark notes: "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up" — the woman was afflicted by a fever, and after being lifted she served. Matthew says: "he touched her hand" (Mt 8:15), Luke: "he rebuked the fever" (Lk 4:39).[21] The editorial differences indicate that the early Church did not treat any one of the gestures as a necessary procedure: the same authority of Jesus can be expressed by touch, lifting or an effective word.

4.2. Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:35–43) Jesus takes the girl by the hand and says, "Talitha kum" — "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (τὸ κοράσιον, σοὶ λέγω, ἔγειρε). The girl immediately arose and walked.[22]

4.2.1. Entering into the space of death Touching a dead person in Mosaic Law brought ritual impurity (cf. Num 19:11–13). Jesus is not "defeated" by death; on the contrary, his life reaches the dead girl. This is not

[16] Lk 4:40–41; "ἑνὶ ἑκάστῳ αὐτῶν."

[17] Luke distinguishes healings (by laying on of hands) and demons departing (in response to the command).

[18] Lk 13:10–17.

[19] The perfect form (ἀπολέλυσαι) emphasizes the efficacy of the word; the gesture makes it visible.

[20] Absence of an exorcistic dialogue; emphasis on loosening bonds and the dignity of the "daughter of Abraham."

[21] Mk 1:29–31; Mt 8:14–15; Lk 4:38–39.

[22] Mk 5:35–43; Aramaic "Talitha kum."

a disregard of the Law but a christological confession: in him there is authority stronger than death.[23]

4.2.2. Intimacy of the gesture The Aramaic talitha is an affectionate address (“little lamb”), and the word is linked with touch: the hand restores contact, the voice calls to life, the command “rise” brings out of death, and the instruction to feed restores normality. The miracle embraces the whole: return to life and return home — to relationship.

4.3. The boy freed from a spirit (Mk 9:14–29) This is a key text for the relation between exorcism and lifting by the hand. Jesus commands the mute and deaf spirit: “Come out of him and never enter him again.” The spirit leaves, violently convulsing the boy. The boy appears as though dead. Then Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up; he arose.[24]

4.3.1. Touch follows the exorcism The sequence excludes the thesis that Jesus expels the spirit by touch: the exorcism is effected by word; touch follows when the boy remains limp. Jesus lifts him so that he can stand by his own power.[25]

4.3.2. Liberation does not end with the spirit’s departure Jesus’ aim is not merely removal of the spirit as an “opponent” but the recovery of the person. The boy cannot remain “as if dead” — he is lifted, restored to autonomy, led out of a resemblance to death into life.

4.3.3. Paschal symbolism Mark uses resurrection verbs: ἤγειρεν (“he raised”) and ἀνέστη (“he rose”).[26] The event has a paschal dimension: Christ tears the person from the power leading to death and gives him back to life. It is not yet resurrection in the eschatological sense but a prefiguring icon of Pascha.

1.8 Chapter V. Touch and exorcism

5.1. The primacy of the word in classical exorcisms In accounts of exorcism Jesus acts with a word: “Be silent and come out of him” (Mk 1:23–27), the deliverance of the Gerasene demoniac (Mk 5:1–20), the deliverance of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter at a distance (Mk 7:24–30), “he cast out the spirits with a word” (Mt 8:16), the deliverance of two possessed men (Mt 8:28–34), the command to an unclean spirit (Lk 4:33–36).[27] Three consequences follow from this.

5.1.1. Jesus’ authority is personal, not technical Spirits leave not because an appropriate gesture was performed but because they recognize in Jesus the authority of the Son and submit to his command. The authority of the Person replaces technique.[28]

5.1.2. Physical contact is not a condition of liberation The Gospels note liberations effected at a distance (e.g., the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter). There is no presence of touch as a “channel of power.” It is Christ’s sovereignty that produces the effect.

5.1.3. Touch is directed toward the human person Jesus’ command is addressed to the spirit; touch is directed to the person: it restores bond, dignity, security, the ability to stand and walk. One can summarize the functions: the command confronts and removes the bondage; touch restores relation; taking by the hand supports the weakened; lifting allows standing again; the word addressed to the healed rebuilds the personal bond.

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[23] Cf. Num 19:11–13 on impurity after touching the dead; in Jesus there appears authority stronger than death.

[24] Mk 9:14–29.

[25] Sequence: command — spirit departs — limpness — taking — lifting — “he arose.”

[26] Paschal semantics of ἐγείρω/ἀνίστημι (cf. Mk 16:6).

[27] Mk 1:23–27; 5:1–20; 7:24–30; Mt 8:16; 28–34; Lk 4:33–36.

[28] Cf. Mt 8:16: “he cast out the spirits with a word.”

1.9 Chapter VI. Theology of physical closeness

6.1. A touch that does not possess In the evangelic narratives Jesus does not use touch to take control over the person. His closeness does not objectify, humiliate, demonstrate power over the defenseless or replace personal relation. On the contrary, it leads to freedom: Jesus takes the hand so that the person can have it "for themselves" again — to stand and walk independently. This is a radical contrast to the action of the unclean spirit which "seizes and throws," robs of speech and communication, isolates, leads to self-harm and death. Jesus approaches without violence, supports, lifts, restores speech, relationship and life.

6.2. From "enslaved body" to "recovered body" Liberation concerns the whole person: recovery of home (Mk 5:19), integration of senses and speech (Mk 7:35; Mt 9:33), calm of mind (Mk 5:15), straightening of posture (Lk 13:13), rising to one's feet (Mk 9:27).[29] Biblical anthropology does not separate soul and body: the kingdom of God embraces the person's integrity.

6.3. Reversal of the logic of impurity In a tradition where the pure avoided the impure, Jesus touches the leper, allows himself to be touched by the woman with hemorrhage, takes by the hand the dead girl. The direction is reversed: impurity does not "infect" Jesus; his holiness restores purity and life.[30] The contemporary formula "infectious holiness" can be illustrative but is not a biblical term; it remains a theological description of the direction of events.

6.4. Touch and faith Touch can become the body of faith: the woman touches the cloak in trust; Jairus asks that Jesus lay hands on his daughter (Mk 5:23); people ask that he touch the blind man (Mk 8:22); parents bring children for him to lay hands on them (Mk 10:13–16).[31] At the same time Jesus does not make his power dependent on a gesture: he heals by touch, by word, at a distance, at the initiative of the sick, of the surrounding people or sovereignly. Faith does not consist in the conviction that a gesture itself "must work" but in turning toward the Person.

1.10 Pastoral Synthesis

The theology of Jesus' gestures — from touch through laying on of hands to lifting by the hand — inspires integral care for the person in the Church. At the same time it requires hermeneutical and ethical prudence. The following emphases arise from the evangelic descriptions and do not constitute procedural instructions but indicate the meaning and limits of closeness.

1. Primacy of the person over the phenomenon Jesus does not make the person a "place of manifestation." The command is addressed against the spirit, the touch toward the person. The aim of action is not simply the elimination of evil but the recovery of the person in relation to God and community. In pastoral practice this means choosing language, gestures and means that do not concentrate attention on "phenomena" but serve the good of the person.
2. Liberation should lead to subjectivity Mk 9 shows that liberation does not end with the spirit's departure: Jesus lifts the boy so that he may stand on his own feet. The paschal gesture signifies the passage from limpness to autonomy. Pastoral care should favor forms of accompaniment that strengthen the person's capacity for independent life and responsible relationships and do not create dependence on those who minister.

[29] Mk 5:15, 19; Mt 9:33; Mk 7:35; Lk 13:13; Mk 9:27.

[30] Mk 1:41; 5:27–34; 5:41–42.

[31] Mk 5:23; 8:22; 10:13–16.

3. Physical closeness is not a means of coercion Evangelic gestures do not justify forceful restraint, touching without consent, or understanding the body as the "location" of an evil spirit. Jesus' touch restores freedom and safety; it cannot be used in a way that violates bodily integrity. In many situations presence, attentiveness, word and prayer — without touch — express sufficient and appropriate closeness.
4. Gesture does not replace word and prayer In classical exorcisms the authoritative word acts; touch complements a transformation already accomplished, especially as "lifting." Mk 9 ends with an admonition about prayer as the source of efficacy (cf. Mk 9:29). There is no "touch technique" that automatically "casts out." Gesture is a language of relation, not a method.
5. Illness is not automatically a "binding" Lk 13 interprets a particular case as "bound" by Satan, but the Gospels do not identify illness with possession. Violent bodily reactions are not "proof" of demonic action; conversely, healings often happen without spectacular display. One must avoid simplifications and harmful interpretations.
6. Necessity of responsible discernment and professional help Symptoms of crisis — somatic, psychological, emotional, relational — do not allow for independent recognition of possession. Pastoral prudence requires consultation and medical and psychological assessment, and any spiritual discernment must be conducted within competent ecclesial structures, respecting law, conscience and the dignity of the person. Cooperation with family, milieu and specialists is often indispensable for the full "lifting" of the person.
7. Paschal horizon of closeness Lifting by the hand — in the language of egeirō/anistēmi — expresses the paschal goal of every ministry: to lead from limpness to life, from fear to trust, from isolation to communion. Pastoral ministry inspired by Jesus' gestures will recognize such moments of "passage" and support processes of maturation in faith, hope and love.
8. Limits of touch and a culture of consent Physical closeness is potentially a good but requires clear limits and a culture of consent: touch must be appropriate, non-intimate, non-imposed, respecting the right to object and the person's sensitivity. In many pastoral contexts a default restraint from touching is advisable, except in cases of clear consent and obvious need (e.g., support in fainting). The evangelic descriptions indicate that Jesus does not appropriate the body — rather, he returns it to the person.

1.11 Conclusion

Touch, laying on of hands and lifting by the hand are not techniques in the Gospels but theophanic signs of God's incarnate closeness. In classical exorcisms Jesus commands with a word; touch, by contrast, is a gesture directed to the person: it restores relationship, heals, removes isolation and lifts to a standing position. In each of the key narratives the same logic appears: God does not save from a distance. He enters the leper's loneliness, touches the shame of the woman with hemorrhage, communicates bodily with the deaf-mute, lays hands on the sick one by one, loosens the bonds of the bent-over woman, lifts Peter's feverish mother-in-law, takes the dead child by the hand and finally restores the boy "as if dead" to life by lifting him by the hand. The exemplary scene for the whole remains Mk 9:27: "Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up, and he arose." The spirit was expelled by command, but the person was recovered by closeness. Therefore lifting by the hand is a paschal icon of Christ's mission: to go down to the one who lies, grasp him and make him stand again as a free person in communion with God and people.

1.12 Notes

1.13 Bibliography

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