

THE PILLARS AND THE RIGHT HAND OF FELLOWSHIP
IN GALATIANS 2.9

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In Gal. 2.9, the Jerusalem pillars entered an agreement with Paul by giving him ‘the right hand of fellowship’. In this brief article, I wish to survey evidence involving agreements with the right hand, and also the figurative use of ‘pillars’ as images of strength, to explore more fully the sorts of connotations that Paul’s Galatian audience may have heard in both images.

The Right Hand and Relationships

Although in some churches today receiving ‘the right hand of fellowship’ refers to being accepted into church membership, Paul’s expression in Gal. 2.9 refers instead to an agreement between himself and the ‘pillars’ of the Jerusalem church. In a general sense, clasping hands communicated positive sentiments and relationships, relieving anxiety; more specifically and more relevantly to our passage in Galatians, it could confirm an agreement.

Right-handed tactile contact, especially grasping one’s right hand, often communicated simply encouragement or assurance of safety.¹ Thus when Claudius expected to be killed, the soldier took his right hand, assuring him that instead he would be emperor.² When Enoch feared, an angel took his hand and raised him up.³ Likewise, the tribune in Acts 23.19 took Paul’s young nephew aside by the hand, probably

1. Valerius Maximus 1.7.5; Longus, *Daphn.* 3.32.

2. Josephus, *Ant.* 19.219. I use Josephus here to illustrate the usage, not to side with his choice of details against those reported by Tacitus.

3. *1 En.* 71.3. One could also still their fear (Rev. 1.17; perhaps Isa. 41.10, 13).

seeking to calm him (as well as securing privacy). One who discovered that his younger brother was involved in a conspiracy took him by the hand to betray the plot to the king.⁴ A woman treating a young man as if he were her own son took his hand and led him aside to warn him of the danger he was in.⁵ By giving one's right hand one could accept a suppliant,⁶ welcome a defector,⁷ or assure one of mercy.⁸ Holding another's hand could also provide comfort when the other was not well.⁹ The gesture could even function as a promise of assistance.¹⁰ Some resented Pythagoreans offering this gesture of good faith only to fellow-Pythagoreans.¹¹

Clasping another's hand displayed affection and hospitality;¹² it could also communicate appreciation,¹³ trust,¹⁴ congratulations,¹⁵ and gratitude.¹⁶ It could serve as a greeting¹⁷ or a welcome home.¹⁸ In more official contexts, extending the right hand could be used to welcome an

4. Quintus Curtius 8.6.21 (thereby rescuing the brother from penalty).
5. Lucian, *Asin.* 4.
6. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 8.2.1.
7. Plutarch, *Cor.* 23.5; Josephus, *Life* 370.
8. Quintus Curtius 3.12.17. It communicated assurance of mercy in Quintus Curtius 6.7.35.
9. M. Aurelius in Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 1.2.1.
10. Quintus Curtius 4.2.17.
11. Iamblichus, *V.P.* 35.257.
12. Ps.-Lucian, *Am.* 9; for clasping hands in a suicide farewell, Plutarch, *Them.* 31.5. The right-handed handshake communicated warmth (Rolf Hurschmann, 'Gestures: Greece and Rome', in Hubert Cancik *et al.* [eds.], *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World. Antiquity* [15 vols.; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002–], V, pp. 832-39 [834]), used for greetings and farewells (*idem*, 'Greeting', in *Brill's New Pauly*, V, pp. 1022-24 [1022]). Good gifts came through the right hand, not the left (Polybius 38.10.8); some cultures associated the left hand with impurity, so that gesturing with that hand can be punishable (1QS 7.15; see comments in Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976], p. 106 n. 64).
13. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 6.3.36.
14. Quintus Curtius 3.6.12.
15. Xenophon, *Hell.* 5.1.3.
16. Quintus Curtius 3.6.17.
17. Homer, *Od.* 20.197; Virgil, *Aen.* 1.514-515; Ps.-Diogenes the Cynic, *Ep.* 33; *Jos. Asen.* 5.7/11.
18. Homer, *Od.* 19.415; 24.398, 410; Aeschylus, *Ag.* 34-35.

emissary,¹⁹ or show special hospitality and promise of safety to an enemy's messenger.²⁰ A king received a sage warmly by taking his hand;²¹ one could also show honor to a queen this way.²² Clasp hands could demonstrate affection, for example, of an adult son with his mother.²³ Likewise, young Scipio, showing affection for Polybius and requesting his companionship, grasped his right hand with both of his own.²⁴ Antiochus Epiphanes allegedly took people's right hands or embraced them, acting like a candidate for office.²⁵ Moses took Joshua by the right hand, bringing him forward to ordain him.²⁶

The Right Hand and Agreements

These uses, however, appear too general to explain the unadorned expression in Gal. 2.9. Certainly the pillars do not conclude with a greeting, and Paul's concise narrative is designed to evoke something more demanding than mere encouragement or friendship alone. The term often translated 'fellowship' could involve economic or other 'partnership',²⁷ and the context makes clear that Paul speaks of a 'right hand of partnership', a comity agreement that designated to each their proper sphere (Gal. 2.7-9; cf. 2 Cor. 10.14-16).²⁸ The economic

19. *Ep. Arist.* 179.

20. Ps.-Callisthenes, *Alex.* 2.14.

21. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 2.27 (elsewhere, the Persian king holds out his hand to have the sage brought in, Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.29; cf. *Est.* 5.2; 8.4).

22. Cf. Polybius 13.7.8. One could grasp another's hand to force them to flee danger more quickly (Pliny, *Ep.* 6.20.12), but this reflects a transcultural sort of urgency rather than custom.

23. Virgil, *Aen.* 1.408.

24. Polybius 31.24.9.

25. Polybius 26.1.5.

26. Philo, *Virt.* 67. This example might work in various categories.

27. James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), p. 350, cite P.Ryl. 2.117.16 and Syll. 300.54; for marriage, they cite BGU 4.1051.9; P.Oxy. 12.1473.33.

28. It could apply to harmony created by shared purpose (Musonius Rufus 13B) and working together (Musonius Rufus 14). Cf. the verb cognate for common interest in, e.g., Hierocles, *Siblings* (in Stobaeus, *Flor.* 4.84.20); the noun for common nature in Iamblichus, *Ep.* 4.7-9 (in Stobaeus, *Flor.* 3.3.26); the Stoic notion of friendship as a partnership in life in Arius Didymus, *Epit.* 2.7.5 L, cf. 2.7.5b2. For the spheres in 2 Cor. 10.14-16, see discussion in, e.g., Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical*

dimension sometimes attached to the term and some of its cognates (cf. elsewhere in Paul, Rom. 15.26; 2 Cor. 8.4; 9.13) might appear in Paul's additional agreement to serve the poor (Gal. 2.10), i.e., in Jerusalem.²⁹

In applying the image to an agreement, Paul draws on accepted convention, as some others have recognized (although usually not abundantly illustrated).³⁰ The papyri treat this action as establishing a contract.³¹ Claspings right hands was also a way of establishing an agreement, friendship or good faith (cf. Gal. 2.9),³² including between peoples.³³ This usage could include an inviolable pledge of protection, support or safe-conduct.³⁴ One could swear an oath while claspings

and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994, 2000), pp. 650-51, 673; Brian K. Peterson, *Eloquence and the Proclamation of the Gospel in Corinth* (SBLDS, 163; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), p. 163; Craig S. Keener, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (NCamBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); J.F. Strange, '2 Corinthians 10:13-16 Illuminated by a Recently Published Inscription', *BA* 46 (1983), pp. 167-68; for different interpretations, cf. Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp. 232-33; J.D.M. Derrett, 'Paul as Master-builder', *EvQ* 69 (1997), pp. 129-37.

29. Cf. Rom. 15.26, where the reciprocal character of the benefaction between Jewish and Gentile churches complements the Jewish-Gentile comity issue here.

30. Cf., e.g., J.B. Lightfoot, *St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan, 3rd edn, 1869), p. 110; Hans Dieter Betz, *A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 100. Others also recognize an agreement here, e.g. G.W.H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1951), p. 73.

31. Craig S. Wansink, 'Roman Law and Legal System', in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 984-91 (990).

32. Sophocles, *Phil.* 812-813; *Oed. col.* 1632; Euripides, *Heracl.* 307-308; Xenophon, *Cyr.* 4.2.7, 17-19; 8.4.25-26; Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argon.* 4.99-100; Nepos, *Dat.* 14.10.1; Virgil, *Aen.* 3.610-611; 8.124 (welcome and nonhostility); 10.517; Livy 25.16.13; Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.71; 15.28; *Hist.* 15.1 (during adoption); cf. 2 Kgs 10.15.

33. E.g. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 4.6.10; 5.2.14; 6.1.48; *Anab.* 2.3.28; 7.3.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 6.84.4; Virgil, *Aen.* 11.165, 178, 292; Livy 45.12.6; 2 Macc. 12.12; Josephus, *Life* 30. For clasped hands as emblems of peace, see, e.g., Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.54; 2.8.

34. Livy 30.12.18; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.326, 328, 334; 20.62; *War* 6.345, 433.

right hands;³⁵ perhaps also relevant is the act of swearing while lifting one's right hand.³⁶

Such agreements presupposed honorable integrity on the part of the parties. Breaking a pledge of the right hand, such as by killing those with whom one had entered into covenant, was perfidious.³⁷ Revoking the mercy already promised in giving the right hand invites protest.³⁸ Thus the psalmist laments the breach of covenant implied in 'a right hand of falsehood' (Ps. 144.8, 11).

Of course, the ideas of agreement and affirmation can overlap in practice, and some general uses border this more particular usage. Giving the right hand offered a suitable image for reconciliation between two cities in conflict.³⁹ A general could take an enemy general's hand, to assure him that he would not battle him unless necessary.⁴⁰ When Antiochus acceded to Popilius's demand, Popilius and his comrades took his right hand and greeted him, showing acceptance.⁴¹

Paul may view Peter's behavior in Gal. 2.11-12 as violating the spirit of their agreement; if Peter succumbs to those who reject a Jew's fellowship with Gentile believers, he is inconsistent with his agreement implicitly allowing Paul to do just that.⁴² Although others present may not have shared Paul's interpretation or rigorous application of the agreement, Paul might be implying that Peter committed a breach of an agreement made with the right hand. It was such behavior that warranted Paul's public censure without prior private rebuke, contravening normal Jewish practice.⁴³

35. Sophocles, *Phil.* 942; *Trach.* 1181; Euripides, *Hel.* 838-839; *Med.* 21; probably Ezra 10.19.

36. Gen. 14.22; Exod. 6.8; Num. 14.30; Deut. 32.40; Ezek. 20.5; Dan. 12.7; Rev. 10.5-6; *Jub.* 13.29; Xenophon, *Cyr.* 6.1.3; probably Lucian, *Tox.* 50 (though the specific term 'hand' is missing); Chariton, *Chaer.* 3.2.5.

37. Valerius Maximus 9.2.1; Josephus, *War* 2.450-456; cf. the irony in Cicero, *Phil.* 13.2.4; even slaughtering the surrendered was evil (Thucydides 3.68.1-3). To rebel again after giving the right hand was treacherous (Xenophon, *Anab.* 1.6.6-7).

38. Quintus Curtius 6.10.11, 14.

39. Dio Chrysostom, *Nicom.* (*Or.* 38) 47.

40. Xenophon, *Hell.* 4.1.38.

41. Polybius 29.27.6.

42. Those partnered in mission could be sundered by rivalry (Valerius Maximus 2.9.6a).

43. For sources relevant to that practice, see, e.g., 1QS 6.26-7.9; 7.15-16; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.67; *m. Ab.* 3.11; *b. Sanh.* 101a; Mt. 18.15-17; Lawrence H.

Pillars

Some view Paul's 'pillars' (Gal. 2.9) as temple imagery (cf. Rev. 3.12).⁴⁴ This interpretation would make good sense of Paul's image of a spiritual temple (1 Cor. 3.16; 6.19; 2 Cor. 6.16), with the apostles as a foundation (cf. Eph. 2.20), and would have been intelligible to many Palestinian Jews and probably most early Christians.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, this sense lacks support in this context in Galatians, allowing the audience to construe 'pillars' in the more general figurative sense that was more common in their milieu.

Without contextual reason to interpret the pillars in the sense of a spiritual temple, Paul's Galatian audience when interpreting his words would probably default to the common use of the phrase in their culture, something like our modern idiom 'pillars of the community'. This image appears for strong persons in both Jewish and Gentile sources.⁴⁶ Thus, for example, Cicero describes one (in Latin) as the pillar of his household.⁴⁷ Though slain, Hector can be described as

Schiffman, *Sectarian Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Courts, Testimony and the Penal Code* (BJS, 33; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), pp. 97-98.

44. E.g. Bernard Hungerford Brismead, *Galatians—Dialogical Response to Opponents* (SBLDS, 65; Chico, CA: SBL, 1982), pp. 104-105; F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 153; James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 545; Richard J. Bauckham, 'James and the Jerusalem Church', in Richard J. Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, vol. 4 in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), pp. 415-80 (442-49). For animate pillars in the heavenly temple, see 4Q403 frg. 1.1.41 (see discussion in Dale C. Allison, '4Q403 fragm. 1, col. I, 38-46 and the Revelation to John', *RevQ* 12 [1986], pp. 409-14); this would not be related to Greek use of Hermae (as in, e.g., Nepos, *Alc.* 7.3.2).

45. The image of a spiritual temple was certainly widespread in early Christianity (cf. 1 Pet. 2.4-8; Ignatius, *Eph.* 9.1; *Magn.* 7.2; *Barn.* 4.11; probably Hermas, *Vis.* 3.2.1). It was apparently already familiar in Judaism (see, e.g., Bertril Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965]).

46. *BDAG* cites, e.g., Euripides, *Iph. taur.* 57; *Life of Aesop* G 106 P; cf. Lightfoot, *Galatians*, p. 109; for Aeschylus, *Ag.* 897. Cf. 1QSa [= 1Q28a], 1.12; 4Q550b frg. 1.4, reconstructed; *1 Clem.* 5.2; Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 109. Other figurative comparisons with pillars also appear, e.g., Pindar, *Nem.* 4.81.

47. Cicero, *Verr.* 2.3.76.176.

‘Troy’s invincible pillar of strength’,⁴⁸ likewise, mighty Troy, when conquered, was lamented as the fallen pillar of Asia.⁴⁹ At Scipio’s death, some lamented, ‘the walls of our city have been toppled’.⁵⁰

In Jewish sources, a Qumran text might speak of the king’s advisors as his ‘pillars’.⁵¹ A wife can be a helper and ‘pillar of rest’ (Sir. 36.24), and one’s daughters like palace pillars (Ps. 144.12); the works and prayers of the godly could be like a strong pillar to a city.⁵² In later sources, Moses is said to have called Aaron (when he died) ‘the pillar of Israel’s prayers’;⁵³ Targumim also apply the image to people of importance and the mighty people of the land.⁵⁴ The image thus could apply even to the patriarchs in some later Jewish sources,⁵⁵ a usage that some have cited as an analogy here.⁵⁶

Arguing that Paul’s audience would construe ‘pillars’ primarily as strong and influential persons does not require us to rule out the possibility that Paul had temple imagery in mind as well.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, his audience, unless familiar with his architectural use of the image elsewhere,⁵⁸ would probably have viewed them simply as particularly strong and prominent figures.

48. Pindar, *Ol.* 2.81-82 (employing a different yet synonymous term for ‘pillar’ than the one used in Galatians).

49. Seneca, *Tro.* 6-7.

50. Valerius Maximus 4.1.12 (although the lament could involve his subsequent inability to defend their walls).

51. 4Q550^{a-b} frg. 2-3, esp. 3.4.

52. *2 Bar.* 2.1-2; *4 Bar.* 1.2.

53. *Targ. Ps.-J.* on Num. 20.29.

54. *Targ. Ps.-J.* on Gen. 46.28; 49.19; Exod. 15.15. It applies to Johanan ben Zakkai in *Ab. R. Nathan* 25 A; also in the Talmudic passage cited in S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Scribner’s, 1967), p. 158 n. 2.

55. See all three in *Gen. R.* 43.8; Jacob in 75.5; earlier, cf. Philo, *Abr.* 4. This usage may be ad hoc; justice, truth and peace are the world’s pillars in *Deut. R.* 5.1.

56. Roger D. Aus, ‘Three Pillars and Three Patriarchs: A Proposal concerning Gal 2:9’, *ZNW* 70 (1979), pp. 252-61.

57. Cf. Rev. 3.12; also the promise to Asenath’s virgins in *Jos. Asen.* 17.6 (some MSS).

58. This familiarity is possible, given the time that Paul had spent with the Galatians in person (e.g. Gal. 4.13-14); because I accept the ‘late date’ of Galatians, it can come from the period when Paul had already conceptualized the new temple (1 Cor. 3.16). The possibility of familiarity, however, does not demonstrate that the audience would have drawn automatically on this image.

Conclusion

Surveying the use of right hands in agreements and the typical ancient use of ‘pillar’ as an image for a strong person provides a clearer sense of Paul’s language in Gal. 2.9. One might best convey the meaning of the right hand of fellowship in translation or notes by underlining the sense of a formal agreement dependent on the integrity and honor of both parties. One might best convey the sense of pillar as in the English expression, ‘pillar of the community’, or an otherwise ‘influential’ person.