

## The Laying on of Hands in 1 Timothy 5:22: A New Proposal

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*In 1 Tim 5:22, the author of the letter tells the recipient to avoid “laying hands on anyone quickly.” Traditionally, this phrase has been understood to refer to an action related either to ordination or to the receiving back into fellowship of lapsed believers. Neither view, however, is without difficulties. This article examines the various uses of the phrase “lay hands on” in the LXX and the Greek NT and argues that the best understanding of the phrase in 1 Tim 5:22 is to associate it with the manner in which hands are imposed as a sign of accusation. Thus, the passage refers neither to ordination nor to receiving lapsed believers but stands as a caution against hastily accusing an elder of wrongdoing.*

*Key Words: ordination, laying on of hands, hands, accusation, Elder, LXX*

In the Epistle of 1 Timothy, an author of the late first or early second century C.E. offers instructions to a younger co-worker laboring at Ephesus. In 5:22, this mentor advises his protégé to avoid “laying hands on anyone quickly” (χειρας ταχέως μηδενὶ ἐπιτίθει). The precise meaning of these words has posed, in the words of Meier, “a true *crux interpretum*.”<sup>1</sup> A survey of the literature on this passage shows that the most widely held understanding of the laying on of hands relates to the ordination of an individual.<sup>2</sup> So widespread is this view that even the NRSV, which tends

1. John P. Meier, “*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles,” *CBQ* 35 (1973): 323–45.

2. E.g., Alfred Plummer, *The Pastoral Epistles* (EB; New York: Armstrong, 1903), 167; E. K. Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 79–80; C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New Clarendon Bible [New Testament]); Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 80–81; Joseph Reuss, *The First Epistle to Timothy, The Second Epistle to Timothy* (New Testament for Spiritual Reading 19; New York: Crossroad, 1981), 71; Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (rev. ed.; TNTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 119–20; George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 239; Jouette M. Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 102; Margaret Davies, *The Pastoral Epistles*. (Epworth Commentaries; London: Epworth, 1996), 44; I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 608, 620–22; Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 473; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 316–18.

toward formal equivalency as a translation style,<sup>3</sup> renders this verse, “Do not ordain anyone hastily.” Against this view, a minority of scholars hold that the laying on of hands here refers to the receiving back into the church of wayward believers.<sup>4</sup> Neither of these views, however, is without shortcomings. The primary difficulty with the second view is that the first extant reference tying the laying on of hands to the receiving of lapsed believers hails from the third century C.E.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this late date, no evidence whatsoever links the laying on of hands with the reception of penitent sinners.<sup>6</sup> A similar problem besets the first view. Despite the widespread assumption that ordination was marked by the laying on of hands, the NT evidence commonly presented for the practice is far from clear, and unambiguous reference connecting the two does not appear until the third century C.E.<sup>7</sup> Many treatments of 1 Tim 5:22 in which ordination is advanced as the favored explanation do not provide evidence in favor of the position so much as they accept it as the default position following a critique and rejection of the minority position.<sup>8</sup>

In 1 Tim 5:22, the key terms are χεῖρας and ἐπιτίθει. Elsewhere in the NT, the combination of any of the related forms ἐπιτίθημι, τίθημι, or ἐπιθεῖς with χεῖρ occurs a total of 29 times. Of these occurrences, 11 refer unam-

3. This leaning is embodied in the maxim adopted by the translation committee: “As literal as possible; as free as necessary” (Bruce M. Metzger, Robert C. Dentan, and Walter Harrelson, *The Making of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 57).

4. E.g., Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (I and II Timothy and Titus)* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1924), 64; P. Galtier, “La réconciliation des pécheurs dans la première épître Timothée,” *RSR* 39 (1951): 317–20; A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982), 103. J. L. Houlden (*The Pastoral Epistles: I and II Timothy, Titus* [TPINTC; London: SCM / Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989], 96) inclines toward care in “reconciling offending elders.”

5. In the early third century C.E., Tertullian (*Pud.* 18.9) quotes 1 Tim 5:22 in his argument against the practice of granting easy absolution to believers who have been caught in sins such as adultery and fornication. The third-century bishop and martyr Cyprian of Carthage advocated the laying on of hands in place of baptism when believers were received after returning from heresy (Cyprian, *Epistles* 74.12; see also, Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.2). The late-fourth-century work *Apostolic Constitutions* refers to the laying on of hands as the means by which a lapsed believer is once again received (2.41) and also as the means by which a bishop receives the Holy Spirit (2.32).

6. For a critique of the linguistic and contextual aspects of this position, see John P. Meier, “Presbyteros in the Pastoral Epistles,” *CBQ* 35 (1973): 333–34; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 622; and Quinn and Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 471–73.

7. In the early third century, Hippolytus (*Trad. ap.* 2.1–3) makes reference to the imposition of hands occurring at the consecration of a bishop. Eusebius quotes a letter by Cornelius, bishop of Rome, to Fabius, bishop of Antioch, attesting to the practice also in the third century. The imposition of hands at ordination is also noted by John Chrysostom in the fifth century (*Hom. 1 Tim.* 16 [5:22, 24]; *Hom. Act.* 14 [6:6]).

8. Plummer (*Pastoral Epistles*, 167) is typical of this approach, listing three verses in support of ordination and then concluding that “this explanation fits the context at least as well as the supposed improvement.” Similarly accepting and cursory treatments are given by Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 239; Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 120; Simpson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 79; and Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 621.

biguously to healing,<sup>9</sup> 4 unambiguously to the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17–19, 19:6), and 3 unambiguously to blessing (Matt 19:13, 15; Mark 10:16).<sup>10</sup> In 3 cases, the reference is to the act of seizing or holding persons (Acts 4:3, 5:18, 9:44) and in 1 case to the power of God being upon Christ (Luke 1:66). What is clear from this catalog of uses is that in the majority of NT occurrences (24 in all), the act of laying on of hands has nothing to do with ordination.

Apart from the passage under discussion, 3 texts in particular have been cited as evidence for an association of the laying on of hands with ordination. Marshall, for example, cites 1 Tim 4:14, 2 Tim 1:6, and Acts 13:1–3 as evidence linking the laying on of hands with appointment to office in the church. In the first 2 cases—both of which come from the Pastoral Epistles themselves—the laying on of hands is not directly associated with office, function, or authority but with the imparting of an unnamed spiritual “gift” (χάρισμα).<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere in the NT, this word is most often associated with the various means by which believers in general minister to one another (e.g., 1 Cor 12:4–31, 1 Pet 4:8–10). In Acts 13:3, the reference to laying on of hands does not designate elevation to formal church office but commissioning to missionary service. That this act is something other than ordination is suggested by the fact that, at the time of their sending, Paul and Barnabas were already prominent leaders in the church at Antioch (13:1). Moreover, as Ferguson notes, the later reflection on this event in Acts 14:26 suggests that it was a committal to God’s care and so corresponds more to an act of blessing than ordination.<sup>12</sup>

A final reference to the laying on of hands that is sometimes associated with ordination is found in Acts 6:6, where the apostles “laid hands upon” (ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας) Stephen and the others who were tasked with meeting the needs of the poor of the church in Jerusalem. Given the early date of this episode and the absence of the term δῆκονος (“S/servant”) from this context, it is far from clear that Acts 6:6 refers to a formal church office. If this is the case, then the laying on of hands here may easily be understood in terms of simple blessing or impartation of a gift to equip Stephen and his co-workers for their task.

9. Matt 9:18; Mark 5:23; 6:5; 7:32; 8:23, 25; 16:18; Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 9:12; 28:8.

10. In the passage detailing the laying of hands by Ananias on Saul (Acts 9:17), the reference is to both healing and the impartation of the Holy Spirit. In Heb 6:2, the laying on of hands appears in a list of basic truths that the letter’s recipients are urged to move beyond. The absence of further detail makes it difficult to determine if this reference is to healing, blessing, or impartation of the Holy Spirit.

11. A similar conclusion is drawn by Parratt, who, on the basis of OT evidence, argues that “the laying on of hands in Christian initiation then has nothing to do with . . . ordination, but rather is to be understood in terms of . . . Old Testament blessing” (J. K. Parratt, “Laying on of Hands in the New Testament: A Re-examination in the Light of the Hebrew Terminology,” *ExpTim* 80 [1969]: 210–14).

12. Acts 14:26, “where they had been delivered over to the grace of God” (ἦσαν παραδεδόμενοι τῇ χάριτι τοῦ θεοῦ). See Everett Ferguson, “Laying on of Hands: Its Significance in Ordination,” *JTS* 26 (1975): 1–12.

Given that in 1 Tim 5:22 the context is eldership, it is worth asking how elevation to this office is signaled in the NT. While references are sparse, where elevation to eldership is unambiguously in view, this is indicated not by reference to laying on of hands but with the term χειροτονήσαντες (“chose,” Acts 14:23) or καταστήσης (“establish,” Titus 1:5). Given the foregoing, it is clear that an understanding of χεῖρας ταχέως μηδενὶ ἐπιτίθει in 1 Tim 5:22 is required that makes better sense of both the phrase and its context than the prevailing view allows.

An alternate approach to understanding the phrase under discussion is to explore the possible contribution that might be made by the OT. Specifically, it will be argued in this article that in 1 Tim 5:22 the phrase “lay hands upon” is best understood by reference to the OT act of public accusation. While the tendency has been to look to the later history of the church for the background of this expression, it is important to remember that the OT was the primary Scripture of the early church, and so even Gentile Christians would have heard it preached and taught.<sup>13</sup> When Philip preaches to the Ethiopian eunuch, for example, he does so using the book of Isaiah (Acts 8:27–40). In addition, the OT is foundational to a number of important NT books (e.g., Gospel of Matthew, Epistle to the Romans). It should not be surprising, therefore, to discover that at several points 1 Timothy includes OT references and allusions. In 1:7–9, for example, the author emphasizes the value of the Torah (νόμος) when used appropriately. Later, in 2:13, he refers to the story of Adam and Eve in order to illustrate his argument regarding women’s conduct in the church. Creation receives passing mention in 4:4, as does public reading (presumably of the OT) in 4:13.<sup>14</sup>

A number of OT references or allusions are clustered around the verse under discussion. In 5:18, the author makes direct reference to the OT, quoting the deuteronomic injunction against muzzling an ox while it treads grain (Deut 25:4) as part of an argument for giving honor to the elders involved in preaching and teaching. In 5:17, the author makes reference to the “double” (διπλῆ) honor that should be afforded to elders—a use similar to the use in Deut 21:17, 2 Kgs 2:9, and Job 42:10, where the term relates to inheritance of the firstborn son, inheritance of prophetic gift, and Job’s compensation, respectively. In 5:19, the advice to entertain an accusation against a church leader only when it is backed by the testimony of two or three witnesses represents a legal practice with roots in deuteronomic

13. Beckwith writes, “The complete implications of a saying or teaching of Jesus’s, of Paul’s, or of any NT writer’s, are not appreciated until its contemporary Jewish background has been explored” (Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 12). For the early church, particularly for the members at Ephesus and elsewhere in the Greek-speaking world, the OT Scriptures were known primarily via the LXX rather than through the Hebrew text—a fact reflected in the clear dependence of 1 Tim 5:18 (βοῦν ἀλοῶντα οὐ φιμώσεις) on the LXX rendering of Deut 25:4 (οὐ φιμώσεις βοῦν ἀλοῶντα).

14. Elsewhere in the NT, the term ἀνάγνωσις is always used in relation to the OT (Acts 13:15, 2 Cor 3:14).

legislation (Deut 17:6, 19:15).<sup>15</sup> Finally, in 5:21, the author of 1 Timothy makes reference to angelology, a subject commonly featured in Second Temple Jewish literature.<sup>16</sup>

Old Testament influence on the passage under discussion has also been detected by Fuller,<sup>17</sup> who argues persuasively that 1 Tim 5:19–21 shows dependence on Deut 19:15–20, a text that also deals with witnesses and judgment. Based on the breadth of this dependence, Fuller argues against the view that 1 Tim 5:21 marks a shift from the subject of elders to that of lapsed believers. Regarding v. 22, Fuller defers to the view that it deals with candidates for ordination. In his treatment of the OT background to 1 Tim 5:19–25, however, Fuller makes no attempt to investigate the possible OT background of the passage's key phrase, *χειρας ταχέως μη δὲν ἐπιτίθει*—a task to which we now turn.

The word *χείρ* is used in direct relationship with the forms *ἐπιτίθημι*, *τίθημι*, or *ἐπίθεσις* 45 times in the LXX. In a few contexts, the phrase functions in a purely utilitarian fashion in order to describe actions related to archery (1x, 2 Kgs 13:16), personal grief (1x, 2 Sam 13:19), kissing the hand (1x, Job 31:27), and silence (5x, Judg 18:19; Job 21:5, 40:4; Wis 8:12; Mic 7:16). In the majority of cases (20x), however, the context is one in which the priest or offerer places his hands on an animal about to be sacrificed.<sup>18</sup> Included in this category is Num 8:10–11, which describes the separation of the Levites. While this might at first seem to depict a form of ordination, it is clear that here the Levites are being depicted as a human wave offering and substitute for the firstborn Israelite males (Num 3:41). Where the elevation to formal priestly office is in view, this is marked by anointing with oil, not the imposition of hands.<sup>19</sup> In the 20 cases noted above, the laying on of hands seems to symbolize the identification of the offerer with the offering or the transfer of guilt from one to the other. The clearest evidence for the idea of transference comes in Lev 16:21–22, in which Aaron places his hands on the head of the scapegoat and confesses the sins of the people over it. The goat itself shall then “carry upon itself all of their [Israel's] iniquities to a solitary place” (v. 22). In other cases of sacrifice, it makes more sense to understand the act of placing hands on the offering

15. A preference for two witnesses is also found in Matthew, the Gospel that shows the greatest dependence on traditions rooted in the OT and Second Temple Judaism. For example, against the other Synoptics, Jesus in Matthew heals two demon-possessed men (8:28, 33) and two blind men (20:29, 34) who then go on to testify of his power or follow him. In discussing the measures to be taken in conflict resolution, Matthew notes the importance of independent witnesses (18:16–20).

16. On the prominence of angels in Second Temple Jewish literature, see Carol A. Newsom, “Angels (Old Testament),” *ABD* 1:248–53.

17. J. William Fuller, “Of Elders and Triads in 1 Timothy 5.19–25,” *NTS* 29 (1983): 258–63.

18. Exod 29:10, 15, 19; Lev 1:4, 10; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; 8:14, 18, 22; 16:21; Num 8:10, 12; 2 Chr 29:23.

19. Anointing with oil is used in the ceremony accompanying elevation to each of the three major offices in the OT (that is, *prophets*, Ps 105:15, 1 Chr 16:22; *priests*, Exod 29:1–7, 40:15; Lev 8:12, 21:10; and *kings*, 1 Sam 10:1, 16:13; 1 Kgs 1:39; 2 Kgs 9:3, 6).

to indicate identification of the offerer with the offering. This seems most fitting in the case of the consecration of the Levites and other offerings where sin (and thus the transference of guilt) is not in view.<sup>20</sup> In these cases, the laying on of hands serves to identify the offering as a substitute for the offerer.

In other cases, the action of placing the hands can be associated with healing (1×, 2 Kgs 5:11), oath-taking (2×, Gen 24:2, 9),<sup>21</sup> the imparting of wisdom (1×, Deut 34:9),<sup>22</sup> or “commissioning” (2×, Num 27:18, 23). It is only in this last use—and this is in a single context—that the placing of hands occurs in connection with anything that might be associated with commissioning or an OT equivalent of ordination. Here, however, where Moses lays hands on his assistant Joshua in the presence of the priest Eleazar and the congregation, the action undertaken does not so much elevate Joshua to a specific office as it identifies him as the successor and heir to Moses. That this is the case is suggested by these facts: (1) the ceremony occurs after Moses is told that he himself will not enter the land (Num 27:12–14); (2) it results in a portion of Moses’ glory (δόξης, Num 27:20) and wisdom (πνεύματος συνέσεως, Deut 34:9) being passed on to Joshua; and (3) afterward, Joshua assumes the responsibilities earlier undertaken by Moses (Num 27:21). The context in Numbers 27 of death and succession suggests that it is an adaptation of the patriarchal blessing by which the leader of the clan designates his heir and successor (Gen 48:1–22).<sup>23</sup>

In 10 instances, the term χεῖρ and τίθημι or its variants combine to refer to the seizure or possession of someone or something.<sup>24</sup> In 2 Kgs 11:16, for example, the commanders of the army seize the usurper Athaliah and carry her out of the temple and to her death. In Job 40:32[Eng. 41:8], God invites Job to attempt to lay hands on Leviathan. In Jer 30:3[Heb. and Eng. 49:9], laying hands on something describes the action of thieves.

Finally, in 2 cases, the terms under discussion are connected in the LXX with an accusation made against an individual. In Lev 24:14, those who have been witnesses to an act of blasphemy must lay hands on the head of the condemned prior to his or her execution by stoning. An identical use is found much later in Susanna 34 (Add Dan 13:34), where the two wicked elders falsely accuse the virtuous Susanna by laying hands on her

20. On this point and on the subject in general, see M. C. Sansom, “Laying on of Hands in the Old Testament,” *ExpTim* 94 (1983): 323–26.

21. In the case of oath-taking, however, the hand is placed under the thigh, as Gen 47:29 indicates.

22. In this later reflection on the “commissioning” of Joshua by Moses, the placing of Moses’ hands upon Joshua is said to have imparted to him the spirit of wisdom that equips him for leadership.

23. See particularly the case of Jacob’s blessing, in which Joseph demands that his father extend his right hand (δεξιάν) and place it (ἐπιθεῖς) on the head of Manasseh instead of the younger Ephraim (Gen 48:18). While χεῖρ is used elsewhere in this context (Gen 48:14), δεξιάν is used in conjunction with ἐπιθεῖς because Jacob is placing a hand on each grandson and giving the primary blessing with his right hand.

24. Judg 4:21, 12:3; 2 Kgs 11:16, 13:16; Add Esth 14:8; Psa 88:26[Heb. 89:26; Eng. 89:25], 138:5[Heb. and Eng. 139:5]; Job 31:25, 40:32[Heb. 40:32; Eng. 41:8]; Jer 30:3[Heb. and Eng. 49:9].

head.<sup>25</sup> In summarizing the use of *χείρ* and *τίθημι* and related forms in the LXX, we should note that the majority of occurrences feature a common physical act followed by death, violence, or judgment. Of the OT and extrabiblical uses of *χείρ* and *τίθημι* and its related forms noted above, the passages that stand out as contextually relevant for an understanding of the same phrase in 1 Tim 5:22 are verses in which the laying on of hands refers to seizure or accusation.<sup>26</sup>

While the idea of seizing someone fits the needs of 1 Tim 5:22 quite well, the meaning that is most directly relevant to the context and argument of 1 Tim 5:17–22 is found in Lev 24:14 and Susanna 34, in which accusers place hands on someone accused of sin. In this use, the act appears to convey the kind of public identification required of a witness if his or her testimony is to be considered credible. Self-identification before the community left no room for denial if a charge of perjury were to arise later (Exod 20:16, 23:1–3; Deut 5:20; Prov 24:28). This laying on of hands as an act of public accusation perfectly suits the context of 1 Tim 5:22. In 1 Timothy 5, the subject of the deference due elders is introduced in v. 17 and is developed in subsequent verses. First, the author establishes that elders are worthy of respect and “double honor” by showing that even animals should sometimes receive special consideration (5:18). Second, the writer establishes the principle that, when a charge is made against an elder, it is to be well substantiated before it is acted upon (5:19). Third, if and when guilt is determined, an elder is to be rebuked publicly (5:20). Fourth, the solemn charge in 5:21 that Timothy should carry out all of these instructions with impartiality functions as a summary and warning that is continued in v. 22—the subject of our investigation. The charge against showing partiality is clearly intended to convey the principle that, where guilt is evident, an elder’s position is no reason for special treatment (5:21). Given the progression of argument from v. 17, 5:22 is best understood within the context of the theme of elders and the caution required when entertaining accusations against them. If this is the case, and if the OT meaning of laying on of hands is taken into account, then Timothy is being instructed to avoid hasty condemnation of a serving elder, for to do so would be to “share in the sin” of people who would perjure themselves by bringing a spurious charge. This understanding of 1 Tim 5:22 has the benefit of being true to the context of the passage and to a known meaning of the phrase that is pivotal to the passage. 1 Tim 5:22, then, is best understood as relating neither to ordination nor to the receiving into fellowship of lapsed believers but as a continuation of the author’s teaching on how to deal with accusations made against leaders in the church.

25. The extracanonical book of Susanna likely originated in the second or first century B.C.E. Although ultimately it did not become part of the Christian canon, it circulated widely and was included among the Additions to Daniel found in the LXX. Its late date testifies to the longevity of the practice of laying on hands as an act of accusation.

26. *Seizure*: 2 Kgs 11:16, Job 40:32[Eng. 41:8], Jer 30:3[Eng. 49:9]. *Accusation*: Lev 24:14; also Susanna 34 (Add Dan 13:34).