Exploring gesture and nonverbal communication in the Bible and the ancient world: some initial observations

J Eugene Botha

ABSTRACT
Traditionally gesture and other forms of nonverbal communication have been the object of research of inter alia cultural anthropologists, linguists and social psychologists. Historians have only rather recently begun to show an interest in various kinds of nonverbal communication (which include gesture) as one possible avenue to the cultural codes and social sensibilities of the past. The study of nonverbal communication and gesture is of course not a totally neglected field, but so far the exciting trends in this field have received scant attention from especially historians and Biblical scholars. This article is an exploratory venture which seeks to identify the current state of affairs in the field as well as an examination of the possibilities a better understanding of gesture and nonverbal communication holds for interpreting ancient texts and the societies that have produced them a little better.

1 INTRODUCTION: THE STUDY OF GESTURE
A close reading of Biblical and other ancient texts in terms of gestures and nonverbal communication referred to and alluded to, makes for very interesting reading. There is actually a staggering number of these instances, but they are seldom commented on, yet they can be crucial in understanding a specific text or can enhance the power of an argument or utterance considerably if we were to take them into consideration in interpreting a text. Furthermore, the advent of social-scientific methodologies in Biblical Studies opened up exciting additional perspectives on ancient societies and cultures such as those in which the Bible was produced. Since gesture is such a crucial part of ancient communication it is now more than ever necessary and possible to take a renewed look at gesture in antiquity and the world of the Bible.

The study of gesture is nothing new. Many physiognomists over the ages (Thomas 1991:2) have dealt with the subject in some way or the other. There are numerous works from antiquity dealing with aspects of gesture such as Quintilian’s description of gesture. The scientific study of gesture in the modern world is widely ascribed to Charles Darwin (The expression of the emotions in man and animals, 1872). He has drawn attention to the universality of some gestures and facial expressions, and also used the
Hebrew scriptures to substantiate much of what he observed. 'Unfortunately Darwin's insights into the body language of ancient Israel were limited by his complete reliance on the KV' (Gruber 1980:2). Some studies of gesture subsequent to the work of Darwin focus strongly on the more universal aspects of gesture—the fact that some facial expressions of emotion and even some other gestures can be found in many cultures and in very different societies. However, 'most modern writing on the subject starts from the assumption that gesture is not a universal language but is the product of social and cultural differences. There are many languages of gesture and many dialects' (Thomas 1991:3). It would thus seem that there are indeed similarities in gesture but there are also very specific culturally governed differences. Morris (1979), for instance, identifies 20 key human gestures, their geographical distribution and their likely historical origin. Morris and his collaborators focus specifically on western and southern Europe and the Mediterranean, and not surprisingly there are striking similarities but also striking differences. Axtell's (1991) popular version of body language around the world confirms that cultural and societal differences have a marked influence on gesture (cf Efron 1972 on gestures among immigrant Italians and eastern European Jews).

Thomas (1991:3) remarks that the study of gesture is nowadays primarily the business of anthropologists, linguists and social psychologists who tend to study gesture as a form of nonverbal communication. This endeavour even has a name: Kinesics, and kinesics consists of various subdisciplines such as proxemics and haptics! Linguists describe and map gestures which they are inclined to view as a form of language, and social psychologists and sociologists have advanced theories explaining the reasons for the variations. It is relatively easy to study gesture in its modern day and actual manifestations, but it is considerably more difficult to study gesture historically. Certainly, art historians out of necessity have been studying gesture and posture and various studies of drama and oratory include aspects of gesture. Even for antiquity there are a few standard studies on the gestures of classical art and oratory (cf Sittl 1890; de Jorio 1964; Brilliant 1963; Evans 1969), and classical literature abound with references to gestures, posture and aspects of body language. Therefore, it can certainly not be disputed that gesture can be studied historically, but is this (the historical study of gesture) really important? Thomas (1991:5) asks:

Is it not too trivial in its implications to engage the attention of those who should be devoting themselves to understanding larger themes? Does it matter whether the Greeks and Romans considered it bad manners to pick their noses or just what James I's brother-in-law, the King of Denmark, did with his fingers when in 1606 he chose to insult the aged Earl of Nottingham, who had recently married a young wife?
To this we can add, does it matter that it is frequently mentioned that Paul used a gesture before he spoke in Acts; or that Paul and Barnabas were given the right hand (deksias edokan) by the pillars of Jerusalem?

It is rather obvious that it does matter. Gestures are not merely trivial, incidental aspects of human interaction, but are essential ingredients of communication, especially of communication in antiquity. It is true for both formal, stylized communication as well as for everyday communication. In a predominantly oral culture such as that of the ancient world, gesture would be even more important.

We would scarcely imagine today that a simple gesture could possess legal power or could commit people more efficiently than a written form drawn up by a notary and signed by both parties. At least until the thirteenth century, however, when cities and commercial activities began to develop rapidly and when growing state bureaucracies helped to spread literacy, gestures were much more powerful than such documents... indeed, very few people could write and therefore commitment had to be made through gestures, formal words, and symbolic objects (a reliquary, the host, a sword, etc.). Gestures transmitted political and religious power; they made such transmission public, known by all, and gave legal action a living image... (Schmitt 1991:59-60).

The importance of gesture in the ancient world also becomes clear from the remark by Quintilian (11.3.109) on the importance of gesture in that some young orators considered it essential to prepare not only their speeches but also their gestures beforehand: ...ut iuvenes, cum scribunt, gestum praemodulati cogitatione sic componant, quomodo casura manus est. In addition, it is remarkable how many gestures are referred to or alluded to when reading classical texts and Biblical texts with a view to this. The study of Latester (1995) on nonverbal communication in the Homeric epic is a case in point.

However, despite the overwhelming evidence of the importance of gesture in antiquity, there are relatively few studies on gesture, and most of these tend to merely list a selection of various kinds of gesture, without remarking on how they fit into the larger fabric of society, its values and norms and how it contributes to meaningful behaviour in the particular society, and how understanding gesture could significantly contribute to understanding and interpreting texts.

We are thus confronted with the fact that gesture was an extremely important part of communication in antiquity, and it is indeed possible to find, list and classify the various gestures in the literature and art of the time, but in the light of recent developments in social-scientific criticism of Biblical texts, the question can be raised whether this alone is adequate. This question is necessary because gesture and other forms of nonverbal communication do not only accompany spoken or written words as something purely addi-
tional, but are also crucial in social differentiation. Like other forms of language, gesture can also be indicative of social values, social boundaries, status, and the like. Gestures and other nonverbal actions can reflect social positions and class, and it can also reflect attitudes regarding things such as gender, status, position, kinship, boundaries, hierarchies and class. In antiquity where physiognomists viewed body parts and zones of the body as indicative of character and other crucial human aspects, gesture would be of equal importance. There are however, very few studies in this regard in existence on antiquity. For the Greco-Roman world two essays (Bremmer 1991, Graf 1991) dealing with aspects of the social values attached to certain actions gestures and postures are important, and a study by Brilliant (1963) on the use of gestures to denote status in Roman sculpture and coinage is also an example of interpreting gesture in a wider context. The study by Gruber (1980) on the 'Ancient Near East', while touching on some aspects dealing with social values (he talks of 'feelings' and 'attitudes'), is for the most part merely descriptive, and tends to classify the various gestures and aspects of nonverbal communication neatly without developing the implications for understanding the social world.

The historian and social scientist who wants to study the past communication between flesh and blood people in concrete social and historical contexts must be able to visualise them as they conversed. This means that we must attempt to not only 'hear' them as they speak but also to 'see' them talk and gesticulate, and this include not only formally fixed gestures of ceremony or ritual but also the ordinary, everyday language of ordinary people of which we have some indications in our texts.

Contemporary experience thus confirms the moral which is to be drawn from these studies of the past: namely, that behind the apparently most trivial differences of gesture and comportment there lie fundamental differences of social relationship and attitude. To interpret an account for a gesture is to unlock the whole social and cultural system of which it is a part (Thomas 1991:11).

There is thus a real need to take a renewed look at gesture and nonverbal communication in the ancient world and the world of the Bible in the light of social-scientific theory, but this has so far not been attempted at all.

In this article we will aim to introduce the study of gesture and its significance for the Bible, and wish to point out that the observations are preliminary in nature and that even the examples given here do not cover the whole spectrum. The majority of the examples is selected from the New Testament, and the reason for this is that the author is a New Testament scholar and more versed in the Greco-Roman literature. However, the need for serious investigation of Old Testament texts is just as pressing, since the
phenomenon of non-verbal communication in the Jewish texts such as the apocalyptic texts and so on has not at all been adequately studied.

2 GESTURE IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

The literature of antiquity abounds with references to various symbolic actions and gestures. While studies on gesture in the Greco-Roman world do not exactly abound, there are quite a number of interesting works in existence. Unfortunately, we do not have a fully developed grammar of gesture or a list of gestures and their meaning neatly arranged by body parts, such as gesture of the hands or head or eyes. Most studies on classical gestures classify their material on the grounds of what emotion or feeling or act is communicated, and give various examples of this. Certainly one of the most comprehensive of this kind is the study by Carl Sittl done in 1890. It contains a wealth of information on gestures and references to gesture in classical literature. Sittl (1890:1) defines 'gesture' as 'all nicht mechanische Bewegung des menschlichen Körpers', and continues to list a staggering number of examples of this. However, Sittl's work is primarily descriptive, and he does not attempt to link the gestures he lists to any specific social or historical situation. This means that while his work contains a wealth of information on the kinds of gestures used and found in classical literature, there is very little reflection on the values, social structures, relationships and the like reflected by these gestures. Sittl classifies gestures in the following way:

- Ausdruck von Gefühlen und Gemütsbewegung
- Der Beifall
- Totenklage
- Konventionelle Begrüßung
- Symbolische Gebärden
- Deisidämonie
- Rechtssymbolik
- Ehrerbietung
- Gebäuden des Gebetes
- Schauspieler und Redner
- Zeichensprache
- Tanz und Pantomimus
- Fingerrechnen
- Die Gebärden in der Kunst
- Eingreifen der Gottheit

Another interesting and well illustrated study is that of Richard Brilliant (1963) which deals with Gesture and rank in Roman art in which he focuses specifically on the ways in which gestures in Roman coinage and sculpture depict status. The assumption is that symbolic gestures in works of art func-
tion as the primary instrument of status identification since these gestures ‘were familiar social acts and their significance was accessible to all’ (Brilliant 1963:9). Since coins and sculptures were commissioned by prominent figures these objects tend to celebrate their achievements and very precisely define their social position and relationships with others. Brilliant (1963:10) remarks that the articulate theatre of Classical drama was gradually replaced in favour by the gesticulate production of mime, and the popularity of the pantomime with its focus on the visible rather than the audible in the Imperial period, and the very important gesticulate addresses of orators and politicians in the public fora, contributed to the rhetorical character of the images in imperial iconography of the personage. ‘Dynastic propaganda and the evolving social structure of the Empire stimulated the development of status motifs and gave them wide currency in Roman sculpture and coinage’ (Brilliant 1963:10). Brilliant follows a chronological framework and distinguishes between the different periods and deals with the gestures of each period. He focuses on the pre-Imperial period, Augustus to Domitian, the second century and the late empire. What makes Brilliant’s study interesting is that he not merely lists various gestures, but link them to concrete contexts and social strata, and thus through the study of these gestures provides us with a glimpse of the society in which these gestures functioned, taking a step in the direction of interpreting gesture in a broader context.

Two essays in Bremmer and Roodenburg (1991) deal with aspects of gesture in antiquity, and especially the article by Bremmer (1991:15-35) on walking, standing and sitting in Greek culture, is significant since it does not merely list variations of gestures but also gives an indication of the values attached to these body techniques in antiquity. Apart from these studies mentioned above, there are few other studies on gesture in antiquity in which gesture and posture are considered in terms of social significance and the values attached. Most other sources merely list various aspects without commenting on them.

It is perhaps apt to take an example from a classical text to show how gesture functions in literary texts and how important it is to understand the gestures in order to enable the reader to really feel the full impact of the text.

The example used here is from Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius, 1.15.

These years of silence he spent partly in Pamphylia and partly in Cilicia; and though his paths lay through such effeminate races as these, he never spoke nor was even induced to murmur. Whenever, however, he came on a city engaged in civil conflict (and many were divided into a low kind), he would advance and show himself, and by indicating part of his intended rebuke by manual gesture or by look on his face, he would put an end to all the disorder, and people hushed their voices, as if they were engaged in the mysteries. Well, it is not so very difficult to restrain
those who have started a quarrel about dances and horses, for those who are rioting about such matters, if they turn their eyes to a real man, blush and check themselves and easily recover their senses; but a city hard pressed by famine is not so tractable, nor so easily brought to a better mood by persuasive words and its passion quelled. But in the case of Apollonius mere silence on his part was enough for those so affected. Anyhow, when he came to Aspendus in Pamphylia (and this city is built on the river Eurymedon along with two others), he found nothing but vetch on sale in the market, and the citizens were feeding upon this and on anything else they could get; for the rich men had shut up all the corn and were holding it up for export from the country. Consequently an excited crowd of all ages had set upon the governor, and were lighting a fire to burn him alive, although he was clinging to the statues of the Emperor, which were more dreaded at that time and more inviolable than the Zeus in Olympia; for they were statues of Tiberius, in whose reign a master is said to have been held guilty of impiety, merely because he struck his own slave when he had on his person a silver drachma coin with the image of Tiberius. Apollonius then went up to the governor and with a sign of his hand asked him what was the matter; and he answered that he had done no wrong, but was indeed being wronged quite as much as the populace; but, he said, if he could not get a hearing, he would perish along with the populace. Apollonius then turned to the bystanders, and beckoned to them that they must listen; and they not only held their tongues from wonderment at him, but they laid the fire they had kindled on the altars which were there. The governor then plucked up courage and said: “This man and that man,” and he named several, “are to blame for the famine which has arisen; for they have taken away the corn and are keeping it, one in one part of the country and another in another.” The inhabitants of Aspendus thereupon passed the word to one another to make for these men’s estates, but Apollonius signed with his head, that they should do no such thing, but rather summon those who were to blame and obtain the corn from them with their consent. And when, after a little time the guilty parties arrived, he very nearly broke out in speech against them, so much was he affected by the tears of the crowd; for the children and women had all flocked together, and the old men were groaning and moaning as if they were on the point of dying of hunger. However, he respected his vow, of silence and wrote on a writing board his indictment of the offenders and handed it to the governor to read out aloud; and his indictment ran as follows “Apollonius to the corn-dealers of Aspendus. The earth is mother of us all, for she is just; but you, because you are unjust, have pretended that she is your mother alone; and if you do not stop, I will not permit you to remain upon her.” They were so terrified by these words, that they filled the market-place with corn and the city revived.

One can but briefly comment on the various gestures here, but overall it is clear the gestures employed seem to confirm the status of the character Apollonius. To the author it is important to stress the status, abilities and standing of Apollonius, and this is done not only by describing the man, but is confirmed when taking his general nonverbal communication into consideration. His actions and the gestures are those of an orator, a learned man
with authority, and the way in which he converses and questions an eminent figure such as the governor and the elite of the city confirms this. The rhetoric of this whole scene strongly establishes Apollonius as a great and learned man. Graf (1991:44) remarks: ‘With the help of the appropriate gestus, the orator impersonates what the Roman society regarded as the ideal orator—and since oratory is the main, if not the only way a member of the Roman upper class appeared in public, the orator has to show himself as the ideal Roman aristocrat.’ The character of Apollonius fits this idealised picture perfectly and ancient readers of the text could have come to this conclusion on the grounds of his gestures alone.

Specific gestures:

* Indicating part of his intended rebuke by manual gesture or by look on his face. This expression is rather strong, since it is a combination of two separate gestures. There are quite a number of gestures recorded to show anger, such as slapping the thigh (often mentioned in Homer II 125; M 162 and even Nonnus Dion 16.352-353) the femur ferire, grinding the teeth (Sen de ira 3.4), slapping the arms (reserved for women only?!), and slapping the head, or slapping/scratching the ear. A specific gesture with the hand with forceful overtones of anger is making a fist, or more specifically hitting the breast (Ovid Met 3.481; Iuven 13.127). Apparently hitting the breast is a very convincing form of indicating anger and it is probable that we should visualise this gesture here. Alternatively, Quintilian (11.3.114-115) remarks on how the hands can both be thrust forward in a sign of horror or negation. The ‘look on the face’ is also significant since it is one of the primary ways to influence an audience: dominantur autem maxime vultus (Quint 72). The glance can exercise enormous influence and Quintilian (72) remarks that it can have even more power than words (hoc pendent homines, hunc intuentur, hic spectatur, etiam antequam dicimus; hoc quod amamus, hoc odimus, hoc plurima intelligimus, hic est saepe pro omnibus verbis). In the whole process the eyes are considered extremely important and the eyebrows can also signal anger by contraction (ira enim contractis, Quint 79). One who can control the audience by a mere glance or gesture, even before speaking, is for Quintilian the epitome of a successful Roman orator, and this function Apollonius fulfils magnificently! His status and his position are indicated by the gesture.

* Clinging to the statues of the emperor. This is a well known gesture of supplication. Both in the Greek and Roman world suppliants often used to hug altars or statues of gods or emperors (Plaut Rud 694f; Ovid Fast 4.317ff). In this instance the governor is appealing to the emperor Tiberius, whose influence is described as enormous, and in whose presence (through the statues or coins) no injustice should be tolerated. Yet the people are on the verge of killing the governor! The description of the gesture here indicates

---

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).
that the situation of the governor is so dire, that even the immense esteem in which the statues of Tiberius are held cannot prevent the people from killing him. Thus the scene is set: If Tiberius could not save him, and Apollonius can—it would really show how great a man Apollonius really is!

* With a sign of his hand asked him. Here the description of Quintilian (101), Nec uno modo interrogantes gestum componimus, plerumque tamen vertentes manum, utcumque composita est, where a slight turn of the hand is described, is probably intended. This is again in line with what is to be expected of an educated and sophisticated orator.

* Beckoned to them that they must listen. Here the reference is probably to what is supposed to happen at the start of a speech. What would an audience recognise as a gesture indicating one is about to speak? It seems that an orator did not start off by speaking immediately, but paused for effect and then started the speech by gesture. Quintilian (157) again mentions that a pause would get attention: Mire enim auditurum dicturi cura delectat, et uidex se ipse composit. Apollonius indeed pauses a little (giving the people a chance to put away the fire), and the gesture mentioned is probably one with the right hand, described by Quintilian (159) as 'a most modest of gestures as though waiting for commencement' (dextra, cum iam incipiendum erit, paulam prolata ultra sinum gestum quam modestissimo, velut spectans quando incipiendum sit).

* Signed with his head, that they should do no such thing. The movements of the head are well known according to Quintilian, and serve both to communicate and for graceful effect. The head is moved from side to side, in the most natural way to show disapproval. What is more intriguing is the question as to why this is recorded at all. Why explicitly refer to the head? Why not merely say he stopped them? What is the rhetorical impact of the reference to the head? The head was certainly considered important, but why? What values were attached to it? Quintilian (68-69) merely states: Praecipuum vero in actione sicut in corpore ipso caput est cum ad illum, de quo dixi, decreem, tum etiam ad significacionem. Decoris illa sunt, ut sit primo rectum et secundum naturam. Nam et deiecto humilitas et supino arrogantia et in latus inclinato languor et praeduro ac rigente barbaria quaedam mentis ostenditur. Tum accipiat aptos ex ipsa actione motus, ut cum gestu concordet et manibus ac lateribus obsequatur. Quintilian’s tenet is that gestures were aimed at the emotions of the audience and not their minds. The question that further research must answer is how this fits in, in this context?

* And wrote on a writing board. There are numerous studies on literacy and orality in antiquity, but there is virtually no research on what the social values attached to written texts or inscriptions could have been. Was being able to write considered a virtue? Was it an indication of status? Why is it
mentioned specifically that Apollonius is suddenly writing on a writing board? He communicated rather well so far in the story. Why is it necessary to introduce the fact of writing here? Does it confirm his status? Is a written text more binding? Could this perhaps throw more light on the narrative in John about Jesus' gesture of writing in the sand which so far has not adequately been explained? Further research is definitely necessary on these aspects.

3 GESTURE IN THE NON-GREEK/LATIN SPEAKING ANCIENT NEAR EAST

There are quite a number of studies devoted to gesture and body language in the (non Greek/Latin speaking) ancient world; perhaps the most significant work to date is the study by Gruber (1980). Gruber (1980:2-16) gives a brief overview of the study of gesture in the 'Ancient Near East' and concludes that 'there is much evidence that nonverbal communication was employed by the ancient Canaanites, Israelites and Akkadian speaking Mesopotamians. The literature produced by these peoples appears to contain numerous references to the postures, gestures, and facial expressions which were employed in the ancient near east (Gruber 1980:16-17). According to Gruber’s work both literal references to these gestures and body language and idiomatic expressions (used to convey the attitudes, ideas and feelings of the gestures) in the literature can shed light on understanding the communication of the texts of the ancient Mediterranean world of which an important part was lost in the inscripturation process. Gruber (1980:8) postulates that we should expect an attempt to compensate for the loss of postures, gestures and facial expressions. According to him we should also expect that verbal descriptions of these nonverbal phenomena would have found their way into various languages as idioms denoting the mental states which the gestures, postures and facial expressions convey. Gruber’s work is important in the sense that it builds on Sittl’s work by adding that idiomatic expressions where body parts/gesture/posture are alluded to, can also convey the attitudes or feelings attached to the specific event/action/circumstances. While this is a long way from analysing gesture in terms of socialscientific concerns it is still something to keep in mind, but it is clear that a model in which the various aspects can be related to each other is still totally lacking.

Gruber (1980) classified the various gestures in the following way:
* Gestures of divine worship and supplication
* Postures of prayer and worship
* Gestures and postures denoting obeisance
* Gestures and postures of greeting and affection
* Nonverbal indications of sadness and chagrin
Gestures and postures of mourning
Nonverbal indications of anger
Nonverbal display of joy and happiness

It is, of course, impossible to give a comprehensive account of the various gestures here, and Gruber mentions quite a lot, but his list of gestures are far from exhaustive. There are many he did not cover (swearing an oath, legal gestures, and the like) and it seems that research into this material has been quite inadequate so far. This does not mean that no significant research has been done, but it seems to me that it is a rather neglected field of study (see Donohue 1992; Finkel 1983-84; Tzori 1958; Wilkinson 1991; Wright 1986). Kruger (1994) deals with some aspects of translating gesture and nonverbal communication in the Psalms, but valuable as this work is, it also clearly shows that some kind of modelling in this field is necessary.

4 NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND GESTURE IN THE BIBLE

There are certainly indications of nonverbal communication and numerous references to gesture in the text of the Bible, as Gruber (1980) had shown in dealing with Hebrew texts (see also Bryce 1975; Carmichael 1977; Falk 1959; Gruber 1983; Landman 1970; Malul 1985; Samson 1983; Soper 1959; Weisman 1976 on Old Testament texts). In the New Testament there are numerous examples of gestures and references to symbolic acts, but it seems that as far as New Testament studies are concerned, the whole question of gesture and its social and cultural implications has not received adequate attention at all. I will only refer to a few examples here, but an exhaustive account of gesture in the New Testament is still sadly lacking! There are numerous examples of gesture, postures and the like in the New Testament, such as the specific indication that Jesus 'sat down' to teach (Mt 5:1, 24:3); people 'fall down and pay homage' (Mt 4:8); there are slaps on the 'right cheek' (Mt 5:39); various symbolic actions associated with healing (Mt 9:18-31, Lk 7:14-15); hands-on healings (Lk 8:53; Ac 9:41); actions associated with the crucifixion; the tearing of the curtain in the temple (Mk 15:38); witnesses putting down clothes (Ac 7:58); the grinding of teeth (Mt 22:13); Paul standing and asking for attention with a gesture (Ac 13:16); the shaking of dust off feet (Mt 10:14; Ac 13:51); kissing; a crowd taking off clothes and throwing dust in the air (Ac 22:23) and many, many more.

The fact that there are so many of these specifically mentioned in the text of the New Testament suggests that these actions were significant and important to the first readers of these documents, but very little work has been done on this aspect. A few preliminary observations on some New Testa-
ment texts will serve to indicate the importance of gesture, and the need for further research.

4.1 Acts 21:40 (standing, making a gesture)

There are a surprising number of examples in the Book of Acts of Paul making a gesture before speaking (13:16; 26:1) and there are also examples where Paul has to defend himself where the gesture is not mentioned, as in the case of his defense before Felix (24:10). We can therefore assume that when the gesture is mentioned, it is done so deliberately with a specific purpose in mind.

In 21:40 the text mentions that Paul stands up and gestures to the people. The character in the narrative is about to defend himself before a Roman court, and the importance of what the character is about to defend partially lies in the status and abilities of the character himself. It seems that the author of Acts is consciously trying to depict Paul as a perfect example of a Roman orator. All the values and social connotations ascribed to an eminent Roman citizen are implied by the way in which Paul’s body language is described. In the first place it is important to note that ‘standing up’ is not an entirely neutral expression. In a formal situation, sitting as opposed to standing can be significant. ‘To stand upright—what Cicero called “that manly bend of the body”—signals nobility and liberty’ (Graf 1991:45). In a public situation, such as a legal trial, standing up is extremely important, as it is an indication of the position and honour of the one who is about to speak. Quintilian (159-160) remarks that a natural and dignified posture whilst standing up is extremely important in delivering a speech, and that other postures are unseemly and unbecoming of an orator. For informed readers the fact that it is mentioned that Paul stands thus immediately raises the expectation that he is about to deliver an oration and that what is about to take place should be evaluated on the same level as other significant defences. This is further confirmed by the fact that it is clear that he waited before speaking until the noise died down, exactly in line with Quintilian’s advice (157-158) where it is specifically mentioned that a pause would get more attention. Quintilian even mentions that a few other additional gestures could enhance this initial communication (158) such as wringing the fingers, stroking the head, looking at the hand and so on. The character of Paul acts exactly in the way a Roman orator would have done. The gesture used by Paul here and in 26:1 probably corresponds to the gesture normally expected and associated with the exordium. Quintilian (92-93) remarks:

One of the commonest of all the gestures consists in placing the middle finger against the thumb and extending the remaining three: it is suitable to the exordium,
the hand being moved forward with an easy motion a little distance both to right and left, while the head and shoulders gradually follow the direction of the gesture. It is also useful in the statement of facts, but in that case the hand must be moved with firmness and a little further forward, while, if we are reproaching or refuting our adversary, the same movement may be employed with some vehemence and energy, since such passages permit of greater freedom of extension. On the other hand, this same gesture is often directed sideways towards the left shoulder: this is a mistake, although it is a still worse fault to thrust the arm across the chest and gesticulate with the elbow. The middle and third fingers are also sometimes turned under the thumb, producing a still more forcible effect than the gesture previously described, but not well adapted for use in the exordium or statement of facts.

The description of Paul's gesture conforms to this traditional gesture here, and for an audience steeped in the traditions of rhetoric, this very fact would have communicated certain values very strongly. Many authors and commentators have commented on the formal structure of the speeches of Paul (e.g., Tajra 1989), but traditionally very few comments are made about the significance of the gestures employed other than the fact that they are probably typical. It seems that the scene is deliberately painted in such a way as to confirm the status and abilities of Paul and to serve as an indication of how to interpret and evaluate what is to follow. The gestures immediately convey the nature of the genre in which Paul is about to communicate and this very fact would raise certain expectations of the readers regarding the character of Paul and the importance of what he is communicating and why it would be acceptable to the kind of audience the book of Acts is aimed at. In a society where honour is one of the pivotal values, this description of an honourable man would enhance his status immensely.

4.2 Galatians 2:9 (deksias edokan)

In antiquity the handshake was employed as a gesture of friendship (Homer Il K 542, Od T 415; Xenoph Oecon 4.25; Eurip Herc f 964) or as a gesture denoting some kind of legal action such as a contract, agreement or marriage. Although it is a very common gesture, there are certain conditions and rules that must be adhered to. Because the society was highly hierarchical, not everybody could shake hands with everybody, and the nature of the interaction (whether a contract/marriage/greeting) would dictate the kind of roles ascribed to the participants. For certain interactions only equals would qualify, and this is extremely pertinent here. Throughout the letter Paul is taking pains to establish his equality with those in Jerusalem (see Esler 1995:293).

With regard to interpreting the gesture there are two possibilities. The first possibility is that the reference is probably to the dextrarum iunctio as a
symbolic act of concord between two equals (Betz 1979:100), and its implications for readers of the first century would have been immense. To modern readers it is probably a rather superfluous gesture, since the agreement has already been hammered out in words, but the importance of the actual gesture to actualise the agreement is not clear. To shake the right hand had enormous implications in antiquity (see Sittl 1890:27-31, 135-138; Xenophon Anab 1.6.6, 2.5.3) and the gesture itself put the seal on an agreement and made it binding. The event described in Gl 2:9 is thus not neutral and merely an addendum to the agreement, but constitutes the actualisation of the agreement and also indicates the importance of the event. What happened there was that a formal and legally binding agreement was concluded and that there was no going back. The fact that it is emphasised in the text is an indication of the importance the author ascribes to the action. Furthermore, this kind of agreement could only be entered into by equals, and mentioning this ‘formal’ aspect of the agreement serves to illustrate and elevate the status of the participants even further. The status of Paul over and against the other apostles is in question, and in Galatians a concerted effort is made to establish this specific status. The reference to the legal agreement confirms without a doubt that Paul’s status is that of an equal to the other ‘pillars’.

Another possibility is raised by Esler. He argues that ‘we cannot assume that the five Jews concerned (or Paul’s readers) knew Roman law...but we can assume that some of the five and most of Paul’s audience were familiar with the Septuagint. The phrase in question occurs eleven time in the Septuagint’ (Esler 1995:298). Esler then indicates that the same expression for giving the right hand is used consistently in the Septuagint for a gesture denoting an agreement to cease hostilities, and that the people in question are not necessarily equals. The one giving the right hand is often described as the one in the military superior position or dominant position. Esler (:303) also comments that without an oath the agreement was not particularly binding, and continues to give an alternative interpretation of the agreement and what was involved between Paul and the pillars of Jerusalem. This reading of the gesture by Esler (whether one agrees with it or not) and the parallels he draws from antiquity are certainly illuminating and serve to confirm the point that interpreting a specific gesture can be crucial in understanding and interpreting a specific event.

5 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH
A study of the gestures, postures and symbolic actions of antiquity is certainly interesting, but is it worthwhile? I believe so. Through the gestures and the postures one can begin to have a sense of how important all of this
was in antiquity in an oral society. Although we are but beginning to look at
the various values and social hierarchies associated with the various gestures,
it is clear that a better understanding of the gesture language of antiquity will
also enhance our understanding of the society and how it functioned.

As I have indicated, there is no scarcity of data on gestures and nonverbal
communication in antiquity and the world of the Bible. There are many texts
referring to various gestures and there are quite a number of studies listing
various kinds of gesture. However, in order to interpret the gestures, and to
really understand the importance of various descriptions of nonverbal
communication in ancient society, these gestures must somehow be
incorporated into a more comprehensive and meaningful picture. It is thus
necessary to begin to view gesture in antiquity in terms of social-scientific
categories, and this includes the building of a model with which to approach
the raw data. (For an explanation of social scientific criticism and the Biblical
that a model is ‘an abstract simplified representation of some real world
object, event, or interaction constructed for the purpose of understanding,
control or prediction’. There are various kinds of models such as isomorphic
(models/objects built to scale) and homomorphic models (cast in abstract
terms), and these models are used in the social sciences too.

Conceptual models are a major subset of such homomorphic models and are those
generally employed by the social sciences. Here they are used to analyze and inter-
pret the properties of social behavior, social structure and social processes...
Models are the cognitive maps or lenses through which we perceive filter and
organize the mass of raw material available to our senses...models do not create
material evidence: rather they provide the means for envisioning relationships and
patterns among the evidence. Moreover, because they are abstract theoretical con-
structs, they can be altered as the terrain (geographical or social) shifts in level of
abstraction or as more information comes into view (Elliott 42-44).

Models are thus crucial heuristic tools we can implement to analyse social
phenomena such as gestures and nonverbal communication, but it must be
stressed that these kinds of models are not absolutes, but merely tools which
can be altered.

With regard to the study of gesture it is thus of extreme importance that
some kind of conceptual model must be developed with which to analyse and
interpret the social phenomenon of gesture and gesticulation. This has not
been attempted so far, and this must be urgently pursued. The problem is of
course to decide on a specific model or models. Certainly modern theories of
communication will need to be scrutinised to determine whether or not there
are existing models which can be used or modified to make them useful to us.
Aspects such as the social circumstances, relationships between participants,
the range of methods available, the choice of communicative means, the social and cultural scripts and values encoded in communication and so on will need to be considered. In addition, a full inventory of the range and types of gestures, body language, and other forms of nonverbal communication such as clothing, smell, skin and so on will need to be constructed and this does not exist. Nothing like this exists at the moment. In addition, a similar inventory must be created for both the Old and New Testaments.

A next step would be to operationalise the model to explain the relationships among the data and questions such as the following will need to be considered: contexts of gesture communication (relationships, gesture, rituals and ceremonies), the various functions of gestures, and perhaps a model which would incorporate the three zone model discussed by Malina (1993:74-77). In this model the three body zones are the following: (1) The zone of emotion-fused thought (head, eyes, eyelids, pupils, and activities associated with these such as knowing, thinking, understanding, fright, terror, awe, and so on; (2) The zone of self expressive speech (mouth, lips, throat, teeth, ears, etc, and their associations such as speaking, hearing, calling, blessing, cursing, turning a deaf ear, silence, eating and so on; (3) The zone of purposeful action (arms, hands, fingers, legs and their associations such as touching, laying on of hands, walking, sitting, standing, using hands, joining hands, kneeling, prostrating and so on. In addition aspects such as honour and shame and the body will need to be examined, codes of behaviour to indicate value in antiquity, gestures in various institutions such as kinship and politics will also need to be considered. From the above it is clear that much research still needs to be done in this regard, and that models need to be developed which can assist in understanding and classifying gesture in antiquity.

In addition, I sense that especially for Bible translation a better understanding of what exactly is implied by a certain gesture or posture, and translating the implication or the emotion or the feeling of the gesture would enhance certain kinds of Bible translation and would help modern readers to understand the world of the Bible a little better.

WORKS CONSULTED


Elliott, J H 1993. *What is social scientific criticism?* Minneapolis: Fortress. (Guides to Biblical Scholarship)
Gruber, M I 1983. The many faces of Hebrew NS'PNYM 'Lift up the face'. *ZA* W 95(2), 252-260.


Soper, K B 1959. For three transgressions and for four. ET 71, 86-87.

Professor J Eugene Botha, Department of New Testament, UNISA, P O Box 392, Pretoria, 0003 South Africa.