

Die Handauflegung im Urchristentum nach Verwendung, Herkunft und Bedeutung
in religionsgeschichtlichem Zusammenhang untersucht
Johannes Behm
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An interesting and instructive monograph on an interesting subject. The title names the three sections into which the author divides the discussion: the usage, the origin and the import of the laying on of hands. The "religionsgeschichtliche" aspect of the matter, while not made particularly prominent, still occupies more space than is justified by the meager results of its consideration, for it yields little else than this, that for the laying on of hands in healing and benediction general analogies can be quoted from the extra-biblical sphere, which are, however, no more than analogies, since the act is so naturally suited to the purpose as to rule out the question of historical derivation from one quarter to another. As to the usage in ordination and in connection with baptism, here even general analogies, aside from the Old Testament, are lacking. The act in healing differs from the act elsewhere in that it is not applied regularly or even prevailingly to the head, but to other parts of the body, and thus bears a less ritual character and falls rather under the general rubric of bodily contact. From the Gospel-data the author draws the conclusion that the supernatural healing-power of Jesus was transmitted from him to men not exclusively through intent or volition or word, but that it also streamed out, as it were, through his body, so that the hands became the natural instruments for communicating it (Matt. 6:2). This, to be sure, is the implication wherever the usage occurs in paganism, as well as in the Gospels, but the author carefully shields Jesus from the charge of magic by emphasizing that in his case the conscious, mental exercise of power was always present, whilst elsewhere the effect is frequently conceived to be *ex opere operato*. In order to establish this distinction the more surely he is willing even to deny the historicity of the representation in Mark and Luke according to which, in the case of the woman with the issue of blood, the proceeding of the power from Jesus by mere physical contact first made him aware of what was taking place. But only Jesus is thus shielded; Mark and Luke had no different conceptions of such things than were vulgarly current in the Hellenistic-Roman world. In another direction the author convincingly shows how little basis there is for the modern idea, that Jesus performed his cures through magnetism and suggestion. Even "the physical elements in his miraculous power sprang from the mysterious depths of his personality" (p. 157). On the other hand, this personal aspect of the matter does not seem to exclude to us, that the healing power of the miracles was consciously associated in the mind of Jesus with the Spirit. Whilst in regard to ordination, the author makes the nexus between the rite and the Spirit of the closest, he seems to avoid affirming this in the case of the use of the hand for healing, and here speaks only of "Kraft" generally (p. 156), or contents himself with saying that the thought of the Spirit stood in the background and only slightly begins to color the meaning of the act (p. 160). Is this reserve warranted in view of such statements as Mark 11:5, 12:28; Luke 4:18 ff.?

In regard to the rite of ordination, the Old Testament and Judaism permit a sufficient explanation of the Christian custom. To be sure, the Jewish tradition about the Semikha as perpetuated from the age of Moses down to the New Testament times and later, through the continuity of the Synedrium, lacks all historic support. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the second century after Christ the scribal judges in Palestine were ordained by laying on of hands, which must, of course, rest on much older usage. It is interesting to learn that Judaism, even after this, abandoned the rite, like some other things, probably in resentment against the Christian usurpation of it.

Less satisfactory to our mind is the discussion of the laying on of hands in connection with baptism. Behm here presents a hypothesis of his own in order to explain that, on the one hand, the rite of baptism itself appears in the New Testament as symbolic of the bestowal of the Spirit, whilst, on the other hand, the laying on of hands as a separate act, added to baptism, is given the same significance. He suggests that originally the two rites were separated, that baptism was a washing from sin pure and simple, and contained no symbolic reference to the positive grace of the impartation of the Spirit. The laying on of hands added to this the positive side, the gift of the Spirit. Because, however, the two acts were regularly performed in such close proximity, and because the bestowal of the Spirit was figuratively also spoken of as a "baptism", the two became fused or confounded, and baptism was now supposed to carry within itself the symbolism of the bestowal of the Spirit. To this hypothesis we have serious objections. It leads the author to cast doubt on the verbal accuracy of the tradition when it attributes to both John the Baptist and Jesus the comparative statement, that the former baptized with water, the latter with the Spirit. While in this saying, of course not two rites are contrasted, but the Johannine rite is set over against its Christian fulfillment, the outpouring of the Spirit by Jesus, yet it will be observed, that the latter is described in terms of baptism, and this is hardly a mere figure altogether independent of the symbolism of the rite. It is further unwarranted to deny that the bestowal of the Holy Spirit occurs directly connected with baptism, without the intermediate link of the laying on of hands. Thus Acts 2:30 certainly is most naturally understood. Of course, Acts 10:47 proves nothing either way, because here baptism appears only as justified by the possession of the Spirit, not necessarily as significant of it. The connection of the Pneuma with baptism in Paul counts heavily against the hypothesis, for it is difficult to believe that as early as this a fusion of the two rites and the attribution to the one of what belonged to the other could have taken place to such an extent that Paul nowhere even so much as mentions any longer the laying on of hands as an integral part of the ritual of introduction into the church, and finds in the bestowal of the Spirit the "true essence" of baptism. Nor do we see how it can be reconciled with this that in Titus 3:5 (rendered by Behm: "through a bath of regeneration, and through a renewal from the Holy Spirit") the two factors can again appear separated, for the author acknowledges the genuineness of the Pastoral Epistles. In view of this would it not be better to say, that from the beginning in the Apostolic church the gift of the Spirit was directly associated with baptism and stood in no necessary ritual connection with the laying on of hands? Obviously both Acts 8:17 and 19:6 are exceptional cases; in both the implication is rather that normally baptism and the Holy Spirit go together, but that, where the latter for some reason or other has not come with the former, the laying on of hands can supply the deficiency.

The author's method is, on the whole, sound and cautious, but occasionally he indulges in taking critical liberties with the text. One instance of this is his treatment of the account in Acts 8:14 ff. Here the strange phenomenon, just alluded to, presents itself, that the Samaritans converted and baptized by Philip have to wait for the arrival of the Apostles Peter and John before they can receive the Holy Spirit. In order to avoid the apparent implication, that only the Apostles were qualified by laying on of hands to impart the Spirit, Behm assumes that here two independent accounts have been patched together by Luke, one which spoke of the ministry of Philip and mentioned only the baptism of the Samaritan converts, without meaning to exclude the subsequent laying on of hands for communication of the Spirit, and another account which spoke of a later missionary visit of Peter and John to the same place and emphasized the pneumatic phenomena, without implying that the persons affected thereby had not been baptized immediately beforehand and received the

imposition of hands. Luke, by erroneously combining the two pieces, created the present impossible situation. But we are unable to see that the situation is impossible. Von Hofmann's view, partially accepted by the author himself (p. 30), seems to offer a plausible explanation of the fact that two things usually connected here fall apart. Where the Gospel for the first time was carried beyond the sphere of Judaism it may well have appeared necessary to make the full coordination of these non-Jewish converts with the Jewish Christians dependent on Apostolic sanction. The endowment with the Spirit was the concrete form in which such full coordination naturally expressed itself. Von Hofmann would bring this into connection with the Spirit as an equipment for the work of extending the Gospel. According to him, the question was specifically whether the converted Samaritans could share in this task, and in order not to prejudge this the Spirit was withheld at first. But, apart from the peculiar turn thus given to the explanation, its general principle sufficiently commends itself to render Behm's partition of the text unnecessary.

It also seems to us questionable exegesis when in 1 Tim. 4:14 the verb εδοθη and in 2 Tim. 1:6 the words "which is in thee through the laying on of my hands" are weakened so as to yield the thought that the χαρισμα of Timothy was previously in him as a natural endowment, and, that the laying on of hands only brought it to clear consciousness, a theory which Behm seems inclined to apply to the Apostle's conception of the χαρισματα generally (pp. 45 ff.). These are, however, minor matters, dissent in regard to which can in no wise detract from our appreciation of the author's admirable treatment of his theme as a whole.