

A note on the laying on of hands

1. I would first like to draw attention to the work of D. Daube (The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism pp 224 - 233), E. Lohse (Die Ordination im Spätjudentum und im Neuen Testament), J. Coppens (L'imposition des mains et les rites connexes) and K. Kleinheyer (Die Priesterweihe im Römischen Ritus).
2. These scholars observe that Judaism, early and late, was familiar with the rite of the laying on of hands. In Hebrew there are three terms, sim, shith (which are virtually synonymous, meaning 'to place' and samakh (meaning 'to lean'). In the study of 'ordination' rites, interest is focussed on the last of these (samakh). In the Old Testament samakh is used to describe either the 'leaning of one's hands' on the animal to be sacrificed (or on the scapegoat); or of the leaning of hands on a blasphemer; or (more pertinently) of the leaning of hands on the Levites (Numbers 8.10) and of Moses' 'leaning his hands' on Joshua.
3. In Rabbinic literature, the term is used of the ordination of the Rabbi's disciples. Daube comments: '...in the case of ordination it can be clearly shown that at least up to the first half of the 2nd century A.D., the rite is executed in the original manner and with the original intent; it involves a real 'leaning on' as opposed to a gentle 'placing', and its object is the pouring of the ordaining scholar's personality into the scholar to be ordained'. The type of such ordination is Moses' appointment of Joshua.
4. In the New Testament, the Greek equivalent of 'samakh' seems to have been 'epitithemi tas cheiras'. Five texts are examined; Acts 6, 1 - 6 (the appointment of the seven), Acts 13, 1 - 3 (the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas); I Timothy 4.14, I Timothy 5.22 and II Timothy 1.6. Interest again focusses on the last three of these. Depending on the dating of the Pastoral Epistles, it can be said that at a certain (possibly late) stage in the church's development, it occurred that an apostle laid hands on Timothy, with the presbytery, and that Timothy in turn laid hands on others. Daube gives reasons for the comparatively late adoption of such practices in the Christian church; but at the same time suggests that the ordination of Timothy is modelled on Rabbinic ordination, and is the earliest reference to what is commonly called 'apostolic succession' in the New Testament or indeed in Christian history.
5. It could be argued that the laying on of hands by an apostle on a person who was to exercise ministry in a local church says nothing of the possibility of the apostle passing on his own office and function. On the other hand, if the rite is consciously modelled on that of the Rabbis, if there is an echo of the Rabbinic understanding of Moses' 'ordination' of Joshua in this ceremony, then for an apostle to 'lay his hands' on another might indicate that the 'ordinand' was to be for the local church what the apostle had been for that community during its foundation, and during his sojourn there before moving to new territory. The tasks delegated (to judge from the Pastoral Epistles) would seem to be those of leadership, discipline and the guarding and teaching of the faith, (the last two of which would square with the intention in Rabbinic ordination).
6. I do not wish in this to say that an account of this rite says all that there is to be said about the ministry and its transmission, or indeed about apostolic succession; the concept includes many other features of church life (the faith of the community, the scriptures etc - see C. I. Turner's essay in Swete (ed) Essays in the History of the Early Church and Ministry). But the existence of such a rite as is described in the Pastorals, together with its possible Rabbinic origins ought, I feel, to be taken into consideration in any survey of NT ministry, and the bearing of such a survey on our understanding of ministry today.