THE PLACE OF TOUCH IN GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY AND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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What is the place of touch in Greco-Roman antiquity and in the Old Testament? What are some tactile attitudes and practices that belong to these two periods? In the investigation that follows, touch is seen to operate within a specific sensory worldview, playing a performative and communicative role in these cultures. Its applications in daily life are regulated by hierarchies and socio-cultural conventions, and it serves as a crucial vehicle for the establishment, maintenance, and/or disruption of boundaries important to a community. With the Old Testament in particular, tactile attitudes and practices are governed by the central covenant relationship between God and his people.

Touch in Greco-Roman Antiquity

The period of antiquity provided a vibrant landscape in which the sense of touch became significant in everyday life. During the primacy of Greco-Roman culture from 5th century BCE to 5th century CE, touch, along with the other senses, "[created] and [expressed] a huge range of cultural meanings." The combination and interaction between these senses, which Toner terms *synesthesia*, has led to a dynamic environment that promoted a given order in society, along with an established set of values, beliefs, and ideas.[1] In particular, touch and its applications have helped set boundaries among persons and

1 Jerry Toner, "Introduction: Sensing the Ancient Past," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Jerry Toner, vol. 1 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2-4.

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social groups, navigate relationships, facilitate transactions, promote health and well-being, express praise and worship with the divine, and establish conventions in the ancient world concerning rank, hierarchy, purity, and cleanliness.

Touch in Philosophy

In Greek philosophy, various thinkers have reflected on the role and value of touch with respect to the other senses. For Plato, sight ranks the highest among the senses because it "was more akin to the intellect than any other sense."[2] Touch, on the other hand, is relegated to a lower place, because while "the eye is sovereign,...[the] tactile body is a beast of burden and contagion to be kept in place."[3] For him, sight is the means to contemplate and access what is ideal, as seen in his praise of sight both in the *Republic* and in *Timaeus*;[4] touch, since it shares a greater affinity to what is corporeal and earthly, is simply inferior to it.

In contrast, Aristotle in his *De Anima* affirms the universality and sensitivity of touch as compared to the other senses. It is universal because not only do all creatures have this sense, but it is always active, even when one is at rest. Furthermore, its universality is evident in how the other senses can be understood as involving some form of contact between an external stimulus and a particular organ: "light strikes the iris, sound the tympanum, odor the nose buds, [and] taste the tongue."[5]

Regarding its sensitivity, touch makes it possible for humans and other creatures to perceive and distinguish among

2 Pablo Maurette, *The Forgotten Sense: Meditations on Touch* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 13

3 Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 33.

4 Maurette, *The Forgotten Sense: Meditations on Touch*, 13.

5 Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*, 35.

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various temperatures, textures, and other physical sensations, through the medium of flesh (*sarx*). Consequently, touch allows one to identify, recognize, and distinguish one person from another, and one thing from another. That is why, for Aristotle, someone who is "thick-skinned" is dull, while a "thin-skinned" person is discerning.[6] For him, while touch is the most basic because of its universality across different species, it is also the most necessary, since the sensitivity it possesses as a sense faculty is essential for an organism's survival, interaction, and communication with the world.[7]

Touch in Social Hierarchy and Organization

Aristotle's insight into the discerning quality of touch is seen in how it distinguishes among people belonging to different social classes. For example, in ancient Rome, Toner points out that slaves can be differentiated from ordinary citizens through bodily marks which resulted from physical torture such as whipping, branding, or wearing a slave collar; other external manifestations, such as rough hands and a bent posture because of intense manual labor, are also used in ancient Greece to distinguish them from free persons.[8]

These, in turn, enable one to determine another's place in the social hierarchy. In other words, the presence or absence of these marks communicates one's rank and social status to another. Especially for former slaves turned free citizens, these marks continue to bear witness to their past identity, along with the emotional and psychological trauma that

6 Ibid.

7 Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (New York, NY: Berg, 2007), 17.

8 Toner, "Introduction," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, 6 and Gregory S. Aldrete, "Urban Sensations: Opulence and Ordure," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Jerry Toner, vol. 1 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 62.

comes with it. It is understandable, then, that these become a cause of pride or embarrassment, with some former slaves even attempting to "cut out the scars or [burn] them to conceal their original meaning."[9]

In addition, people belonging to different social classes are normally forbidden to be in contact with one another; a person from a lower class is generally prohibited from touching someone from a higher one. Such rules on touching and other forms of interaction are in place to maintain order, which usually benefits the elite classes who are distinguished from the rest of society. Toner says about the Roman emperor:

> To share the emperor's food, to hear him speak, to touch his very clothes, those were things that only the members of the imperial entourage or the leaders of the community could hope to do. Distinctions of sensory experience shaped the sense of class, privilege of rank, and worth that day. The average person was simply not good enough to hear the emperor's voice, touch his clothes, eat his food, smell his perfume, or see him in an intimate setting.[10]

Here, it is interesting to note how despite the generally low regard for the sense of touch especially by the upper segments of society, it is precisely touch which mainly distinguishes the royalty from the commoner, since while the emperor can be seen by everyone, not all have the privilege to touch him, and by extension, anything associated with him, such as his clothes, food, and royal throne.

Access through touch, therefore, implies a kind of equality between the one touching and the one who is touched; or at the very least, it expresses a tacit permission from the one with the higher social rank. Otherwise, this constitutes a violation

9 Aldrete, "Urban Sensations," 62.

10 David Potter, "The Social Life of the Senses: Feasts and Funerals," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Jerry Toner, vol. 1 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 24.

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and subversion not only of these conventions, but of the underlying social order that it expresses and upholds. This hints at a certain power and authority that is attributed to touch (and the ability to touch and be touched), both from the perspective of the agent and its recipient.

Touch and the Law

Apart from distinguishing among different social classes, touch also plays a communicative role in legal settings. For example, Hibbits observes that in performance cultures[11] such as those found in Greece and Rome, an oath is usually made "by touching an altar or other object of religious significance."[12] This signals that one is making a particular promise or commitment to the person or institution associated with the object one touches (ex., swearing an oath by touching an altar intended for a specific deity expresses allegiance).

He also notes that touching another person or thing signifies legal authority or ownership over it.[13] In ancient Rome, the practice called *legis actio sacramentum* used a ceremonial rod to touch a slave to claim him as one's own property, along with the words "I affirm that this man is mine by Quiritary right according to his proper title. As I have declared, so, look you, I have laid my staff on him." [14] Here, the verbal claim is legitimized by the gesture, just as the gesture signifies that

11 Hibbits defines a "performance culture" as a society in which "significant information is delivered through many media and not just orally." Members of these cultures communicate and express themselves not only through speech, but also via "gestures, touch, smell, and taste." See Bernard J Hibbitts, "Coming to Our Senses: Communication and Legal Expression in Performance Cultures," *Emory Law Journal* 41, no. 4 (1992): 882–884.

12 Hibbitts, "Coming to Our Senses," 928.

13 Ibid., 929-930.

14 Ibid.

the slave and his body are now part of the master's property, as proclaimed. Similarly, in the *mancipatio*, a traditional Roman legal ceremony that facilitates the transfer of ownership of certain goods such as cattle, what is being transferred is "taken by the hand" from the previous master by the new one to explicitly communicate this change of status.[15]

In addition, tactile gestures in legal settings can impute culpability on a specific person or party. In ancient Mesopotamia, for instance, touching a person's hem can be understood as making a legal complaint, while in Rome, a creditor can claim a delinquent debtor by grasping a part of the debtor's body.[16] Finally, touch can also be used in performance cultures to establish guilt or innocence. The accused can be made to touch an object associated with a spirit or deity (ex, a hot iron, boiling water), and if the touch can be sustained without harm or injury to the accused, then he/she is innocent. Otherwise, that person is judged guilty, with the harm/injury interpreted as a visual and tactile confirmation of his culpability. While sight in this instance is necessary to validate guilt, it is the tactile reaction of the accused that communicates it.[17]

Taken together, touch in legal settings in the ancient Greco-Roman world is used to express commitments, legitimize transactions and other agreements between two parties, establish ownership of people and property, and determine guilt and innocence, along with the degree of culpability of the accused.

15 Ibid., 930.

16 Ibid., 931.

17 Ibid., 934.

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Touch in Medicine

Just like in law, touch also plays a vital role in the field of medicine. In *Regimen*, one of the medical texts by the Greek philosopher and physician Hippocrates, touch is identified as one of the means used to help identify a person's symptoms and subsequently determine illness. Together with sight, hearing, smell, taste, speech, and breath, an ancient physician "reads" the body of the patient by touching it, which in turn would inform the prescribed intervention given to restore that person back to health.[18] Examples of tactile diagnostic methods include touching the skin to check body temperature, using the fingers to know the regularity and intensity of a patient's pulse[19], or feeling the abdomen for lumps or other irregularities. Here, touch operates alongside the other senses, as ancient doctors recognized that the simultaneous engagement of the senses can help improve the accuracy of one's diagnosis.[20]

Apart from determining illness, touch also has therapeutic value. The Greek demigod and centaur Chiron, as well as his disciple Asclepius, often use touch to heal, particularly by way of massages, baths, or laying on of hands, in conjunction with music, potions, and medicinal herbs.[21] The Roman statesman Cato the Elder, meanwhile, recommends chanting along with touching the hips with a green reed to remedy dislocation of the joints. The Roman thinker Pliny suggests taking a warm

18 Helen King and Jerry Toner, "Medicine and the Senses: Humors, Potions, and Spells," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Jerry Toner, vol. 1 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 142-143.

19 The Roman physician Galen has written extensively on the use of pulse as a medical diagnostic method. See Rebecca Flemming, "Losing Touch: Impaired Sensation in Greek Medical Writings," in *Touch and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Alex Purves (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 180-191.

20 King and Toner, "Medicine and the Senses," 142-145.

21 Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*, 66-67.

sheep's lung to wrap around a person's head struck with brain-fever to help cure the disease.[22]

With the above examples, it is evident how both direct and mediated touch are presumed to have both diagnostic and therapeutic qualities in the ancient world. The diagnostic capacity ties well with Aristotle's insight regarding the sensitivity of touch, while its therapeutic nature affirms a highly embodied approach to medicine, as opposed to modern methods, which rely more heavily on sight, especially in terms of diagnosis.[23]

Touch and Religious Practice

Finally, religious practice in ancient times, like the other aforementioned areas of daily life, was also heavily reliant on the body. Here, Toner remarks how "the senses were not simply intrinsic but also functionally significant", because they "elicited and marked divine presence or absence."[24] The different religious traditions existing during this period – which include, but are not limited to, Jewish, Roman, Greek, and Christian – used embodied gestures to articulate their beliefs, conduct rituals, express their relationship with the divine, and pass on practices from one generation to the next. Needless to say, many of these involved some form of tactile engagement, just as it did with the other senses.[25]

For instance, it was generally believed that touching or kissing a religious statue belonging to a particular cult would provide one with inspiration or transfer the deity or spirit's power to the person in contact with it. This is because these

22 King and Toner, "Medicine and the Senses," 157-158.

23 Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*, 22.

24 Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Senses in Religion: Piety, Critique, Competition," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Jerry Toner, vol. 1 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 91.

25 Ibid., 92-96.

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statues were "thought to embody the spirit of the divinity and to represent the god in shrines and temples."[26] This leads to two insights. First, for the ancient world, touch is a concrete means to access the divine, but this access is nevertheless mediated (in this case, by a thing); and second, that divine power is in fact transmittable through embodied means.

Susan Harvey comments that behind this practice is a worldview that recognizes the constant intersection between the realm of the human and the divine, and thus, sensory practices such as touching religious objects facilitate their interaction. Nevertheless, despite their constant exchange, they remain distinct, and dialogue between these two domains is governed by a set of rules so that humanity may be deemed pure and/or whole so as to interact with the divine, which is considered the paragon or ideal of purity and wholeness.[27]

That is why, for the Greeks, only pure persons (*hagnos*) are allowed to offer sacrifice; impurity comes from sexual intercourse or contact with death (ex, touching a corpse). While divine bodies are *hagnos* by default, they believed that human bodies were not. With the Romans, an impure (*impurus*) person or thing implies pollution and contamination from physical dirt or sexual activity, thereby making one *profanes* – unclean and unfit for religious activities; to be pure (*purus*), in contrast, qualifies a person or thing to be *consacratus* or *sacer* – set apart for a religious or divine purpose.[28]

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26 Toner, "Introduction: Sensing the Ancient Past," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, 8, and Mark Bradley, "Art and the Senses: The Artistry of Bodies, Stages, and Cities in the Greco-Roman World," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Jerry Toner, vol. 1 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 192.

27 Harvey, "The Senses in Religion," 96.

28 Potter, "The Social Life of the Senses," 25-26.

As a result, for both cultures, religious men and women in charge of worship or offering sacrifice were very particular about what and whom they came in contact with, in view of maintaining their purity, which comes from their status. For the Romans, in particular, these included the male priests and religious officials, as well as consecrated women of the cult of Vestal Virgins, who were known for their chastity. Hence, it was common for them to practice ceremonial washing, refraining from sex, and/or distancing themselves from any form of physical contact with death and dirt to avoid contamination, which can threaten their physical integrity.[29]

The same applies to religious sites and objects. For example, the Romans believed that consecrated objects needed to be guarded against external elements that could jeopardize their sanctity, since they represented the divine. In the *Laws* by Cicero, he stressed the importance of physical purity for anyone who wishes to be in contact with the divine, while Aulus Gellius in *Attic Nights* exhorted that temples are only for worship; hence, they should be regarded with purity and should not be used for any other profane purpose.[30] The various Greek cults also emphasized the same idea, and they believed that keeping sacred sites clean and pure is a shared responsibility of those working in the temple and those who hold office in the city-states and communities.[31]

29 Ibid., 25-26, 37-38, and Jack Lennon, "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World," in *Touch and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Alex Purves (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 122, 127.

30 Lennon, "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World," 124.

31 Linda-Marie Günther, "Concepts of Purity in Ancient Greece, with Particular Emphasis on Sacred Sites," in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*, ed. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 258-259.

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Touch, Pollution, Life, and Death

As seen above, the separation between who or what is regarded as pure and/or sacred and impure and/or profane helps uphold a particular order in ancient Greek and Roman societies. To mix the two is seen as threatening this agreed way of life, and so rules are in place to help keep the *status quo* and restore order in cases of transgression. These rules, in turn, are founded on a shared definition of who and what are considered dirty, with dirt generally understood as anything or anyone that "threatens the shared sense of order."[32]

As Mary Douglas notes, pollution "exists in the eye of the beholder,"[33] depending on what each culture deems a threat to this established order. Here, pollution is made real and communicated through the body via touch, which functions as the most immediate and concrete means by which impurity spreads, sacred boundaries are breached or maintained, and one's state of purity is communicated to one's surroundings.

Touch plays a crucial role in this regard because, among the different senses, it is the most effective means that can be used to cross this division, which can subsequently upset the social and religious order. Lennon observes that since dirt is often organic in origin, physical contact with the sources of pollution becomes a particularly dangerous means by which contamination can be carried, transmitted, and received, and consequently compromises one's physical cleanliness and state of ritual purity.[34] Through touch, bodies become carriers for impurity, and one's tactile actions can defile and disrupt both the social and religious order.

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32 Ibid., 122.

33 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1984), 2.

34 Lennon, "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World," 122.

Now, what exactly makes something or someone dirty? For ancient cultures in Greece and Rome, dirt and pollution are closely related to matters of life and death, made real through bodily contact. Sexual activity is believed to make one impure because of the exchange of bodily fluids through physical intimacy. Thus, across various regions in ancient Greece, men are allowed to offer sacrifice only after a number of days following sex with one's wife or a prostitute, with some areas also requiring public washing to cleanse one's body and make oneself fit to worship.[35]

Similarly, in Rome, ritual sexual abstinence was practiced in preparation for taking part in different religious festivals throughout the year, to maintain the separation between the sacred and mundane.[36] These practices are not just symbolic, but express the idea that touching someone's body in sexual union introduces impurity that needs to be avoided before approaching the divine. It also puts a premium on bodily cleanliness and the avoidance of any prior contact that would compromise the purity required for sacred activities.

Aside from sex, body deformations and excretions are also regarded as a source of impurity – not by their mere presence *per se*, but due to their potential to make contact with others. For example, for Roman religious officials, having sores on the body is a sign of impurity, which restricted them from performing particular rituals.[37] In early Greek sacred laws, one of the hallmarks of purity is to be free from the "taint of childbirth", with taint referring to not so much to the event

35 Potter, "The Social Life of the Senses," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, 26.

36 Lennon, "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World," 125.

37 Ibid., 126.

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itself but to the fluids, like blood, that touch the body during the process.[38]

Roman literature also depicts touch as the vehicle of defilement, especially in cases involving blood. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas asks his father to carry the sacred images of the Roman household gods because his body was covered by the blood of his enemies, and he can only touch them after washing in a running stream. Similarly, in Seneca's *Hercules*, Amphitryon forbids his stepson to offer sacrifice to the gods while his hands were still bloodied from killing Lychus.[39] In both cases, the pollution rests not only in the act of killing but in its physical and tactile manifestation – the body stained by blood, along with the risk of transferring this impurity through touch to a sacred object or site.

In matters concerning death, contamination through contact becomes even more pronounced. Among the Greeks, inflicting injury or death on another required ritual purification before the individual could be reintegrated into the community, because the act of harming the body of another rendered one impure.[40] In another example, when a person dies in Athens, the place of death automatically becomes unclean. Contact with the corpse is restricted to a select few, usually women, who would draw water from an unpolluted house for washing upon leaving the site of death. The funeral procession

38 Noel Robertson, "The Concept of Purity in Greek Sacred Laws," in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*, ed. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 214, 219, 235, 237.

39 Lennon, "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World," 124.

40 Robertson, "The Concept of Purity in Greek Sacred Laws," 232.

is then done early in the morning to avoid physical contact with other people and prevent unwanted contamination.[41]

The Romans held a similar view – a corpse, and by extension, that person's entire household and property, became a source of pollution following death. During the period of mourning, any member of the deceased's family is forbidden to offer sacrifice in the temple because they have been exposed to death; they can only worship again after the funeral, when the body has already been laid to rest.[42]

Finally, certain professions were seen as inherently impure, primarily because of their regular and sustained contact with impure substances or bodies. Corpse handlers, executioners, and other death-related workers were avoided by the Romans because they routinely handled the dead. Prostitutes were deemed defiled as well by both Greeks and Romans, both due to their sexual activity and their places of work, which are associated with filth, bodily excretion, and social disorder. [43] Here, impurity is rooted in both occupation and touch: what one handles, touches, and is touched by defines one's state of cleanliness.

In summary, purity for the ancient Greco-Roman world was maintained by carefully regulating what and whom one could touch, and under what circumstances. Because impurity was embodied, it was something transmitted through contact, specifically by physical proximity and interaction with bodies, fluids, and spaces associated with sex, death, and disease. Purity rules were thus in place to protect the community

41 Potter, "The Social Life of the Senses," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, 37.

42 Ibid., 39.

43 Toner, "Introduction," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, 7, and Lennon, "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World," 128-132.

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from the threat of pollution, which emerged most clearly at the point of bodily contact between what is acceptable to the established sense of order and what deviates from it.

The Place of Touch in Greco-Roman Antiquity

From the exposition above, it is evident how touch played an important role in various aspects of daily life. Drawing on the universal, sensitive, and corporeal elements of touch, the concept and practice of touch in Greco-Roman antiquity has become a mark of one's social status; it helped distinguish between social and economic classes, while reinforcing the established order in a community. In this regard, touch communicated privilege and power because of the capacity to allow or restrict access to individuals or groups of people.

This power of touch is also operative in legal contexts, as a way to express ownership or enforce agreements and obligations. In ancient medicine, its power lies in its diagnostic and therapeutic capabilities, which can be either through direct or mediated contact. In religious settings, touch helped facilitate an encounter with the divine by helping determine and regulate the boundaries between the sacred and profane.

Finally, in relation to life and death, touch was deeply intertwined with concepts of purity and pollution, where physical contact with birth, bodily fluids, or death needed acts of purification to restore social and religious order back to the *status quo*. Taken together, these demonstrate how touch is a potent medium through which cultural, social, legal, and religious values were expressed and maintained in the ancient world of Greece and Rome.

Touch in the Old Testament

After taking a closer look at ancient Greco-Roman attitudes and practices concerning touch, it will likewise be instructive

to inquire into its function, meaning, and purpose in the Old Testament. As such, this section will begin by looking at touch in the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically as part of the overall sensorium the text presents. It will then move into a few examples of stories where touch plays a central role in the Old Testament, and afterwards, locate the role of touch in the purity codes found in the Torah.

Touch in the Hebrew *Septasensorium*

Yael Avrahami argues that, in contrast to the Greco-Roman pentasensory model, the Hebrews categorized the senses into seven, resulting in a septasensory model. She concludes that in addition to sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, the ancient Hebrews also considered speech and kinesthesia as distinct senses – each associated with specific body parts which embody and actualize their functions.[44] Speech includes both the process of thinking and articulating one's thoughts, with the mouth (more specifically, the tongue and lips) as its primary organ; with kinesthesia, it comprises both mobility and posture, with the foot or leg as its primary organ.[45]

For the sense of touch, the Hebrew Scriptures understand this to involve both touching and feeling. Touch between humans can be an expression of fondness and care (cf. Gen 21:18, 26:8, 29:11,13)[46] At times, it substitutes for sight, in cases where the person is blind or has defective eyesight, or when what needs to be seen is concealed from the eyes (cf. Gen

44 Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2012), 2, 114-115.

45 Ibid., 75-93, 118-124, 127.

46 Victor H. Matthews, *Experiencing Scripture: The Five Senses in Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 27.

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27:12, 21; Gen 31:34, 37; Deut 28:29, etc.).[47] Also, just like the sense of taste, its practice is to be conformed to biblical law, and can also be used euphemistically to describe the sexual act (cf. Prov 6:29). Tactile imagery may likewise be employed to express one's capacity for discernment, or the ability to know – whether a particular skill or craft, or knowledge associated with a specific profession (cf. Gen 4:21, Ez 27:29, Jer 2:8, etc.).[48] Lastly, when predicated of the divine, touch becomes an articulation of God's power and might (cf. Ps 104:32).[49] It can mean knowledge of God (as in the people whose hearts he touched, cf. 1 Sam 20:26), divine election (cf. Jer 1:9), or the bestowal of divine inspiration or strength (cf. Dan 10:10, 16, 18).[50]

The primary Hebrew word for touch, *nāga*ʿ, connotes some form of non-violent outward contact between inanimate figures, human beings, or God (in the case of theophanies). Most of the instances of this verb are found in the sacred laws concerning purity, sacrifice, and food.[51] When used figuratively, it can denote harm or affliction (in a legal setting), forbidden sexual advances of a man to a woman (but not a euphemism for the sexual act), or the application of punishment, disease, or affliction. For spatiotemporal contexts, it means "to extend," "to reach," or "to attain" towards someone or something. Finally, the associated noun *nega*ʿ can generally mean a disease

47 Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture*, 106-107.

48 Ibid., 159-160.

49 Ibid, 106-109.

50 Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper III Longman, eds., Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 880.

51 L. Schwienhorst, "נָגַע Nagaʿ; נֶגַע Negaʿ," in Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 203-205.

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sent by God, or in specific cases, either bodily harm or a specific type of "leprosy" in legal and medical contexts, respectively.[52]

Touch as the "Hand of God"

Now, in contrast to the Greeks' association of touch with flesh (*sarx*), the Hebrew conception of touch assigns the hand as its principal organ, specifically as the "feeling limb".[53] Avrahami notes how it "is the agent of multiple acts and experiences that are tactile, and... [represents] the tactile even in expressions that are not explicitly related to touch"; thus, "there is no real differentiation between touching and holding," as both are traced to the hand.[54]

To touch is usually descriptive of some action performed by the hand; it can express either support (Ez 33:22, Jer 26:24) or harm (Job 19:21, 1 Sam 6:9), whether from another human person (Ps 105:1, Chr 16:22, Job 5:19, etc.) or from God (Jdg 20:34, 1 Sam 6:9, 2 Kgs 15:5, Ps 104:32, etc.).[55]

Of particular interest is the term the "hand of God." In the Hebrew Bible, divine providence to humans in need often employs bodily metaphors to articulate it in more familiar terms.[56] As seen previously, the hand is an image that connotes support; hence, the "hand of God," which stands for his strength, is used to express assistance from the Lord who "helps," "upholds," "grasps," or "strengthens" the party in distress (ex: Is 41:10, Ps 63:8-9, Ps 139:10, Ez 30:24, Job 4:3, etc.).[57] This, in turn, makes the abstract idea of divine help

52 Ibid., 205-209.

53 Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture*, 125.

54 Ibid., 127.

55 Ibid., 126.

56 Ibid., 130.

57 Ibid., 138-139, 154-157.

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more concrete through specific acts of God's hand, specifically God's "right hand," which in turn represents him and his will.[58]

Nevertheless, just as how the "hand" can connote harm, so God's hand can likewise be a cause of punishment and or the absence of his providence. In other words, the same power that can help can also harm or punish another. This comes in various forms, like disease, unnatural death, or war (Ex 9:3, Dt 2:15, Jer 6:12, etc.).[59]

At the same time, despite the usage of this imagery, it is interesting to note that in the Old Testament, God (and the things of God) can neither be seen nor touched directly, for fear of death. In Ex 19:12-13, the Lord commands Moses to prohibit Israel from ascending Mount Sinai or even touching the edge of it, otherwise they will die. Similarly, in 2 Sam 6:6-11, when Uzzah, son of David, touches the ark of the covenant, he dies, since it is believed to contain the presence of God. This made David unwilling to take in the ark under his care, such that it remained in the household of Obed-edom the Gittite for three months.[60]

Stories of Touch in the Hebrew Scriptures

Now, looking at the various stories of touch in the Hebrew Scriptures, we can classify them broadly into four different categories: *healing and blessing, violence and punishment, laws and rituals, and holiness and purity.* While each category will not exhaust all the stories of touch in the Old Testament, it will use a few examples to help illustrate each.

58 Ibid., 139.

59 Ibid., 139-140, 155-156.

60 Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 879.

First, touch and physical contact can either facilitate healing or impart blessings on another. In 2 Kgs 4:34-35, we find Elisha raising the dead son of the Shunammite woman by direct physical contact; in 2 Kgs 5:1-14, he instructs Naaman the Syrian to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River, implying that even touching the waters will already lead to healing.

Regarding blessings, in Gen 48:13-20, Jacob imparts his blessing onto Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons, by placing his crossed hands on their heads, thereby bestowing on them favor from God. Meanwhile, in Gen 27:18-40, Jacob deceives his blind father, Isaac, to receive the blessing meant for his brother Esau by using touch. With the help of his mother Rebekah, his hands and neck were covered in goat skins, so he could pose as his brother Esau, who was a hairy man. Presumably, the same placing of hands over the head was done to Jacob by Isaac, so that he might receive the paternal blessing.

Second, touch can also inflict violence or punishment upon another. For example, 2 Sam 13:11-14 tells the story of Amnon's sexual assault on his sister Tamar. Here, non-consensual touch is used to dominate and violate, leading to Tamar's disgrace and Absalom's vengeance. Meanwhile, in Ex 21:21-27, one can find provisions of Mosaic law concerning striking another person physically, with a list of physical punishments corresponding to the severity of the offense. Dt 25:11-12 also mentions what to do when a wife intervenes in a fight between men by grabbing a man's genitals – her hand must be cut off. With the last two examples, we see clear instances of both violent touch and retributive touch.

Third, touch figures symbolically in various Jewish laws and rituals. For instance, in Gen 24:2, Abraham asks his servant to place his hand under Abraham's thigh as he makes an oath

to find a wife for Isaac, and in Gen 47:29-31, Joseph places his hand under Jacob's thigh while swearing to bury his father in Canaan. In Ex 22, touch is legally invoked in both the transfer of property from one party to another, as well as in cases of loss and liability.[61]

Moreover, in Lev 1:4 and 16:21, the priest's act of placing his hands over the sacrificial animal symbolizes and communicates the imputation of sin or guilt, as the animal becomes the representative of the people and serves as the atonement for their offenses. With 1 Sam 10:1 and 1 Kgs 19:19, the anointing of oil by Samuel to Saul and the throwing of the mantle by Elijah to Elisha, respectively, embody divine consecration, approval, and empowerment on the one hand, and discipleship and the transfer of prophetic authority on the other. In all these examples, touch contains a deeper meaning that goes beyond the act itself.

Holy and Profane, Pure and Impure

Fourth, and perhaps the most important, touch is central to how ideas of holiness and purity are experienced in daily life. For the Israelites, their relationship with God and with one another revolves around the regulation of two mutually exclusive pairs of opposites: holy and profane, and pure and impure. Thiessen critically observes that these two pairs are not equivalent; in other words, holiness is not the same as purity, and neither is profanity equal to impurity.[62]

The first pair, holy and profane, classifies persons, places, animals, things, and events according to their intended

61 Matthews, *Experiencing Scripture: The Five Senses in Biblical Interpretation*, 27-28.

62 Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 9.

purpose; for Israel, anything holy is meant especially for God and worship of God (cf. Lev 11:44, 20:7,26; 22:32), while anything profane is for common or everyday use.[63] Bandstra further observes that holiness for Israel is a characteristic of God, who is radically different from humanity, particularly regarding his power and wholeness. Hence, every Israelite needs to acknowledge this inherent alterity, live in respect, awe, and reverence to this divine being who is totally unlike them, and strive towards the same holiness through covenant fidelity and obedience to God's commandments – "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 11:44, 19:2).[64] Here, profanity in itself is not wrong or sinful; when one is profane, it simply means that something or someone is not reserved for God and for cultic worship.

Now, the elements of the second pair, pure and impure, pertain to whether something or someone is properly constituted or in its proper place, according to a society's agreed conventions.[65] Furthermore, Meier observes that impurity is subdivided into several categories: ritual, moral, and genealogical.[66] Among the three, only ritual impurity is communicable

63 Ibid., 9-10.

64 Barry L Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible,* 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009), 152.

65 Neyrey, who closely follows the insights of Mary Douglas, notes how the idea of purity helps biblical Israel to establish and maintain order in their society, according to how God intended it to be. Whatever follows or keeps this normal sense of order is classified as "pure" or "clean;" whatever violates it is "dirty," "polluted," or "unclean," which happens when "the wrong *thing* [or person] appears in the wrong *place* at the wrong time. See Jerome Neyrey, "Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 91-92.

66 A fourth classification, dietary laws, falls somewhere in between moral and ritual purity. For a more in-depth discussion, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Law and Love*, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 347-352.

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through touch and physical contact; the rest are not directly transmissible through tactile means.[67]

To give an example, killing another person or engaging in idolatrous worship leads to moral impurity, while giving birth or experiencing menstruation only results in ritual impurity. Meanwhile, intermarriage between a Jew and a Gentile constitutes genealogical impurity. Here, Harrington notes that moral impurity is normally a consequence of disobedience of God's laws; ritual impurity, on the other hand, refers to certain life conditions that do not make a person sinful, but render one unfit to be in contact with anything and anyone sacred.[68] Still, Thiessen observes that ritual impurity can potentially lead to moral impurity and sin when it is not addressed in the right way and time.[69]

Now, these two pairs (holy and profane, pure and impure) make up a continuum that governs everyday life for biblical Israel. Touch is critical here, since ritual impurity can be transmitted through direct or indirect contact. Bandstra explains it this way:

> [A] clean thing could be elevated to the status of holiness through the process of sanctification (literally, making holy). Clean things could become unclean *through contact with other unclean things*, such as dead bodies. For an unclean person or thing to get back to the state of cleanness, it had to be purified. Once clean, it could then be sanctified through an additional procedure. Once made holy, it was set apart from the rest of the world and was devoted

67 For an extensive discussion into the differences of ritual, moral, and genealogical purity, ee Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Law and Love*, vol. 4, 343-347. See also Thiessen, Jesus and the Forces of Death, 12-20, for a similar discussion.

68 Hannah K. Harrington, "Clean and Unclean," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 681-685.

69 Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 13.

> exclusively to divine service. Holy persons and things could be rendered profane, or unholy, through ritual procedures of decommissioning or *by contact with something unclean*. A profaned thing could be clean or unclean, but in either case, it could not be in direct contact with YHWH (italics supplied).[70]

This, in turn, is founded on their belief that God's presence, which is holy, needs to be defended from the moral impurities that exist in the world. Hence, lines have to be drawn "not only to safeguard God's presence but also to protect God's people from the consequences of wrongly approaching God."[71] Hence, as Ps 24:3-6 remarks, only those who have "clean hands and pure hearts" may "ascend the hill of the Lord" and "stand in his holy place." The priestly class, as a group set apart and "exalted above his brothers" (Lev 21:10), plays an important role in this regard, for they determine and enforce legislation to help keep these boundaries in place (cf. Lev 10:10).[72]

Ultimately, these rules are put in place for three reasons. First, they are practical; following them protects the Israelites from things that can cause them harm, such as disease and death. Second, their observance serves as a distinct cultural marker that expresses Israel's identity and sets them apart from other pagan cults and groups whom they considered as unclean and whose practices deviate from their way of life. And third, as a nation prone to committing sin and violating their covenant relationship with God, these rules help them become a holy nation – not only ritually pure but also pure of

70 Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 152-153.

71 Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 11.

72 Neyrey, "Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," 93.

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heart, so that they may be properly disposed to be in contact with him, lest they suffer death.[73]

Holiness and Purity in the Torah

Most of the regulations concerning purity and holiness are found in the Torah, specifically in the priestly laws in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.[74] With respect to touch, direct contact with sources of ritual impurity was the means by which one became ritually impure. These included carcasses or corpses (cf. Num 5:2, 19), people with certain skin diseases that fall under the general category called leprosy (cf. Leviticus 13)[75], and human discharges like blood, seminal emissions, and excrement (cf. Lev 12:1-6, 15:1-5, 16-24, 25-30, Dt 23:15).[76] Eating unclean animals (cf. Lev 11) also made one ritually unclean, since the mouth touched something defiled. In terms of indirect contact, impurity was transmissible through second-hand exposure; a person who touched a corpse can transfer their impurity onto others or onto objects like food and vessels.[77] Here, it can be observed that most sources of ritual impurity are similar to those in ancient Greco-Roman society – blood, sex, and death.

Also, while it is clear that ritual impurity is contagious even through indirect contact, the Old Testament presents conflicting positions on whether ritual purity can be similarly transferred. Ez 44:19 affirms this, while Lam 4:14 and Hag 2:12-13

73 Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 151-152.

74 This high regard for maintaining purity and holiness is also evident in extrabiblical writings. For a more complete treatment on this topic, refer to Neyrey, "Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," 94-105.

75 Harrington, "Clean and Unclean," 683.

76 Ibid., 682-683.

77 Matthews, *Experiencing Scripture: The Five Senses in Biblical Interpretation*, 113.

argue otherwise, with Matthews noting that their opposing views may have been caused by the latter's negative view of the priestly class during the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 BCE and the post-exilic period.[78]

Finally, for moral impurity, procedures are also in place to get rid of pollution and restore not only cleanliness, but the underlying sense of order it upholds.[79] Purification through rituals such as offering sacrifices, immersing in ritual baths (*miqva'oth*), sprinkling with purgation water, or avoiding contact for a determined period removes one's impurity, purges from the stain of guilt, and allows a person to fully participate again in daily life, especially temple worship.[80]

Seen in this light, touch is not merely a physical gesture; it is deeply symbolic, capable of transferring status, disrupting boundaries, and defining access to the divine. Thus, in Israelite ritual consciousness, touch plays a decisive role in determining and communicating one's readiness or fitness for contact with the holy.

The Place of Touch in the Old Testament

Just as how touch functioned in ancient Greco-Roman societies, so too does it have a crucial role in the life of ancient biblical Israel. First, its conception is found within a broader septasensory framework. Within this sensorium, touch operates both literally and metaphorically. It functions as a medium for human connection as well as an articulation of divine action

78 Ibid. See also Tiemeyer, Lena-Sofia. "The Question of Indirect Touch: Lam 4,14; Ezek 44,19 and Hag 2,12-13." *Biblica* 87 (2006): 64–74.

79 Once again, it is important to distinguish between ritual purity, which is external, and moral purity, which is internal. One is not equivalent to the other, and ritual purity does not automatically equate to moral purity.

80 Harrington, "Clean and Unclean," 683-686.

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and intervention. Also, unlike Greco-Roman notions of touch as primarily linked to flesh, Hebrew conceptualizations root it in the hand as its principal organ of touching and feeling.

Second, touch in the Hebrew Bible serves multiple functions: it can express human affection, substitute for impaired senses, facilitate healing and blessing, inflict harm and punishment, enact legal obligations, symbolize ritual actions, transmit and communicate holiness or impurity, and serve as a conduit for divine power and inspiration. The different touch-centric stories in the Old Testament, which were identified above, help concretize these different applications of touch according to their agent, recipient, and underlying motivation.

Third, the Hebrew term *nāgaʿ* encapsulates this diversity in the understanding and use of touch. In particular, divine touch, often represented through the metaphor of the "hand of God", signifies both providence and judgment, underlining God's power to assist or afflict his people.

Fourth, touch becomes especially significant in the priestly purity codes, where contact with corpses, bodily discharges, or unclean animals renders one ritually impure, sometimes even through indirect transmission. While ritual impurity is seen as contagious, the transference of purity remains debated within the biblical texts. These regulations are embedded in a broader theological and ritual framework that distinguishes between the holy and profane, and the pure and impure, and allows for remedies in case these boundaries are crossed. These pairs, while not synonymous, are fundamental to Israelite religious and social order, regulating how people relate with God and one another.

Ultimately, touch in the Old Testament is shaped by a worldview in which divine holiness and otherness demand ritual boundaries. The system of purity laws aims not only to

safeguard the sacred from contamination but also to cultivate a community attuned to God's holiness. Through this lens, touch becomes a vehicle for divine-human interaction, a mediator of social and cultic order, and a symbol of Israel's identity as a holy nation set apart.

In all these, the theology of touch in the Old Testament reveals a worldview that is both concrete and embodied yet symbolic and transcendent. Thus, the practice and place of touch both reflect a divine order in which physical contact is never neutral but always charged with moral, spiritual, and communal significance.

Greco-Roman Antiquity vs. Old Testament Conceptions of Touch

To serve as a synthesis, first, in both traditions, the practice of touch is never neutral. It can sanctify or defile, heal or corrupt, uplift or put down, depending on the context in which it is employed, both sacred and secular.

Second, touch involves both transmission and communication; more importantly, touch expresses power, status, affection, etc., as it transmits these through tactile gestures. In other words, touch is simultaneously performative and communicative. Whether involving the hand, skin, or flesh, tactile acts convey ideas, values, or insights to the agent, recipient, and/or witnesses as these are being performed; abstract notions about one's place in society, state of purity or health, or even relationship with a fellow person or with the divine find embodied articulation through touch.

Third, touch is regulated in both cultures, which are dependent on a particular understanding of cultural hierarchies, such as gender, socio-economic status, state of purity or holiness, or cultic importance. Both also acknowledge the

potency of touch to disrupt these hierarchies, which necessitates the formation of boundaries, both social and sacred, that distinguish between classes of people and things (ex, slave-free, holy-profane, pure-impure). These boundaries, in turn, not only reflect an underlying cultural worldview but, more importantly, help maintain and uphold it.

Now, in terms of differences, if for the Greeks and Romans, touch is one of the five senses, for biblical Israel and early Jewish communities, it forms part of a heptasensory model, with speech and kinaesthesia also considered as distinct senses. The former explicitly relegates touch as one of the lower senses, while the latter does not forward this idea.

Second, touch for the Greco-Roman world sees it closely linked to sensuality and irrationality, since it is a sense shared with other lower life forms like animals. Meanwhile, sensuality does not appear to be an issue for the Old Testament; instead, purity is their chief concern, with touch as a means to either keep or lose it.

Finally, the regulation of touch in Greco-Roman antiquity puts less emphasis on humanity's relationship with the divine, whereas in the Old Testament, this plays a central role. Specifically, God's covenantal relationship with humanity, along with the idea of God's necessary distinction and separation from the forces of impurity found in the world, is the ordering principle behind Israel's conduct of its life, which includes conceptions and practices concerning touch.

In conclusion, both Greco-Roman antiquity and the Old Testament portray touch as a dynamic and meaningful gesture, depending on the specific context in which it is employed. Tactile actions are capable of mediating healing, power, and blessing. They can also express affection and authority, and their practice is regulated by social and cultural conventions.

Their potency lies not only in embodying certain ideas and norms but in defining and redefining boundaries that bring a sense of order to a given community.