




# 'Strike Your Hands' in the Book of Ezekiel and Contemporary Ghanaian Christian Practice of Clapping in Prayer: The Problem of Interpretation and Application of Scripture

Yaw Adu-Gyamfi <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of the Western Cape, South Africa / Christian Service University College, Kumasi, Ghana.

## ABSTRACT

In contemporary Ghanaian Christianity, clapping of hands in prayer has become an accepted practice. The Book of Ezekiel has been quoted to support this practice. Statements such as 'When I clap my hands and pray let fire come and consume my enemies; let those against my progress perish', have become statements in prayers. The focus of the article was to examine these texts in the Book of Ezekiel as to whether it is appropriate for contemporary Ghanaian Christians to use these texts to support their practice. To achieve this, the article subjected the texts in Ezekiel to exegetical exercise through the historical-grammatical method. This exegesis revealed that the practice is an interpretation and application error. This is because a proper exegesis of the texts from Ezekiel clearly shows that the texts have nothing to do with the contemporary Ghanaian Christian clapping in prayer. In fact, one cannot mimic Ezekiel because God has not informed the contemporary Christian to do so. The narrative is descriptive, not prescriptive. It is therefore recommended that Ghanaian Christians who clap their hands in prayer should not base the practice on Ezekiel's experience. The article impacts positively on scholarship. It especially, demonstrates how biblical symbolic actions should be interpreted and applied. The issues raised can serve as tools for Christian scholars who wish to interpret texts of this nature.

## Correspondence

Yaw Adu-Gyamfi  
Email: [yawag156@gmail.com](mailto:yawag156@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Clapping of hands in prayer has become a practice in most Ghanaian churches including some mainline churches. As to when and how this became a practice is unknown. The present practice and belief show a lack of knowledge that this study wants to provide. The researcher thus tried to find out the basis of this practice from some Christians. They quoted some texts from the book of Ezekiel to explain why they clap their hands in prayer. For them, as God instructed Ezekiel to strike his hands, they see it fit to follow the same. In other words, what they read in Ezekiel is taken to be God's instructions to them to apply. They also claim that there is power in clapping against their enemies. The focus of the article is to examine these texts to see if it is appropriate for contemporary Ghanaian Christians to use these texts to support their practice. To achieve this, the article subjects the texts in Ezekiel to exegetical exercise through the historical-grammatical method. This approach is chosen for the simple reason that most Ghanaian Christians come from the reformed tradition, which subscribes to this approach of interpretation of Scripture.

The article begins, first, by looking at the concept of clapping in the Ghanaian society, and then the clapping of hands in prayer among Ghanaian Christians. Attention is given to the historical-critical approach to the interpretation and application of biblical texts. The main objective of the study is to show that the clapping in prayer is the result of lack of proper interpretation and application of symbolic actions of the prophet. The method to be employed is mainly exegesis of the biblical texts.

The questions to guide the research are: (1) Can the practice be based on the texts in the book of Ezekiel? and (2) Can the practice be exegetically justified? There are discussions on symbolism and prophetic actions in the Old Testament in general and in the book of Ezekiel. Furthermore, texts in Ezekiel on clapping of hands are exegetically analysed. The article finally ends with conclusions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Clapping of Hands in Ghanaian Society

Ghanaians think about the world in symbolic terms. As Ayiku asserts, 'they use a wide range of symbol systems in accordance with various aspects of their social and cultural life'<sup>1</sup> which includes the practice of clapping. Clapping is one of the common sounds Ghanaians use without their voice chords. The action of clapping is used in response to being aroused. They perform it as a social gesture for various reasons. It could be used to show approval and admiration in groups, crowds and in the setting of being presented with something like a show or performance. When they want to approve their leaders, Ghanaians, with unified voices in the form of clapping they express their admiration, which is termed 'applause' in modern terms.

Clapping of hands is a common practice in traditional Ghanaian communities. People clap their hands for various reasons and on different occasions. Clapping of hands, on appropriate occasions means popular acceptance. However, clapping of hands while booing and hooting means rejection. Furthermore, Christians who are overcome with joy and gratitude might spontaneously start clapping during a worship service. The Christians refer to this religious hand-clapping as 'clapping for Jesus', and 'a clap offering'. In addition, in most cases, clapping is accompanied by singing. In some instances, clapping is used as a musical instrument while singing.

Performance entails both the verbal and non-verbal movement of the human body. So, worship involves motion; thus, worship depends on performance and therefore on gestures humans make. In worship services, various movements are imaginable, from the action of the vocal cords for speech or song, to movement of the body through recurring handclapping and dancing. In most Ghanaian church services, 'worshippers are expected to sing, clap hands, raise their hands in adoration, and even sway and dance'.<sup>2</sup>

### Clapping of Hands in Prayer among some Ghanaian Christians

Ogunrinade, Fatokun and Abu indicate that dance, clapping and gesticulation during worship in African Indigenous Churches (AIC) among the Yoruba people of Nigeria is a practice. They explain that for the AIC clapping, feet stamping and vigorous hand waving prevent evil spirits from hiding within the prayer arena, and assert that while dance facilitates healing, clapping symbolizes warfare and victory.<sup>3</sup> The Yoruba people in AIC give spiritual interpretation to clapping in prayer. For them, it expresses rage, intensity and contest; the energy put into clapping assaults the evil forces and the sound of clapping confuses the wicked forces. In addition, it is believed that the intense clapping is a contest between good and evil, which, during deliverance, demonstrates a spiritual fight between the evil spirit and the power of those performing the deliverance. However, Ogunrinade, Fatokun and Abu conclude that modernity has affected the structures of the AIC's liturgy to the extent that the constancy of vigorous clapping has declined although they continue the practice.

In his work, *Doctrine or Experience? A Theological Assessment of Persistent Hand-Clapping in Contemporary Ghanaian Christian Prayer*, Adu Ampong conducted a survey among Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches and some independent prayer ministries in Ghana. Among the reasons why people clap in prayer are: to keep awake, in response to leaders' instruction, to make prayer more effective, the Bible says so, just feel like clapping and to slap the Devil and demons. Ampong indicates that Christians who clap in prayer often quote scriptures such as 2 Kings 11:12; Job 27:23; 34:37; Psalm 47:1; 98:8; Isaiah 55:12; Lamentations 2:15; Ezekiel 25:6; Nahum 3:19; and Ezekiel 6:11 to support their practice. However, he

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<sup>1</sup> Robert K. Ayiku, *Symbolic Meanings in the Ghanaian Arts: A Step Toward Developing Cultural Literacy*, PhD thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 1998, iii.

<sup>2</sup> Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening. Singing a New Song in the Postmodern Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2002), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Ogunrinade A. Olukayode, Samson A. Fatokun, Ogbale F. Abu, 'Spiritual and Physical Interpretations of Dance, Clap and Gesticulation in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria', *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 9 (2015). Assessed on [www.iiste.org](http://www.iiste.org)

concludes that clapping in prayer by contemporary Ghanaian Christians is an experiential practice and not a doctrine of any biblical basis.<sup>4</sup>

The researcher notes that referring to Ezekiel 21:14, some Ghanaian Christians believe that striking 'your hands together is equivalent to the sword of the Lord'.<sup>5</sup> In this view, each time one strikes the hands and stamps the feet, 'in the spirit' one throws a blow and crushes the head of the enemy. It is believed that striking the hands under that 'anointing' causes a sound in the spirit realm that causes one's enemies to fall down and become weak.<sup>6</sup> One hears statements such as 'Will you allow the power of God to flow through your hands as you strike them together to win your spiritual battle?' At some prayer meetings, one hears, 'If I clap my hands and pray, fire should come down and burn enemies against my business, marriage, finances, and so on'.

According to Cindy Jacobs, 'Clapping in the Bible is associated not only with praise but also with warfare. Clapping is one means of breaking yokes'.<sup>7</sup> A blogger writes,

The purpose of this blog is to bring to our remembrance one of the strategies that God used in biblical times to protect His people and cause them to be triumphant and victorious. While in prayer, I found myself striking my hands together and speaking in tongues-warring in the spirit. The power that rose up in the midst of the battle gave me the resolute assurance that the enemy was defeated. I have only experienced the striking of the hands as spiritual warfare on very few spontaneous occasions before this occurred recently. This experience motivated me to search out the scriptures to see what the Word says about clapping hands in battle and I wanted to share the results on [inspirationalblogging2.wordpress.com](https://inspirationalblogging2.wordpress.com).<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, Ghanaian Christians who practice clapping during prayer believe that power emanates from the act of clapping their hands. As the blogger posits, they see the clapping of the hand as a spiritual weapon. Like him, many Ghanaian Christians claim they have had results to prayers accompanied by clapping their hands. However, as indicated earlier, can the practice be based on the texts in the book of Ezekiel and can it be exegetically justified?

## METHODOLOGY

The study applies the historical-grammatical approach to appreciate the textual world. As its name implies, this approach takes the historical time of the writing of a text and grammatical analysis of the text seriously. It shows that textual meaning is the predetermined authorial explanation and intent that can be ascertained through accurately monitoring historical facts and grammatical rules in relation to their application to the text under study.<sup>9</sup> Since this method considers the historical context of the text, it discusses the author's world and the way of life, language and the biblical world's societal context. The method often focuses on the firm belief that for one to fully comprehend the import of scriptures, one must primarily establish its significance from the original writers' viewpoint. The sense of the text is defined by the intention of the author. So, to understand the text, the reader must understand what the author wants to say because the key to interpretation is the intention of the author;<sup>10</sup> grasping the intention of the author – interpreting the text according to the author's purpose and plan.<sup>11</sup>

Among the many questions that the critics of this method often enquire are: Who is the author? Who are the recipients? What are their present circumstances? What historical factors occasioned this writing? What is the author's purpose? What is the overall theme or concern? Does the argument or narrative follow an easily discerned outline?<sup>12</sup> In line with this, the ultimate aim is to bring to the fore the actual meaning of the text during the time they were written.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ebenezer Adu Ampong, 'Doctrine Or Experience? A Theological Assessment of Persistent Hand- Clapping in Contemporary Ghanaian Christian Prayer', *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 8/1 (2018): 66.

<sup>5</sup> Alexis N. Washington, 'Weapons of our Warfare', <https://inspirationalblogging2.wordpress.com/2015/10/06/weapons-of-our-warfare-2/>

<sup>6</sup> Washington, 'Weapons of our Warfare'

<sup>7</sup> Cindy Jacobs, *Possessing the Gates of the Enemies: A Training Manual for Militant Intercession* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1994), 161.

<sup>8</sup> Alexis N. Washington, 'Weapons of our Warfare', <https://inspirationalblogging2.wordpress.com/2015/10/06/weapons-of-our-warfare-2/>

<sup>9</sup> Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 73.

<sup>10</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hermeneutics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>11</sup> T. Norton Sterrett, *How to Understand Your Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 71-75.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, rev. ed. (Kentucky: John Knox, 1993), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 34.

## Principles of the Method

From the meaning of the method, as shown above, there are three principles to this approach. First is the principle of simplicity. This principle looks for the 'natural sense'<sup>14</sup> or the *literal meaning*<sup>15</sup> of the text. This principle can be referred to as the principle of the *intended meaning* of the text. The *literal* interpretation, therefore, refers to what the author intends to say. The literal meaning is the basic meaning of any text, including biblical text. Biblical authors did not intend that a diversity of meanings should be drawn from what they said or wrote. The statement of an author attempts to get across one meaning. It may take several statements to explain his or her meaning, but to assign levels of meaning to his or her statement is an erroneous approach. To discover the literal meaning of a text, two important things need to be considered. First, the grammatical analysis of the text. Words are symbols used in communication. It is generally assumed that to obtain the literal meaning one has to add all the literal meanings of the words, taken in their syntax. Words are combined to form sentences.

An examination of the grammar of a sentence is essential in understanding the concept of a statement. In addition, to discover the intended meaning of the author, words, phrases and sentences must be interpreted in their context. A word may have more than one meaning though, within its context, it is usually limited to one meaning. Furthermore, it is essential to determine the basic, customary, and social designation of a word. This is true because words change in meaning. Second, literary styles or forms of the text. In many cases, the literal meaning is often concealed and sometimes hard to discover, especially where the texts are in figures of speech as in poetic books. In view of this, to discover the intended meaning of the author for a text, the interpreter is required to recognize the author's use of the literary forms. The interpreter should find out whether the text before him or her is history, law, poetry, parable, epistle, or apocalyptic. This is important because, for example, in poetry, an author may use a word in a special way, such as alliteration, assonance, and the like to make a point. The author may make an unfamiliar use of a word, use a word that is unusual, or even invent a word for the occasion.

In sum, the basic meaning of a text is the literal meaning, which is also the basis for interpretation the literal meaning of a text is the basic meaning and the basis for interpretation. Ignoring the literal meaning leads to all sorts of imaginary interpretations and applications. As McKim notes, 'without the literal sense we have no control of any other sense'.<sup>16</sup>

The second principle is the principle of history. This approach takes the historical circumstances of the biblical texts as important because it believes that God gradually revealed his nature and ways in history. It believes that biblical statements were made in particular and precise contexts and so for proper interpretation of a biblical text, these statements need to be known. Stott refers to this as the 'original sense'<sup>17</sup> of scripture, where the interpreter tries to get into the mind of the author and to listen to the author's words as if the contemporary readers were among the first readers of the text. As a result, this approach looks for the time of the writing of the text, the culture of both the author and the reader, the occasion, and the purpose of a whole book as well as its various parts. With this approach, therefore, biblical texts should be interpreted historically because the texts refer to real events in history. So, the geography, political settings, culture, socio-religious customs, and the economy of the people of Bible times are regarded as important. In addition, this approach considers the fact that culture influences thought patterns and language. Hence, discovering the world behind the text is paramount to this approach. It describes the biblical text in terms of its own process of development and analyzes the text to determine whether it is an accurate account of the events of the past.

The third is the principle of harmony. This principle tries to look for the 'general sense'<sup>18</sup> of Scripture. Scripture is to be interpreted as one harmonious whole. The important point here is that the interpreter must interpret Scripture by Scripture. By this, apparent discrepancies can be resolved by using what is plain to understand what is obscure. In trying to harmonize Scripture, two things need to be taken into consideration. First, the interpreter must synthesize the various parts of a subject as it is taught from the whole of Scripture. Second, the interpreter should allow Scripture to explain itself. As Bauder points out, 'a passage that can mean only one thing should be used to interpret a passage that could possibly mean several things.'<sup>19</sup> In addition, passages that expressly address an issue carry more weight in interpretation than those passages that just refer

<sup>14</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (London: Scripture Union, 1972), 217.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the term *literal* is often misunderstood for 'letterism'. We cannot hold on to a literal interpretation of every word. For example, in the Book of Revelation, Jesus is called a lamb. In this case, the literal meaning would be that Jesus is a four-footed creature, which is not true. To interpret the word *lamb* literally misses the concept the author is attempting to communicate.

<sup>16</sup> William S. Lasor, 'The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation', in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 50.

<sup>17</sup> Stott, *Understanding the Bible*, 224.

<sup>18</sup> Stott, *Understanding the Bible*, 230.

<sup>19</sup> Kelvin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 2012), 15.

to the issue.<sup>20</sup> The principle of harmony helps the interpreter to avoid ‘random dipping’ and ‘proof-text’. *Random Dipping* is the inclination to jump from sentence to sentence and build doctrines out of them without relating them to their context. *Proof Text* is the inclination to try to settle an issue by quoting just a single text of Scripture. It could also be quoting many texts out of context to justify an issue.

In conclusion, the grammatical-historical method comprises several aspects. In grammatical interpretation, the interpreter seeks to understand the meaning of the words, syntax, and grammar of a passage. The text of Scripture is composed of words, which necessitates comprehending their meaning, but this meaning is in the intention of the original author and the surrounding context. Seeking the author’s intent is a vital key to accurate understanding; the interpreter seeks to draw out (‘exegete’) the author’s meaning instead of reading into the text (‘eisegesis’) his or her own meaning. The historical setting of a passage also aids in the interpretative process. In this feature, the reader seeks to understand the text in its historical context or ‘life setting’.

## APPLICATION OF THE TEXT

Since the study is basically on the application of the biblical text, it would be appropriate to briefly say something about it. The Church reads the biblical text and then seeks to apply it. The exegesis moves on to the application. Here, the process is thought of in terms of contextualisation, decontextualisation and recontextualisation. Thus, an exegesis examines the contextualised meaning of the text in the world of its implied reader(s). After that, decontextualisation is done by examining the theological principles that emerge from the text and transcend its historical-cultural context. Then finally these theological principles are recontextualised in contemporary situations, asking how they are relevant to the lives of current readers.<sup>21</sup>

Application of biblical texts is very important because the values, associations and meanings that the biblical texts had in their contexts will not transfer easily into those of their contemporary contexts.<sup>22</sup> In the case of a command, the reader is to observe the reason why it was given in the text. As Kaiser notes, if reason has its basis in the unchanging nature of God, then that command will have permanent relevance for all in all times.<sup>23</sup> As Osborne indicates, the reader of the text should not impose their theological system upon the text even though the reader’s theological system is important because without that the reader cannot make sense out of the text let alone one as difficult as a prophetic passage.<sup>24</sup>

Most contemporary readers of the Bible make two errors in the application of biblical texts: neglect of the literary or historical context and insufficient analogous situations. In the former, they read the text, and without considering the context, take God’s instructions to individuals and Israel as commands to be applied. In the case of the latter, the readers bring the text to bear on situations where the text simply does not apply. In the application of biblical texts, the analogy of scripture should be applied. As Terry notes, ‘No single statement or obscure passage of one book can be allowed to set aside a doctrine which is clearly established by many passages’.<sup>25</sup> Thus, doctrines must not be built upon a single passage but rather should summarise all that scripture says on the topic. Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard have provided a four-step methodology for legitimate application:<sup>26</sup> (1) determine the original application(s) intended by the passage; (2) evaluate the level of specificity of those applications, by asking if they are transferrable across time and space to other audiences; (3) if not, identify one or more broader cross-cultural principles that the specific elements of the text reflect; and (4) find appropriate applications for contemporary that embody those principles.

It is important to state that the cultural use of the biblical text needs to be considered. The biblical writers represented a variety of cultures that differed in dramatic ways from those of the cultures of contemporary readers. As Kaiser observes, the contemporary reader, therefore, ought to bridge the gulf of explaining the cultural elements that are present in the biblical text, acknowledge their own cultural baggage and then transcend both to communicate the original message of the text into the culture of the contemporary audience.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 189.

<sup>22</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, ‘Obeying the Word: The Cultural Use of the Bible’, in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 175.

<sup>23</sup> Kaiser, ‘Obeying the Word’, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Grant R. Osborne, Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and exp. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 219.

<sup>25</sup> Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old Testament and New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 579.

<sup>26</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 406-425.

<sup>27</sup> Kaiser, ‘Obeying the Word’, 173-174.

The contemporary reader of the biblical text will do well to heed the ways suggested by Zuck.<sup>28</sup> First, build an application on interpretation. Thus, applications should be founded exactly on the meaning and relevance of the text to its original readers considering the intent of the text. The correct interpretation is the only passable foundation for appropriate application. Wrong interpretation of a text leads to faulty application. Second, determine what was anticipated of the original readers. The authors wrote to specific readers concerning specific situations, so they had certain expectations from their readers. As a result, the first step in application is to find the applications the authors expected from their original readers. Third, base applications on elements contemporary readers share with the original readers. The commonality between the original readers and the contemporary readers is the basis for legitimate applications. Fourth, determine what is normative for the contemporary situation. Care should be taken not to generalise for contemporary readers everything that happened in Bible times. This is so in narrative passages which recount experiences peculiar to individuals in their isolated cases. Thus, the fact that God did something for an individual in the past does not mean the present-day persons should expect him to do the same for them. The fact that God told an individual in the past to do something does not mean the contemporary individual must do the same. Thus, there is a need to differentiate between the descriptive (what happened) and prescriptive (what must happen) and make sure the former is not turned into the latter without considering other passages on an issue.

### UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL SYMBOLISM

It would be appropriate to say something about biblical symbolism since the problem under discussion is on interpretation and application of symbols. As Osborne notes, symbols are real objects frequently cited in combination to convey some religious truth convincingly.<sup>29</sup> Osborne indicates that biblical symbolism is a unique kind of metaphor and so it is part of the multiple sense of the semantic range. As Ramm indicates, a symbol has two elements: the psychological and conceptual idea and the image that signifies it.<sup>30</sup>

The cultural gap is the contemporary reader's problem because both the symbol and the idea it signifies originate from the ancient world and the biblical experiences of the time. When the symbols are explained, the meaning is obvious, but when not the contemporary reader is lured to give the symbols certain meanings than is required because they are interpreted based on contemporary cultural meaning.<sup>31</sup> To move from the symbol to the reality it imagines, the contemporary reader needs to, first, search for the biblical background behind the symbols and then use it to interpret later references, because the meaning of the symbols is unraveled by the background.<sup>32</sup> Osborne explains that while the past use of a symbol may serve as an indicator of its meaning, it does not in itself determine the meaning. He adds that since symbols infrequently became completely fixed or formalised in meaning, the contemporary reader must verify the entire semantic field behind the associative senses of a term, observing both similarities and differences in the use elsewhere.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, since biblical symbolism is a fraction of the whole semantic range, it is the duty of the contemporary reader to establish which figurative sense the symbol has in the larger context. So, as Osborne rightly puts it, 'the true meaning is not to be found in our present situation but rather in the use of that symbol in its ancient setting.'<sup>34</sup>

### PROPHETIC ACTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

#### Meaning of Prophetic Actions

In addition to the articulate word, the prophets performed various kinds of actions to express the future. These actions have been variously referred to as 'sign-actions',<sup>35</sup> 'prophetic symbolism',<sup>36</sup> 'symbolic action',<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Eastbourne, England: Victor, 1991), 282-292.

<sup>29</sup> Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 228.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 233.

<sup>31</sup> Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 228.

<sup>32</sup> Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 228-229.

<sup>33</sup> Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 229.

<sup>34</sup> Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 227.

<sup>35</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 67-72.

<sup>36</sup> Henry W. Robinson, 'Prophetic Symbolism', in *Old Testament Essays*, ed. David C. Simpson (London: Charles Griffin, 1927), 1-17.

<sup>37</sup> See Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 165; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (London: SCM, 1965), 95-98; Alfred Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination among the Hebrews and Other Semites* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938).

'prophetic action',<sup>38</sup> 'prophetic drama',<sup>39</sup> 'acted parables',<sup>40</sup> 'enacted prophecies'<sup>41</sup> or 'prophetic acts of power'.<sup>42</sup> Some of the prophets embodied the word in personal actions in a simulation of the presaged event. Some of the actions were weird and they were 'flagrant indications of psychic abnormality'.<sup>43</sup>

Prophetic actions are symbolic. Kooy defines a symbol as 'a representation, visual or conceptual, of that which is unseen and invisible'.<sup>44</sup> He explains that a religious symbol does not draw attention to itself, but to reality, partakes in its power, and makes its meaning understandable. So, a symbol is more than a sign or an image. Kooy intimates that symbols are a section of the language of faith, and by them, faith articulates itself when it interprets the holy, the eternal, the beyond and anytime it talks about divine encounters, assertions, and demands. Based on this, he contends that from the beginning symbolism has been a part of biblical religion, a means of revelation. For Kooy, a symbol's value is its aptitude to clarify; to condense into a simple, expressive whole, readily understood and preserved; to offer a centre for the formation of belief and practice. He indicates symbols are invented and passed on, given birth to and developed, and perish in the midst of varying circumstances. As a result, they sometimes appear as new, and sometimes bring new significance to observances which have lost their meaning, or which have been adapted from elsewhere. Kooy finally shows that when taken from the realm of human experience, symbols relate humankind to that which is of ultimate concern.

Mostly, the symbolism of the Old Testament was created by the prophets. Symbolism was an essential element in the prophetic ministry because of the nature of the work of the prophets and their experience, together with the strong and naive realism of Semitic thinking.<sup>45</sup>

In 1 Kings 11:29-31, the prophet Ahijah tore his garment into twelve pieces, giving ten to Jeroboam with words that suggest that ten tribes will be torn from the house of Solomon and given to him. In 2 Kings 13:14-17, Elisha made King Jehoash shoot an arrow through the window toward the east, toward Syria thereby ensuring his victory over the Syrians. Isaiah drew up a tablet with a name written on it (Isa 8:1-4); Isaiah went about 'naked' and barefooted to symbolize the humiliating defeat of Egypt and Ethiopia (Isa 20). Jeremiah bought a linen belt and put it around his waist, took it off and buried it in a hole and then recovered it indicating Judah, called to intimacy with YHWH, had defiled herself and will be cast away (Jer 13:1-11); Jeremiah broke a potter's vessel to represent the destruction about to come upon Jerusalem (Jer 19:1-13); Jeremiah wore a yoke of wood (Jer 27-28) indicating that the people should submit to the suzerainty of Nebuchadnezzar, and bought a field (Jer 32:1-15).

### Characteristics and Purposes of Prophetic Actions

The prophetic actions have some characteristics. First, they were performed by people who acknowledged a particularly close relationship with God.<sup>46</sup> Second, from this close relationship came the specific command of YHWH to perform the action.<sup>47</sup> Thus the actions were not the ideas thought up by the prophets themselves.<sup>48</sup> As Von Rad suggests, YHWH himself acted in the symbol through the prophet as his instrument.<sup>49</sup> Third, prophetic actions were single actions, taking place once and for all. Thus, they were not like the acts of social convention or cultic practice that were repeated over and over again by different people.<sup>50</sup> Fourth, the prophetic actions were deliberate and artificial. They were contrived for one particular situation and, therefore, could relate to it perfectly.<sup>51</sup> Fifth, prophetic actions were usually, but not always, accompanied by an oracle or

<sup>38</sup> John W. Bowker, 'Prophetic Action and Sacramental Form', *Studia Evangelica* 3/2 (1964): 129-37; Harry Mowvley, *Guide to Old Testament Prophecy* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1979), 28-34.

<sup>39</sup> David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990), 14-22.

<sup>40</sup> John Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12; Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 268.

<sup>41</sup> Victor H. Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 135-36; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide for Understanding the Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 196.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas W. Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 87.

<sup>43</sup> Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> Vernon H. Kooy, 'Symbol, Symbolism,' *IDB* 4:472-76.

<sup>45</sup> Visions, dreams, actions, as well as words, had an objectivity of their own enabling them to actualize the divine purpose and will. The visions of the prophets were the pledge of impending divine activity. An almond rod indicated the certainty of divine action (Jer 1:11-12); a boiling pot, terror from the North (vv. 13-15); two baskets of figs, good and bad, the exiles and remnant in the land (ch. 24); a basket of summer fruit, the destruction of Israel (Amos 8:1-2); dry bones re clothed with flesh, Israel renewed by the Spirit of God (Ezek 37:1-14).

<sup>46</sup> Charles R. Biggs, *The Book of Ezekiel*, Epworth Commentaries (London: Epworth, 1996), 13.

<sup>47</sup> Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 61; Biggs, *Book of Ezekiel*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 61.

<sup>49</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 2, 96.

<sup>50</sup> Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 62.

supplied with an explanation that brought out whatever meaning may not have been obvious in the act itself. Often, the explanation is included in the instruction to perform the sign. Prophetic actions had specific and finite meanings.<sup>52</sup> Von Rad provides a sixth characteristic that the prophetic actions were 'creative prefiguration of the future which would be speedily and inevitably realized'. He continues that by means of the symbolic act, a prophet projected a detail of the future into the present, which begins the process of realisation.<sup>53</sup> That the symbolic actions were about future events is behind Weavers' assertion that the accounts of the dramatic actions 'lost some of their relevancy after the events actually took place, and details of interpretation either in the light of the events or of later history were often added. The results are sometimes bizarre.'<sup>54</sup> Another characteristic of a prophetic action is its literary form. As Aune demonstrates, the form consists of three main elements:<sup>55</sup> (1) a command of YHWH to the prophet concerning the exact nature of the symbolic action to be performed, (2) a report of the fulfilment of the command by the prophet, and (3) a full interpretation of the prophetic action, frequently accompanied by a divine promise.

These prophetic actions had a purpose. Von Rad indicates that the contemporaries of the prophets were not surprised by the actions performed by the prophets. He explains that what shocked them was the meanings which the prophets expressed by their actions.<sup>56</sup> The purpose of the prophetic actions was in accord with the prophet's main task of proclaiming YHWH's word in the most forceful way possible. For Fohrer, they were means of public announcement 'to arouse curiosity, excite attention, ... make the proclamation more expensive, cause a stir, act upon the imagination, and make the prophetic teaching more forceful'.<sup>57</sup> He adds that the prophetic acts had some causative bearing on the future by pointing to and giving assurance of the will and power of God. For his part, Lang postulates the only purpose of the prophetic act is to provide public agitation. He regards it 'as a prototype of modern politically and socially agitating street theatre'.<sup>58</sup> Weavers indicate they call special attention on the part of the audience.<sup>59</sup> Commenting on Ezekiel 6:11, Greenhill asserts that 'these outward signs of sorrow are commended that the people might be awakened out of their security, that they might be more affected with the calamities that were coming, and the sins that hastened such calamities upon them'.<sup>60</sup> He further states that 'words are transient, and leave little impression, but visible signs work more strongly, effect more deeply, and draw the spirits of beholders into a sympathy'.<sup>61</sup> Stacey opines that the actions were to arrest attention, to impress an audience, and to reveal an idea.<sup>62</sup>

In sum, the characteristics indicate that prophetic actions should be taken as a separate category of their own. They were particular actions with a particular purpose, performed by a unique person, who considered himself to have been called by God to this special service and was generally known as such. The symbolic actions illustrated and rendered the oral word more concrete and to arouse the interest of the audience. The prophet attached interpretative oracles to his symbolic actions that magnified the meaning of the displayed actions. So, by the variety of gestures and actions, the prophets were gaining attention and reinforcing their message.<sup>63</sup>

### Prophetic Actions and the Prophetic Word

The prophetic actions were not just to illustrate a prophetic word. The actions were independent means of proclaiming God's word. In Hebrew thought, word and action are connected, because the Hebrew word דָּבָר does not mean only 'word' but also 'deed'.<sup>64</sup> As Boman explains, 'the word is the highest and noblest function of Man and is, for that reason, identical with his action'.<sup>65</sup>

The symbolic actions were considered to be 'the word of YHWH' in the way as the oral discourses, for they were introduced by the 'the word of YHWH came to me'. A prophetic action was 'an intensified form of the prophetic speech'.<sup>66</sup> Carley is right to note that these gestures were part of YHWH's message just like the

<sup>52</sup> Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 62.

<sup>53</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 2, 96.

<sup>54</sup> John W. Weavers, *Ezekiel*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 14.

<sup>55</sup> David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 100.

<sup>56</sup> Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 2, 96.

<sup>57</sup> Georg Fohrer, *Die Symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten*. ATANT 54 (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1953), 91.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Lang, *Kein Aufstand in Jerusalem* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1978), 168.

<sup>59</sup> Weavers, *Ezekiel*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> William Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, GSC (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1994), 162.

<sup>61</sup> Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 162.

<sup>62</sup> Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 261.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, BST (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 94.

<sup>64</sup> David Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 397,399-400.

<sup>65</sup> Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM, 1960), 65.

<sup>66</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 2: 96.



spoken word.<sup>67</sup> As Sawyer shows, prophetic actions are presented as no more than a dramatic alternative to the spoken word.<sup>68</sup> Thus in the same way that the prophetic words were powerful (Jer 23:29) and effective (Isa 55:10-11), the prophetic actions also were considered to be powerful and effective expressions of God's will, initiating his work.<sup>69</sup>

It can be concluded that Old Testament prophecy is characterised by actions that symbolise the prophetic message. So, when Isaiah went about barefooted and unclothed, he was symbolising the manner in which the Assyrian king would take away the Egyptians and the Ethiopians as captives (Isa 20:1-6). Similarly, Jeremiah's yoke on his neck showed Israel was to submit to the suzerainty of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer27-28). William explains those unable to hear Jeremiah's words caught what he meant by his performed actions.<sup>70</sup> So, the symbolic actions were frequently accompanied by interpretative oracles.<sup>71</sup> As Eichrodt shows, the prophet's symbolic action ... strikingly expresses the wonderful nature of his God, and goes far beyond being merely a visible illustration of the message he gives with his lips. It is itself an integral part of his preaching, as the anticipatory representation and actualization of a real event, it guarantees, establishes, or serves to indicate the fact that God acts.<sup>72</sup>

## **Prophetic Actions and the Book of Ezekiel**

### ***Literary Characteristics of the Book of Ezekiel***

The literary style of the book of Ezekiel is diverse. The prophet employed a great range of imagery, some familiar from other parts of the Old Testament, some remarkably fresh and colourful. Carley intimates that those he borrowed are often dramatised or its symbolism is drawn to almost bizarre lengths.<sup>73</sup> He further asserts that the prophet 'follows the typical Near-Eastern fashion of exaggeration and seemingly crudity in his frankness'.<sup>74</sup> The prophet is a master of allegory and fine poetry, but often words and phrases are repeated over and again for the sake of emphasis, and his painstaking elucidation of legal cases may seem irritating if thought is not given to the importance of the decisions to be reached.

The book is pervaded with the supernatural. Ezekiel contends that every vision, every symbol and every oracle originated from YHWH, he was a mere intermediary. In addition, the book is marked by idealistic colouring. It is full of puzzling visions, allegories, parables and others, which were to capture the attention of the prophet's reluctant audience.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Ezekiel makes extensive use of earlier Scriptures.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, there are many repetitions and deliberate redundancy in the book. Although Ezekiel's visions are incomprehensible and mystical, his messages are simple. Another distinctive feature of the book is the ordered sequence of dated messages.<sup>77</sup> Although the dated messages are not in strict chronological order, they have a general chronological flow that makes the development of the book easy to follow. While 26:1 and 32:17 contain the day and year, the remaining begin with the year, month and day the oracle was received. Vawter and Hoppe indicate the dating system confirms the notion that the present form of the book of Ezekiel is a redaction.<sup>78</sup> However, as Cooper shows, the dating may show that the messages were written personally by the prophet in his diary.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Keith Carley, *Ezekiel among the Prophets*, SBT 31 (London: SCM, 1975), 41.

<sup>68</sup> Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 12.

<sup>69</sup> See John Eaton, *Mysterious Messengers* (London: SCM, 1997), 4.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Williams, *The Prophet and His Message* (New Jersey: P & R, 2003), 91.

<sup>71</sup> Weavers, *Ezekiel*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 82.

<sup>73</sup> Keith W. Carley, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 8.

<sup>74</sup> Carley, *Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> While some scholars attribute it to the influence of the art of Babylon, because of, for instance, many sculptured shapes in Babylon points to Ezekiel's cherubim, Keil argues that all the symbolism in the book is derived from the Israelite sanctuary and so it the logical outcome of Old Testament ideas and views.

<sup>76</sup> The book has links with the Pentateuch (see Thomas Whitelaw, 'Introduction to the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel' in *Ezekiel*, vol. 12 of *The Pulpit Commentary*, eds. Henry Donald M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985], xxv-xxvi). Ezekiel displays intimate knowledge of the eighth century prophets (see, e.g., Whitelaw, *Ezekiel*, xxv), and took many metaphors from them; for example, Ezek 3:1-3 and Jer 15:16; Ezek 5:1-4 and Isa 7:20; see Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I*, Hermeneia, trans. Ronald E. Clements (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 19-20).

<sup>77</sup> John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 36, finds fourteen dated messages, Greenburg (*Ezekiel*, 8) recognizes fifteen, while Carl H. Howie (*Ezekiel, Daniel* [London: SCM, 1961], 9) thirteen. The apparent discrepancy results in the omission of the date in 29:17 by Howie and the omission by Taylor of the date in 3:16.

<sup>78</sup> Bruce Vawter and Leslie Hoppe, *Ezekiel*, ICT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 4-5.

<sup>79</sup> Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr, *Ezekiel*, NAC, vol. 17 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 39.

### **Prophetic Actions in the Book of Ezekiel**

As indicated, the book of Ezekiel is fascinating, replete with visions, allegories, and action parables. The prophet has been labelled the 'audio-visual aids prophet'.<sup>80</sup> According to Smith, Ezekiel's 'prophecy is a gallery of word pictures interspersed with mini-stages upon which the prophet performed divinely inspired monodrama'.<sup>81</sup>

Just like the prophetic symbolic actions in general, there have been mixed feelings about the symbolic actions performed by Ezekiel. Klostermann sees the prophet's actions as a medical condition that reflects a psychiatric disorder, known as 'periodic alalia',<sup>82</sup> a disease that 'refers to a rigid or fixed posture which the patient is unwilling to modify'.<sup>83</sup> Following this physiological or psychiatric 'interpretation', Broome posits that Ezekiel suffered from Catatonic Schizophrenia characterised by catalepsy and Paranoid Schizophrenia characterized by delusions.<sup>84</sup> Gunkel sees Ezekiel's actions as nervous derangement, which have no clear meaning.<sup>85</sup> Halperin has analysed the prophet's mind from the viewpoint of psychiatry.<sup>86</sup> Troxel, citing as an example, the order to Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days, describes many prophetic actions as 'fanciful'.<sup>87</sup> However, as Garfinkel notes, these 'explanations impose psychological interpretations on the text where none is necessary or even appropriate'.<sup>88</sup> As Howie posits, 'Ezekiel was not a schizophrenic, nor is he to be classed as a psychopathic case of any kind'.<sup>89</sup> Clearly, the symbolic actions of the prophet do not reflect any mental state; rather they represent religious and social aspects.<sup>90</sup>

Bullock has enumerated the different kinds of symbolic acts performed by Ezekiel:<sup>91</sup> eating the scroll (2:8-3:3), modelling the siege of Jerusalem on a clay tile (4:1-3), lying on his left side 390 days and on his right 40 days (4:4-8), rationing his food and cooking it on cow's dung (4:9-17), shaving his head and beard and disposing of the hair in three parts (5:1-17), clapping his hands and stamping his feet (6:11-14), digging through the wall and exiting with an exile's baggage (12:3-7), eating his meals nervously (12:17-20), sighing with a breaking heart (21:6-7), smiting his thigh (21:12), clapping his hands and striking the sword three times (21:14-17), setting up road signs (21:19-23), his unnatural behaviour at the death of his wife (24:15-24), setting his face toward the objects of his oracles,<sup>92</sup> and putting two sticks together (37:15-23).

Perhaps the complex nature of these sign-acts caused Freedman to say that Ezekiel 'for the most part lives in a separate world'.<sup>93</sup> For Davis, the sign-actions should be seen as aspects of Ezekiel's self-representation.<sup>94</sup> Ellison explains that Ezekiel's use of symbolism is because 'the whole of the priestly ritual was symbolic, as indeed was the layout of the Temple'. So, as a member of the priesthood, 'symbolism had become second nature to him'.<sup>95</sup> As Eaton notes, 'Ezekiel was deeply and painfully engaged in many symbolic actions as part of his prophesying'.<sup>96</sup> In all these dramatic actions Ezekiel gave himself to powerful expressions of YHWH's word. Ezekiel believed that YHWH was at work in the signs, shaping events and declaring their meaning.<sup>97</sup> So, as Childs shows, the use of symbolic action does not suggest that Ezekiel's message is not a real idealization of history; rather, Ezekiel portrayed a divine message in a way that addressed both the future and the present generation with God's unchanging will.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>80</sup> James E. Smith, *An Exegetical Commentary on Ezekiel*, rev. ed. (College Press, 2004), <http://icotb.org>.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Exegetical Commentary on Ezekiel*, 2.

<sup>82</sup> See Stephen Garfinkel, 'Another Model for Ezekiel's Abnormalities', *JANES* 19 (1989): 41.

For Klostermann's approach to the Ezekiel's condition, see his book 'Ezekiel'.

<sup>83</sup> Theodore Millon, *Modern Psychopathology* (Philadelphia: Saunders Books in Psychology, 1969), 80.

<sup>84</sup> Edwin C. Broome, 'Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality,' *JBL* 65 (1946): 277.

<sup>85</sup> Hermann Gunkel, 'The Israelite Prophecy from the Time of Amos,' in *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 1: 52-53.

<sup>86</sup> David J. Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

<sup>87</sup> Ronald L. Troxel, *Prophetic Literature: From Oracles to Books* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 231-32.

<sup>88</sup> Garfinkel, 'Another Model for Ezekiel's Abnormalities', 41.

<sup>89</sup> Carl G. Howie, *The Date and Composition of Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1950), 101.

<sup>90</sup> Rimon Kasher, *Ezekiel, Miqra' leYisrael*, vol 1 (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001), 910.

<sup>91</sup> C. Hassell Bullock, *Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 415, n. 14.

<sup>92</sup> For instance, the sketch of Jerusalem (4:4, 7), the mountains of Israel (6:2), the daughters of Israel (13:17), the Negev of Israel (20:46), Jerusalem (21:2), the Ammonites (25:2), Sidon (28:21), Pharaoh (29:2), Mount Seir (35:2), and Gog (38:2).

<sup>93</sup> David N. Freedman, 'The Book of Ezekiel,' *Interpretation* 8 (1954): 453.

<sup>94</sup> Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 67.

<sup>95</sup> Henry Leopold Ellison, *Men Spoke from God: Studies in the Hebrew Prophets* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), 100.

<sup>96</sup> Eaton, *Mysterious Messengers*, 119.

<sup>97</sup> Eaton, *Mysterious Messengers*, 119.

<sup>98</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 363.

## EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF TEXTS ON CLAPPING THE HANDS IN EZEKIEL

### Some Meanings Associated with Striking of Hands in Old Testament Texts

The Hebrew words תָּקַע, ('drive'/'thrust'/'clap one's hands'/'blow' [the trumpet]),<sup>99</sup> מָחָא, סָפַק and נָכַח denote 'clap'.<sup>100</sup> In the AV the words are translated 'smite' and in the NEB 'beat'. תָּקַע is used to connote 'drive, thrust, clap one's hands, blow (the trumpet)'.<sup>101</sup> It is important to note that the ANE origin of תָּקַע seems to be onomatopoeic, i.e., it has been formed in imitation of the sound it describes. As Klingbeil shows, in the cognate languages it refers to the blowing of a trumpet, but asserts that, in the Old Testament, mainly in poetic literature, it is used to denote the sound of clapping hands.<sup>102</sup>

The term 'clap' in the Old Testament is used to express various emotions and so has a number of different intentions. First, it is used to express joy, as a sign of acclamation of the king: 'They clapped their hands [נָכַח], and said, "Long live the king"' (2 Kgs 11:12); or God: 'Clap your hands [תָּקַע], all peoples' (Ps 47:1; 98:8; Isa 55:12). Second, the same action in a different context connotes a derisive implication; thus to express exultation, showing or feeling triumphant elation as in Lam 2:15 [סָפַק] - as a sign of contempt, Jeremiah presents Jerusalem as so desolate that all those passing by clap their hands at her; Nah 3:19 [תָּקַע] - people will rejoice over cruel Assyria's fall. Thirdly, striking of hands signifies the legal action of pledging oneself to another party, as Job 17:3 exemplifies (cf. 2 Kgs 10:15; Prov 6:1 and 17:18).<sup>103</sup> As Klingbeil shows, the plural participle תִּקְעוּם (striking of hands) is found only in Prov 11:15 where it also denotes the legal act of pledging oneself to another person through the striking of hands, though in a negative context.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, it is used to express repudiation as in Job 27:23; 34:37 [סָפַק]. Furthermore, it is used figuratively to denote nature's 'sympathy' with God's people: 'Let the floods clap [מָחָא] their hands' (Psa 98:8); 'All the trees of the field shall clap their hands' (Isa 55:12).<sup>105</sup> Finally, it is used as a sign of anger and judgment. For instance, when Balaam blessed Israel instead of cursing them, Balak struck his hands [סָפַק] together in anger (Num 24:10).

### Exegesis of Some Texts

As indicated in the introduction, the practice of clapping hands in prayer in Ghana is based on Ezekiel's actions. It is therefore necessary to look at such texts to find out if they have used the texts correctly or falsely.

#### *Ezekiel 6:11*

Thus says the Lord GOD: Clap your hands, and stamp your foot, and say, Alas! because of all the evil abominations of the house of Israel; for they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.

According to 6:1-10, Israel had sinned against YHWH by serving idols. YHWH then threatened to destroy them, though he would spare some. YHWH will destroy his people to show that he is the LORD. He then commanded Ezekiel his prophet to 'strike his hands together and stamp his feet and cry out "Alas!"'

The messenger formula, *Thus said Lord YHWH*, introduces a new oracle (vv. 11-14). Since this formula is normally followed by a message to be conveyed verbatim, but in this case, it is followed by instructions or gestures, Greenberg sees it as 'surprising'.<sup>106</sup> He explains instructions are mostly introduced by the regular revelatory formula as in v. 1. Therefore, the irregular in v. 11 may be attributed to what he terms 'editorial makeshift'.<sup>107</sup>

Clap your hands, literally, 'strike with your hand' is a variation of 'strike hand on hand'.<sup>108</sup> Some interpret it to mean glee and scornful delight.<sup>109</sup> However, as Block shows, this interpretation is dubious for two

<sup>99</sup> Martin G. Klingbeil, '[qt,' *NIDOTTE* 4:329-331.

<sup>100</sup> William S. Caldecott, 'Clap,' *ISBE* 1:716.

<sup>101</sup> Klingbeil, *NIDOTTE* 4:329.

<sup>102</sup> Klingbeil, *NIDOTTE* 4:329.

<sup>103</sup> In 2 Kgs 10:15, to 'strike hands' is the equivalent of shaking hands with someone as a token of agreement or commitment to a decision or a course of action. In Prov 6:1 and 17:18, the author cautions the reader against becoming liable for someone else's debts or obligations to a third party as in the case of co-signing for a loan, or by agreeing to pay another person's debts if the person himself defaults.

<sup>104</sup> Klingbeil, *NIDOTTE* 4:330.

<sup>105</sup> Caldecott, *ISBE* 1:716.

<sup>106</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, AB 22 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 135.

<sup>107</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 135.

<sup>108</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 234.

<sup>109</sup> See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 135; Ralph W. Klein, *Ezekiel: The Prophet and His Message* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 10 and Taylor, *Ezekiel*, 91.

reasons.<sup>110</sup> First, when Ezekiel uses the verb *קָפַץ* of clapping the hands in 21:14, 17 and 22:13, the emotion expressed is anger.<sup>111</sup> Second, the expression of anger is indicated at the end of 6:12 with reference to YHWH venting his wrath against the people. Thus Ezekiel was not exulting but lamenting.<sup>112</sup> The gestures were a physical expression of YHWH's inexorable anger upon the house of Israel.<sup>113</sup>

The gesture of stamping the feet is not well attested in the Old Testament. Here, however, it reinforces the emotion displayed in the clapping of hands.<sup>114</sup> As Plumptre shows, the two 'gestures were to give a dramatic emphasis to the mingled indignation and sorrow with which the prophet was to utter his woe'.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to these gestures, the prophet is commanded to utter the interjection *אֵי* (Ah!). This shorter form of the onomatopoeic paralinguistic utterance, which occurs also in 21:15, is frequently considered a variant of *אֵיִי*, which appears in 25:3, 26:2 and 36:2. The contexts of each, however, clearly show the differences the prophet intends. The shorter form is used to express the emotion of indignation, while the longer form is used to express YHWH's derision and joy.<sup>116</sup> In 6:11, therefore, the expression should be understood to mean anger,<sup>117</sup> lamentation in the light of its cause, the accusation and the coming punishment of the people.<sup>118</sup> So, as Carley posits, 'the word *bemoan* in the NEB is perhaps more aptly rendered by the cry "Woe (to you! because of) your vile abominations."<sup>119</sup>

After the performance, Ezekiel verbally proclaims the eminent disaster by reintroducing three divine agents of judgment: plague, sword and famine. These identify the targets of YHWH's anger: the scattered population, those outside the city, and those within the city. The end result, which is YHWH's intention, is that the exiles will acknowledge him.<sup>120</sup>

Ezekiel 6:11-14 can be described as 'words reinforced with deed'. Thus the actions here express confirmation of the divine oracle, like the arm-baring of 4:7.<sup>121</sup> So 'from the context, when Ezekiel struck his hands together, it symbolized the marching of soldiers and the clashing of the swords of God's wrath was "spent" or "accomplished" against his disobedient people'.<sup>122</sup>

For Matthew Henry,

the prophet must by his gestures in preaching express the deep sense he had both of the iniquities and of the calamities of the house of Israel. Thus he must make it appear that he was in earnest in what he said to them, that he firmly believed it and laid it to heart. Thus he must signify the just displeasure he had conceived at their sins and the just dread he was under of the judgments coming upon them.<sup>123</sup>

The instructions are intended both to point up and to send a premonition of threat and defiance.<sup>124</sup>

### ***Ezekiel 21:14, 17; 22:13***

<sup>14</sup> "Prophesy therefore, son of man; clap your hands and let the sword come down twice, yea thrice, the sword for those to be slain; it is the sword for the great slaughter, which encompasses them,...

<sup>17</sup> "I also will clap my hands, and I will satisfy my fury; I the Lord have spoken."

<sup>110</sup> Block, *Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, 234-35.

<sup>111</sup> George A. Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 184.

<sup>112</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 1503.

<sup>113</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 184.

<sup>114</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, vol. 28, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1994), 89.

<sup>115</sup> Edward H. Plumptre, "Exposition" in *Ezekiel*, vol. 12 of *The Pulpit Commentary*, eds. Henry Donald M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 103.

<sup>116</sup> See Block, *Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, 235; Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 162.

<sup>117</sup> Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 9, trans. James Martin and Matthew G. Easton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 57, see it to mean "an exclamation of lamentation"; Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 162, sees it as a word constantly used to note grief. He explains, 'in cases of great sorrow, they used this word'.

<sup>118</sup> Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 89.

<sup>119</sup> Carley, *Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 43.

<sup>120</sup> Block, *Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, 235.

<sup>121</sup> Frederick F. Bruce, ed., *The International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 816.

<sup>122</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary* (Colorado Spring, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 1285.

<sup>123</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 1350.

<sup>124</sup> Vawter and Hoppe, *Ezekiel*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> “Behold, therefore, I strike my hands together at the dishonest gain which you have made, and at the blood which has been in the midst of you.

Chapter 21:14-17 has the ‘sword song’ (21:8-17) as its context. The sword is characterized by two divine passives, ‘sharpened’ and ‘polished’ (21:9-10a). As its function, it is sharpened for slaughter and polished to flash like lightning. The target of the sword is not only the land of Israel but also the population of Israel. In 21:12, the prophet was asked to ‘cry out and wail’ and to ‘beat your breast’. In 21:14-17, the prophecy enters a new stage, indicated by a new command to prophesy. There are three parts to this stage. First, the prophet is commanded to perform a symbolic action: clap your hands (v. 14a); second, YHWH calls for the sword to perform its deadly work (vv. 14b-16), and third, YHWH claps his hand (v. 17).

In 21:14, YHWH commands his prophet to ‘prophesy and strike his hands together’, when YHWH was against Israel and decided to use Babylon as his sword of judgment. In this verse, as Wiersbe notes, the prophet combined both speech and action; thus, prophesy and clapping, stamping his foot.<sup>125</sup> The clapping of the hand by the prophet in v. 14 has been variously interpreted including an expression of enthusiasm accompanying the sword song and as a magical act designed to enhance the effectiveness of the sword.<sup>126</sup> However, first, taking into account v. 17, the action should be better interpreted to mean an expression of anger as already indicated in 6:11. Second, the prophet was in a mourning frame and so could not refer to joy. Third, when the sword is coming (v. 10), is it a time for joy or sorrow? Thus Ezekiel by the gesture depicted the anger with which YHWH would smite his people.<sup>127</sup>

In v. 17, YHWH claps his hands in scorn and harmony with his command to Ezekiel. Thus as the punisher of evil, YHWH must satisfy his furious wrath, which he showed by repeating Ezekiel’s gestures in order to give them validity and to ensure that they take effect.<sup>128</sup> The gesture inspires the deadly work of the sword and gloats over the shameful end of YHWH’s heartless people.<sup>129</sup> So, with the clapping of his own hands, YHWH ‘arouses the fury of the sword to the uttermost, declaring his triumphant victory and finally exhausting his anger’.<sup>130</sup>

Chapter 22:13, appears within the context of the ‘woe to the bloody city’ (22:1-31). Here there are three separate oracles: the indictment of Jerusalem (vv. 1-16), the judgment of Jerusalem (vv. 17-22) and the rationale for the judgment on the land (vv. 23-31). The immediate context of v. 13 is the announcement of the sentence (vv. 13-16). The announcement of judgment opens abruptly with the call for attention, הִנֵּה (Look!). After this, the sentence is divided into two parts, which are separated by divine self-introduction formula (v. 14c). The emphasis is on YHWH’s personal involvement in the execution of the sentence. Verse 13 opens the first part with YHWH’s declaration that he has clapped his hands because of the crimes committed in the city. So, here too, YHWH’s gesture is an expression of anger; a sign of ‘extreme displeasure’.<sup>131</sup> Thus the atrociousness of their sins irritated YHWH that he smites his hands together to show his anger against them and his readiness to take vengeance on them.<sup>132</sup> In sum, when God saw the wickedness of Israel, he expressed his anger and judgment by striking his hands together.

### **Ezekiel 25:3, 6**

<sup>3</sup>Say to the Ammonites, Hear the word of the Lord God: Thus says the Lord God, Because you said, ‘Aha!’ over my sanctuary when it was profaned, and over the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and over the house of Judah when it went into exile;

<sup>6</sup>For thus says the Lord God: Because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet and rejoiced with all the malice within you against the land of Israel,

<sup>125</sup> Wiersbe, *Wiersbe Bible Commentary*, 1285.

<sup>126</sup> For a summary of various interpretations, see Kelvin Friebel, ‘Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s Sign-Acts: Their Meaning and Function as Nonverbal Communication and Rhetoric.’ PhD, diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1989, 712-16.

<sup>127</sup> Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1537; Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 169, see the gesture as an expression of ‘violent emotion’.

<sup>128</sup> Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 296. Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 526, suggests the clapping of hands of YHWH here as in 25:6 is an expression of joy. He explains it does not only refer to God’s approbation of the Babylonians’ undertakings, but also his encouragement of them to that work, that he might execute his vengeance upon them, and be at rest.

<sup>129</sup> Vawter and Hoppe, *Ezekiel*, 106.

<sup>130</sup> Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 434.

<sup>131</sup> Weaver, *Ezekiel*, 130.

<sup>132</sup> Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 542.

Ezekiel 25:1-17 provides oracles against Israel's close neighbours. Verses 1-7 record two oracles against Israel's Transjordanian neighbour. Two mini-speeches (vv. 3-5 and vv. 6-7) state the accusation and verdict against Ammon; each shows that Ammon was indicted of expressing pleasure over the adversity of Judah, her enemy and rival.<sup>133</sup> First, Ammon's attitude is shown by the interjection אָהָי<sup>134</sup> in v. 3. The interjection accentuates Ammon's mockery of Jerusalem. The expression 'aha!' in this context was exultation over Jerusalem,<sup>135</sup> a cry of malicious glee,<sup>136</sup> an expression of jubilation.<sup>137</sup> Thus with the paralinguistic exclamation 'aha!', Ammon verbally expressed malicious delight over the sacrilege of the sanctuary of YHWH, the devastation of Israel's land and the expulsion of the people of Judah. As Block notes, 'these three actions strike at the heart of Judean national self-consciousness, disrupting the deity-land-people relationship'.<sup>138</sup>

In addition to this verbal expression, the people of Ammon put up two nonverbal gestures: clapped their hands and stamped their feet (v. 6). Here, the term is expressed with מִתְרַחֵם. So, unlike 6:11 and 21:14, 17, where these same gestures expressed anger, here the actions express deep contempt and hateful delight, an interpretation confirmed by the presence of מִתְרַחֵם (lit. 'your contempt'), which is exclusive to Ezekiel<sup>139</sup> and by YHWH's remark: 'because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet'. This meaning of the gestures here is in accord with the suggestion that the stamping with the foot here means 'dancing for joy'.<sup>140</sup> Thus rejoicing in heart the Ammonites gave outward evidence by these gestures.<sup>141</sup> So, these gestures were a symbol of rejoicing over Israel's calamities,<sup>142</sup> a gleeful response or malicious delight or joy<sup>143</sup> over Israel's misfortune: the temple's defilement, the desolation of the land of Judah, and the captivity of the people of Judah by Babylon.

In summary, in Ezekiel 25:6, the term מִתְרַחֵם is used as a sign of triumph, the Ammonites rejoiced over fallen Israel. Verse 7 provides the fate of the Ammonites for their attitude. In four identical 'I wills', YHWH pronounced that the national existence of Ammon will come to an end.

## SUMMARY

The discussion of the cases of striking the hands in the book of Ezekiel clearly shows it does not warrant clapping in prayer. It reveals an exegetical and application problem on some grounds. First, there is a lack of proper interpretation of the texts. As the principles of interpretation have shown, the original intention of Ezekiel striking his hands never meant a release of some sort of power to destroy his enemies. Also, the discussion has shown that 'worldview confusion' is one exegetical problem of some Ghanaian Christians. They think that the appropriate framework for interpreting the biblical text is their own experience and interpretation of reality. They do not recognise the 'distance' that separates the contemporary reader from the text of Ezekiel. As a result, they have overlooked differences in outlook, vocabulary and interest. When there is a probe beyond the superficial level, deep differences are seen between what the clapping of hands meant to the users in Ezekiel and what it means to the contemporary Ghanaian Christian. Not to confuse one's own worldview with the biblical writers' worldview, there is a need to recognise one's own assumptions, questions, interest and biases, and negotiate with the text and try to find allowances for them.

Second, there is a wrong connection between application and context. As established, 'application is the logical and necessary step after interpretation', therefore, 'proper application must be based on proper interpretation'.<sup>144</sup> To make a proper application, the context that an interpretation is applied to in the contemporary situation must be comparable to the context of the original passage being interpreted. Thus, the interpreter must connect with a passage in a way that is consistent with its context and meaning. Therefore, to

<sup>133</sup> From early days the Ammonites had been hostile to Israel (Judg 11:4-33; 1 Sam 11:1-11; 14:47, 2 Sam 8:12; 10:1-19; Amos 1:13-15; Zeph 2:8-10). During the Babylonian invasions the Ammonites joined forces with Nebuchadnezzar against Judah (2 Kgs 24:2), and later on allied with Edom, Moab, Tyre and Sidon in order to persuade Zedekiah to revolt (Jer 27:1-5). After the fall of Jerusalem, the Ammonites seized the territory of Judah (Jer 49:2) and took the Babylonian side again (Jer 40:14; 41:10-15).

<sup>134</sup> Ralph H. Alexander, 'Ezekiel', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 865.

<sup>135</sup> Robert Jamieson, Andrew A. Fausset and David Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 298.

<sup>136</sup> Carley, *Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 171.

<sup>137</sup> Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 356.

<sup>138</sup> Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 17.

<sup>139</sup> Block, *Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48*, 18; see also Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 89.

<sup>140</sup> Jamieson, et al, *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, 298; Greenhill, *Ezekiel*, 588.

<sup>141</sup> Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2:1546; Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Trust, 1990), 740.

<sup>142</sup> George A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 283.

<sup>143</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 207; Cooke, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, 282.

<sup>144</sup> Michael Kyomya, *A Guide to Interpreting Scripture* (Bukuru, Nigeria: HippoBooks, 2010), 69.

apply Ezekiel's symbolic actions of clapping and stamping of feet as done in the contemporary Ghanaian church is against the hermeneutical rule of application and context. The error of such an interpretation is over-spiritualisation. It is unfortunate that Ghanaian Christians have detached Ezekiel's actions 'from their scriptural contexts and so reflect little or no connection with the purpose that they originally held in their canonical settings'.<sup>145</sup>

Third, there is a problem of not distinguishing between what the Bible describes and what it prescribes. When the Bible describes Ezekiel clapping his hands and stamping his feet by the command of YHWH, it does not imply that the contemporary reader should do likewise. Other than that, the reader should be doing other actions Ezekiel was commanded to do. For instance, he was commanded to sleep on one of his sides for days, commanded to wail, and commanded to swirl a sword. In other words, Christians should not turn the descriptive (what happened) into the prescriptive (what must happen) without considering other passages on a subject.

Fourth, there is evidence of a lack of knowledge of the interpretation of symbols. Biblical symbolism is a special type of metaphor, which is part of the multiple senses of the semantic stretch. With the larger context in mind, the interpreter is to determine which figurative sense the symbol under investigation has in the bigger context. This shows that contemporary situations cannot give the true meaning of a symbol but rather the meaning is in the use of that symbol in its ancient setting.

## CONCLUSION

This study has discussed the concept of 'strike your hands' in the book of Ezekiel and the contemporary Ghanaian Christian practice of clapping in prayer. This exegesis revealed that the practice is an interpretation and application error. It further argues that the improper interpretation of biblical texts, especially symbolic actions, and illegitimate application of the text are the cause of the practice of clapping and praying among some contemporary Ghanaian Christians. The Church must therefore take the task of interpretation seriously in order to avoid misinterpretation and misapplication of biblical text as has been the cause in this instance.

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<sup>145</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr, 'As the Deer Pants for Streams of Water', in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 163.

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#### **ABOUT AUTHOR**

Prof. Yaw Adu-Gyamfi (PhD - Sheffield, UK) is an Associate Professor, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Head of the Department of Theology at the Christian Service University College, Kumasi Ghana. He is also a Research Fellow at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa.