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An Enquiry into Origins

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Abstract

The imposition of the Gospel book in episcopal ordination, first found in *Apostolic constitutions*, and subsequently widespread, has never satisfactorily been explained. This article explores the possibility that the *Vita Herakleidis*, a neglected liturgical source, might cast some light on the ritual. Given previous suggestions that the ritual seating of the bishop and the imposition of a hand may be means of ordination with distinct points of origin, the suggestion is made that the imposition of the Gospels was likewise a rite of distinct origin intended, like the imposition of a hand, to indicate appointment. This implies that the imposition of a hand was not the universal and fundamental gesture in episcopal ordinations.

Keywords

Episcopal ordination | Imposition of the Gospel Book | Imposition of Hands | Enthronement | Apostolic Constitutions | Traditio Apostolica | Antiochene Liturgy

Episcopal Ordination by Imposition of Gospel Book

An Enquiry into Origins

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1 *The Ordination Rites of Apostolic constitutions 8*

Constitutiones apostolorum 8,4–5 legislates for the ordination of a bishop. Much of this is taken from *Traditio apostolica*, and part of it moreover is supplied by the apparatus of pseudonymy, but there is also material which may reflect Antiochene practice. After a statement that the bishop is elected by all the people (derived from *Traditio apostolica*), and a statement of the gathering of the people and presbytery (with bishops who are said to be present, perhaps a further intrusion from *Traditio apostolica*) somebody who is said to be pre-eminent (ὁ πρόκριτος τῶν λοιπῶν) asks of the presbytery and the people whether this is the person they desire as their bishop. This is then repeated a further two times.¹

This repeated election might indicate that such an election was known in the Antiochene church, though is not clear who the electors might be. One of the agenda of *Constitutiones apostolorum* is to oppose imperial interference in the affairs of the church,² and Antiochene bishops

¹ Cf. Const. ap. 8,4,2–5 (SChr 336, 140–142; METZGER).

² This generally agreed position is given particular clarity by Joseph G. MUELLER, *L'Ancien Testament dans l'ecclésiologie des pères. Une lecture des Constitutions apostoliques* (IPM 41), Turnhout 2004, 117–126.

had been appointed and removed several times by emperors in the course of the fourth century, and so the election may be a literary production in pursuit of this agendum. The statement that he is to be ordained if for the third time he is found worthy (ἐκ τρίτου ἄξιον εἶναι)³ may, however, echo real practice, given that the acclamation ἄξιος is found in ordination rites elsewhere.⁴

The redactor goes on:

Καὶ σιωπῆς γενομένης εἷς τῶν πρώτων ἐπισκόπων ἅμα καὶ δυσὶν ἑτέροις πλησίον τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ἐστῶς, τῶν λοιπῶν ἐπισκόπων καὶ πρεσβυτέρων σιωπῇ προσευχομένων, τῶν δὲ διακόνων τὰ θεῖα Εὐαγγέλια ἐπὶ τῆς τοῦ χειροτονομένου κεφαλῆς ἀνεπτυγμένα κατεχόντων, λεγέτω πρὸς θεόν.⁵

This is followed by an ordination prayer derived from *Traditio apostolica*. The president of this rite is thus said to be “one of the leading bishops”, though the inclusion of this figure is probably the result of importing bishops from *Traditio apostolica*. We cannot be sure who, otherwise, would have taken charge. The insistence on silent prayer is also derived from *Traditio apostolica*, but the rite of deacons holding the Gospels over the head of the candidate is distinct.

The rite continues:

Καὶ μετὰ τὴν προσευχὴν εἷς τῶν ἐπισκόπων ἀναφερέτω τὴν θυσίαν ἐπὶ τῶν χειρῶν τοῦ χειροτονηθέντος. Καὶ τῇ ἑωθεν ἐνθρονιζέσθω εἰς τὸν αὐτῷ διαφέροντα τόπον παρὰ τῶν λοιπῶν ἐπισκόπων, πάντων αὐτὸν φιλησάντων τῷ ἐν Κυρίῳ φιλήματι.⁶

³ Const. ap. 8,4,5 (SChr 336, 142; METZGER).

⁴ So Paul F. BRADSHAW, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West*, New York 1990, 23 f.

⁵ Const. ap. 8,4,6 (SChr 336, 142; METZGER): “And when there is silence, one of the leading bishops, along with two others, standing near to the altar, while the rest of the bishops and presbyters pray silently, while the deacons hold the divine Gospels open upon the head of the one being ordained, should say to God”.

⁶ Const. ap. 8,4,9–10 (SChr 336, 148; METZGER): “And after the prayer one of the bishops should lift up the sacrifice on the hands of the one ordained, and early in the morning he should be seated in a place set apart for him

The ordination by the Gospel book and the role of the deacons holding the book in this rite are sufficiently unusual to raise questions. Notably, moreover, there is no imposition of hands, although there have been attempts to sneak one in.⁷ In particular we may enquire into the origin of this rite, and why it should be the deacons who hold the book.

2 *Other Occurrences of Ordination by Gospel Book and Attempts at Explanation*

This action is not only found in *Constitutiones apostolorum*; it is also found in the *Vita Herakleidis*, to be discussed in detail below, in the Coptic version of the *Canones Basilii*,⁸ and in the *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua*,⁹ though this occurrence is probably directly derived from *Constitutiones apostolorum*. There are, moreover, references to the rite in the work of Palladius,¹⁰ of Ps.-Dionysius,¹¹ of (Ps.-?)Chrysostom,¹² and of Severian of Gabala.¹³ It

among the rest of the bishops, while they all kiss him with the kiss of the Lord.”

⁷ Cf. Octavian BÂRLEA, *Die Weihe der Bischöfe, Presbyter und Diakone in vor-nicänischer Zeit* (APT 3), Munich 1969, 179, suggesting that the consecrator might extend his hands over the Gospel book. BRADSHAW, *Ordination rites*, 71, states: “It is possible that [...] the absence of any explicit reference to the imposition of the hand really does mean that the gesture was not used.”

⁸ Cf. Can. Bas. 46 (s. n. 16). See Alberto CAMPLANI – Federico CONTARDI, *Remarks on the Textual Contribution of the Coptic Codices Preserving the Canons of Saint Basil with Edition of the Ordination Rite for the Bishop (Canon 46)*, in: *Philologie, herméneutique et histoire des textes entre Orient et Occident. Mélanges en hommage à Sever J. Voicu*, ed. by Francesca P. BARONE et al. (IPM 73), Turnhout 2017, 139–159.

⁹ Cf. Stat. eccl. ant. 90 (BIDC 5, 95; MUNIER).

¹⁰ Cf. PALLADIUS, *Dialogus historicus* 16 (PG 47, 53) refers to placing the Gospel on a polluted head.

¹¹ Cf. Ps.-DIONYSIUS, *Eccl. hier.* 5,7,1; 5,7,3 (PTS 67, 110 f.; HEIL – RITTER).

¹² Cf. (Ps.-?)CHRYSOSTOM, *De legislatore* 410 (PG 56, 404) states that in the *χειροτονίαις τῶν ἱερέων* the Gospels are placed on the head of the candidate. The homily has also been attributed to Severian of Gabala.

¹³ A discussion observed by Joseph LÉCUYER, *Note sur la liturgie du sacre des évêques*, in: *EL* 66 (1952) 369–372. It is found in various catenae, most

is now widespread in eastern rites. On the basis of provenance of the early evidence we may suggest that this rite reflects an originally Antiochene practice.¹⁴

In most of these instances there is not the evidence to state whether or not it was accompanied by an imposition of a hand or hands. Ps.-Dionysius suggests that an imposition of a hand accompanied the ordination with the *λογία*,¹⁵ though the order in which these rituals take place is not made clear. However, in the *Canones Basilii* the ordination prayer is said while the “Gospel is lifted above him” (εἰσναταλο πεγαγγελιον εἰσωq) but, in distinction from *Constitutiones apostolorum*, this is followed by an imposition of a hand: εἰσωανοqω δε ἡναῖ μαρε πινος ἡεπισκοπος κα εἰσ εἰσωq ἡωροπῖ· αἰω ερεπκε σεεπε ἡεπισκοπος κα εἰσ εἰσωq.¹⁶ Camplani and Contardi quote Bradshaw on this matter: “In every Eastern rite, however, it is the presiding bishop alone who lays his hand on the ordinand, and only in a few cases are there signs of obviously secondary attempts to associate others with him in this action”, and go on to say “Basil’s Canon 46 may be connected to those secondary attempts”¹⁷. However, in the light of the absence of any imposition of a hand in *Constitutiones apostolorum* we may suggest that the secondary element is not simply the association of other bishops with the imposition of hands, but the entire rite of handlaying, without which the pattern of the *Canones Basilii* otherwise follows the pattern of the *Constitutiones apostolorum*. The same phenomenon of combination is met in *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua*, in which, as

easily accessed in the citation by THEOPHYLACT, *Expositio in Acta apostolorum* 2 (PG 125, 533). Severian compares this imposition to the tongues of fire experienced by the disciples at Pentecost. Both this text and that of *De legislatore* are given in French, with a brief discussion, in Joseph LÉCUYER, *Le sacrement de l’ordination. Recherche historique et théologique* (Théologie historique 65), Paris 1983, 99–101.

¹⁴ So also Paul F. BRADSHAW, *Rites of Ordination. Their History and Theology*, London 2014, 71.

¹⁵ Cf. Ps.-DIONYSIOS, *Eccl. hier.* 5,7,1 (PTS 67, 111; HEIL – RITTER).

¹⁶ Can. Bas. 46 (IPM 73, 153 f.; CAMPLANI – CONTARDI): “When these words have been finished, let the archbishop put his hand on him as first, while the remaining bishops put their hand on him.” (ibid., 155).

¹⁷ CAMPLANI – CONTARDI, *Remarks*, 150, citing BRADSHAW, *Rites*, 92.

in *Constitutiones apostolorum*, the prayer (described as a *benedictio*) is said as the Gospel book is imposed (by two bishops) and in which a rubric states that other bishops present should lay their hands upon the ordinand's head.¹⁸

As Bradshaw remarks, the various interpretations which are given to the rite of imposing the Gospel book provide a clear indication that its original purpose had been forgotten.¹⁹ Remarkably, however, there has been little attempt to explore its origin.

We may probably discount Botte's suggestion that the gesture indicates that "the power of the Gospel should fill the elect"²⁰. This suggestion is made as one to be preferred to the indication within the Byzantine rite that the "yoke of the Gospels" is being imposed,²¹ since it is placed on the head rather than the shoulders. However, whereas it is a better explanation than that which might be derived from the Byzantine rite it seems simply to be a secondary justification of the action derived from the reflection of Severian of Gabala,²² just as the explanation found within the ritual is likewise far removed from the origins of the rite.

A further suggestion is that of Ratcliff, who suggested that this was a relic of some form of bibliomancy, mirroring the appointment "by lot" of Matthias in Acts 2 (Ratcliff notes that Matthias receives no imposition of hands): "Did the Gospels figure in an act of 'Evangeliomancy'? If they did, an explanation of the open Gospel book readily suggests itself. The book

¹⁸ Cf. Stat. eccl. ant. 90: "Episcopus cum ordinatur, duo episcopi ponant et teneant evangeliorum codicem super cervicem eius, et uno super eum fundente benedictionem, reliqui omnes episcopi, qui adsunt, manibus suis caput eius tangant." (BIDC 5, 95; MUNIER).

¹⁹ Cf. BRADSHAW, Rites, 71.

²⁰ Bernard BOTTE, Holy Orders in the Ordination Prayers, in: The Sacrament of Holy orders. Some Papers and Discussions concerning Holy Orders at a Session of the Centre de Pastorale Liturgique, 1955, Collegrave 1962, 5–29, here: 14, and the discussion at 24 f.

²¹ Such is implied in the ordination prayer found in Jacobus GOAR, *Εὐχολόγιον* sive *Rituale Graecorum*, Venice 1730 [reprint: Graz 1960], 244 and in contemporary use which refers to the candidate being made worthy of the *εὐαγγελικὸν ζυγόν*; the phrase is not found in the older version of the ordination prayer in *Barb. gr.* 336.

²² See n. 13.

would be open at the passage which had indicated the Lord's choice of the bishop."²³ In response Bradshaw follows Bârlea in noting that the ritual is tied up to prayer and not to the election.²⁴ Bârlea also notes that some three centuries separate the appointment of Matthias and the directions of *Constitutiones apostolorum*, and further that there is no mention of any book, let alone a book of Gospels, in the account of Acts.²⁵

Finally Bradshaw suggests that the rite of the Gospel book is meant to replace the anticipated laying on of a hand;²⁶ his hypothesis is based on the further hypothesis that as visiting bishops came to ordain the new bishop, rather than the presbyters of the community, so the imposition of the Gospel book came about as a solution to the argument as to who might lay on hands in the ordination, that is to say the visiting bishops, among whom there might also be a struggle for precedence, or the presbyters. He further suggests that the role of deacons in holding the book is also a solution to arguments over an order of precedence.²⁷ He then goes on to suggest that when the imposition of hands is found in addition to the imposition of the Gospels, as it is in *Canones Basilii*, *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua*, and the ritual described by Dionysius, then this has secondarily been added to conform the rite to wider ordination practice, which included the same imposition of hands which had previously been replaced with the imposition of the Gospel. This entire argument, however, assumes firstly that Syrian episcopal ordination rites had originally included an imposition of hands, and secondly that presbyters had undertaken such an imposition. Each of these can be no more than an assumption, derived from practice elsewhere.

It is possible that a document relatively recently brought to the attention of liturgical historians may cast some light on the origin of this ritual.

²³ Edward C. RATCLIFF, "Apostolic Tradition". Questions concerning the Appointment of a Bishop in: ID., *Liturgical Studies*, ed. by Arthur H. COURATIN – David H. TRIPP, London 1976, 156–160, here: 158.

²⁴ Cf. BRADSHAW, *Rites*, 71; BÂRLEA, *Weihe*, 179, n. 89.

²⁵ Cf. BÂRLEA, *Weihe*, 179, n. 89.

²⁶ Cf. BRADSHAW, *Rites*, 71 f.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 43.

3 *Ordination in Vita Herakleidis*

The *Vita Herakleidis*, a hagiographical text from Cyprus, gives a full account of an episcopal ordination as, shortly before his death, Herakleides, the subject of the hagiography, ordains Mnason, his successor.²⁸ Although this text is probably from the sixth century, or perhaps later, which in turn might lead to the objection that a document of such a late date is shaky evidence for any attempt to discuss a fourth-century ritual, I have already suggested that there is much that is primitive about the liturgies contained in this vita, and that the isolation of Cypriot church life has led to a fossilization of aspects of the liturgy such that it may reflect Antiochene liturgy of a much earlier period.²⁹ As an example of such fossilization, which I failed previously to note, we may observe that in *Vita Herakleidis* 14 Herakleides ordains two deacons (one male, one female) after the reading and address, and that this is followed by the dismissal of the catechumens; this reflects the practice of *Constitutiones apostolorum* 8,6, in which the catechumens are dismissed after the ordination. Ordinations thus take place in the presence of catechumens, whereas the Council of Laodicea later in the fourth century explicitly declares that ordinations should not take place in the presence of catechumens.³⁰ This vita may thus provide a window into the liturgy of Antioch described by the eighth book of *Constitutiones apostolorum*, but without any infection of “Hippolytean” material. This might best be tested by examining the evidence of the text.

The account begins thus:

τῇ δὲ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, κυριακῆς διαφαι<ν>ούσης, μεταστέλλεται πάντα τὸν πιστὸν καὶ εὐλογημένον λαόν [...] καὶ Ἀετίῳ καὶ Γρηγορίῳ <ἐπιτρέπει> δοῦναι αὐτῷ χεῖρα, Κλησίππῳ δὲ τῷ διακόνῳ λαβεῖν τὰ ἅγια εὐαγγέλια. Καὶ κατήλθαμεν ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ ἐκκλησίᾳ. ἐπιτρέπει δὲ Γρηγορίῳ τῷ πρεσβυτέρῳ καὶ

²⁸ Cf. François HALKIN, Les actes apocryphes de Saint Héraclide de Chypre, disciple de l'Apôtre Barnabé, in: AnBoll 82 (1964) 133–170.

²⁹ Cf. Alistair C. STEWART, The Greek *Life of Herakleides* as a Liturgical Source. A Preliminary Examination, in: SE 62 (2023) 29–42.

³⁰ Cf. LAODICEA, can. 5: “περὶ τοῦ μὴ δεῖν τὰς χειροτονίας ἐπὶ παρουσίᾳ ἀκροωμένων γίνεσθαι.” (SEAug 95, 336; NOCE et al.).

Κλησίππῳ τῷ διακόνῳ φέρειν τὸν ὅσιον Μνάσωνα ἐν τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ· καὶ ἐνέγκαντες αὐτόν, ἐπέθηκεν τὰ ἅγια εὐαγγέλια ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτοῦ.³¹

Thus once again we see the imposition of the Gospel book, but notably the retiring bishop, and not the deacons, places the Gospel book on the head of the candidate. There is, moreover, no accompanying prayer. There follows a charge given by Herakleides to Mnason, the new bishop. The narrative resumes:

καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν ὁ ὅσιος καὶ πατὴρ Ἡρακλείδιος ἐπιτίθει τὸ ἐγχειρίδιον³² αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον Μνάσωνος καὶ δίδει πᾶσιν εἰρήνην καὶ ἐπιτρέπει Κλησίππῳ τὴν εὐχὴν λέγειν· καὶ ἀνατείνας τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἶπεν· Εὐχαριστῶ σοι, Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, εὐχαριστῶ σοι, πάτερ ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς· κατὰπεμψόν σου τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα ἀπὸ ὑψίστων· καὶ οἴκησον μετὰ Μνάσωνος τοῦ ἱερέως, ἵνα ἀμέμπτους χερσὶν προσφέρῃ τὸ σῶμα καὶ αἷμα σου. γενοῦ αὐτῷ τεῖχος ἀκατάλυτον· γενοῦ αὐτῷ εἰς λαὸν περιούσιον· ὅτι σοι πρέπει δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.³³

³¹ Vit. Her. 18 (AnBoll 82, 166; HALKIN): "On the third day, as Sunday showed itself, he [Herakleides, the aged and infirm bishop] summoned the entire faithful and blessed people [...]. And he charged Aetios and Gregorios to give him their hand, and Klesippos the deacon to take the holy Gospels. And we set out to the holy church. He charged Gregorios the presbyter and Klesippos the deacon to bring the sainted Mnason into the sanctuary. And as they brought him in he placed the holy Gospels on his head."

³² The term is obscure, though STEWART, Greek life, 38 n. 22, suggests, following a personal suggestion from Euthymios RIZOS, that it refers to some kind of stole, or perhaps to the ancestor of the *omophorion*.

³³ Vit. Her. 18 (AnBoll 82, 167; HALKIN): "And saying these things the sainted and father Herakleidios placed his *encheiridion* on the shoulder of Mnason and gave the peace to all and charged Klesippos to say the prayer. And lifting up his eyes to the heavens he said: 'I give you thanks, Jesus Christ, I give you thanks, Father in the heavens. Send your Holy Spirit from the heights, and grant to Mnason the priest that he may offer your body and blood with unstained hands. Be to him an impenetrable wall, be to him a special people. Because glory is fitting to you to the ages. Amen.'" Halkin, in his apparatus, suggests that something has been lost from this prayer. This judgement is certainly sound.

Whereas this may be a diaconal litany, the invocation of the Holy Spirit leads to the suspicion that this may an ordination prayer, even though said by the deacon. If it is an ordination prayer then it is notable that the imposition of the Gospel book on the head of the candidate and the investiture with the *encheiridion* precede the ordination prayer. However, if the imposition of the Gospel book was originally silent, and we may remind ourselves of the possibility that the ordination prayer is only found in *Constitutiones apostolorum* because it was provided by *Traditio apostolica*, it may be that the distinction between a litany and an ordination prayer at this point is an artificial one.

This is followed by what may be a *porrectio*, comparable to that by which a reader is appointed in *Traditio apostolica*,³⁴ and by the reading of the Scriptures:

καὶ λαβὼν τὰ ἅγια εὐαγγέλια ἐπιδίδει αὐτῷ αὐτὰ εἰς τὰς ἀγκάλας· καὶ ὁ διάκονος Κλήσιππος ἐπιτρεπείς λέγει τὸν ἀπόστολον, ὁμοίως καὶ ὁ πατὴρ Μνάσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον.³⁵

Unfortunately, and unhelpfully for the interpretation of this action, it is not clear who places the Gospels in whose arms, and who charges that they be read.

This in turn is followed by the offering of the eucharist, by the seating, and by the kiss:

καὶ ἀνελθόντων, προσφέρει ὁ πατὴρ Μνάσων, ἡσυχάντος τοῦ πατρὸς Ἡρακλείδου ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου διὰ τὸ ἀδύνατον ἔχειν αὐτόν. Καὶ πληρώσας τὸ μυστήριον μετέδωκεν τῷ πατρὶ Ἡρακλείδῃ ὅς ἦν ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ, ὁμοίως καὶ ὁ πατὴρ Ἡρακλείδιος Μνάσωνι. καὶ κατερχόμενος, ὑπὸ πολλῶν <στηριζόμενος> διὰ τὴν ἀσθένειαν ὁ πατὴρ Ἡρακλείδιος ἀνέσκη ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου αὐτοῦ· καὶ λαβὼν τὴν χειρὰ Μνάσωνος ἐκάθισεν αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ οὗ ἦν καθημένος ὁ πατὴρ Ἡρακλείδιος· καὶ ἔδωκεν ἡμῖν εἰρήνην [...].³⁶

³⁴ Trad. ap. 11 (SVPPS 54, 111; STEWART): The question of whether this *is* a *porrectio* is addressed below.

³⁵ Vit. Her. 18 (AnBoll 82, 167; HALKIN): “And taking the Holy Gospels he placed them in his arms. And the deacon Klesippos, at his charge, read the Apostle, and similarly the father Mnason the Gospel.”

³⁶ Vit. Her. 18 (AnBoll 82, 167–168; HALKIN): “And they ascended, and the Father Mnason offered, whilst the Father Herakleides was silent on his throne

As in *Constitutiones apostolorum* we see the rite of seating taking a prominent place. Finally we may note that the kiss is shared after the seating, as it is in *Constitutiones apostolorum* 8,5,9. In other words, the order is largely that of *Constitutiones apostolorum*; the rite lacks an election (Herakleides has chosen his own successor), and the absence of other bishops is notable (though their presence in *Constitutiones apostolorum* might be attributed to the influence of *Traditio apostolica*), the Gospel book is given, although first it is placed on the candidate's head, and the seating and greeting of peace conclude the rite. We might, indeed, suggest that this *vita* reflects the ritual of *Constitutiones apostolorum* once Hippolytean material has been stripped away.

4 The Significance of Seating the Bishop

Apart from sharing the use of a Gospel book the *Vita Herakleidis*, like *Constitutiones apostolorum*, gives a prominent place to the seating of the bishop. Once again, these are not the only occurrences of such a rite.

Seating of a bishop as part of the ordination rite is found in a number of sources. In *Constitutiones apostolorum* the seating takes place at the conclusion of the rite,³⁷ rather oddly held over to a following day, whereas the eucharist is offered immediately after the ordination prayer, a comparable pattern to that found in *Vita Herakleidis*, in which the seating likewise takes place at the conclusion of the rite and after the offering of the eucharist. Otherwise a rite of seating may be observed in the third-century *Vita Polycarpi*,³⁸ and twice moreover in the Pseudo-Clementine litera-

due to his disability And when the mystery was completed he shared with the Father Herakleides who was on the throne, and in the same way also the father Herakleidios with Mnason. And when he went down, the Father Herakleidios, supported by many because of his weakness, got up from his throne and taking the hand of Mnason he sat him on his throne where the father Herakleidios had been seated. And he gave us the peace [...].”

³⁷ Cf. Const. ap. 8,5,10 (SChr 336, 148; METZGER).

³⁸ Cf. Vit. Pol. 23: “Οἱ οὖν διάκονοι προσήγαγον πρὸς τὴν διὰ τῶν χειρῶν τῶν ἐπισκόπων κατὰ τὸ ἔθος γινομένην χειροθεσίαν. καθεσθεις δὲ ὑπ’ αὐτῶν [...].” (Early Christian Studies 4, 124; STEWART-SYKES): “The deacons led him up for the ordination through the hands of the bishops according to custom. And when he was seated by them [...].”

ture.³⁹ Finally we may note a passing reference is made in the (fourth-century) *Canones Hippolyti*.⁴⁰ In the Pseudo-Clementine literature and in the *Vita Polycarpi* there is also an imposition of hands, and yet there is no agreement as to the order in which the imposition of hands and the seating take place. In *Ad Jac.* 2 and *Vita Polycarpi* 23 the seating takes place after the laying on of a hand or hands, whereas in *Hom.* 3.63 it takes place beforehand. This leads Ferguson to suggest that the two rites are independent, and that they have been joined together to form the ordination rite represented in the Pseudo-Clementines.⁴¹ We may agree, and suggest that the same is true of the rite in *Vita Polycarpi*. In the *Canones Hippolyti* we may suggest that the imposition of a hand is, like the ordination prayer itself, a derivation from *Traditio apostolica*, thus leading to the suggestion that the native rite known to the redactor, whether Egyptian or Cappadocian, might not have known of the imposition of hands in an episcopal ordination, though it certainly knew of the seating of a new bishop as an element in the rite.

We should also note the intriguing account of an episcopal ordination in third-century Rome preserved by Eusebius:

ἐξ ἀγοῦ φασιν τὸν Φαβιανὸν μετὰ τὴν Ἀντέρωτος τελευτὴν ἅμ' ἐτέροις συνελθόντα ἐπιχωριάζειν τῇ Ῥώμῃ, ἔνθα παραδοξότατα πρὸς τῆς θείας καὶ

³⁹ Cf. *Ad Jac.* 19 (GCS 42, 21; REHM – STRECKER); *Hom.* 3.63. 72 (GCS 42, 79. 83; REHM – STRECKER).

⁴⁰ Cf. *Can. Hipp.* 4: “وإذا أقسم قسيس فليفعل به مثل كلما يفعل بالأسقف ما خلا الجلوس الى الكرسي” (PO 31/2, 354; COQUIN): “When a presbyter is ordained it is done for him entirely the same as it is done for a bishop, apart from the seating on the throne.”

⁴¹ Cf. Everett FERGUSON, *Jewish and Christian Ordination. Some Observations*, in: *HTR* 56 (1963) 13–19, here: 18; *id.*, *Selection and Installation to Office in Roman, Greek, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, in: *ThZ* 30 (1974) 273–284, here: 280. At *Ad Jac.* 19.1 (GCS 42, 21; REHM – STRECKER) *χείρας ἐπιθείς* is used when the actual ordination takes place whereas in the narrative, when Peter announces Clement's appointment (*Ad Jac.* 2.2; GCS 42, 6; REHM – STRECKER) he states: “Κλήμεντα τοῦτον ἐπίσκοπον ὑμῖν χειροτονῶ”. Similarly at *Hom.* 3.72.1 (GCS 42, 83; REHM – STRECKER), Zachaeus already being seated, the text states *ἐπέθηκεν χεῖρα τῷ Ζακχαίῳ*. This distinction of vocabulary leads us further to suspect that the account of ordination through the imposition of a hand (or hands) is secondary.

οὐρανίου χάριτος ἐπὶ τὸν πλήρον παραληλυθέναι. τῶν γὰρ ἀδελφῶν ἀπάντων χειροτονίας ἕνεκεν τῆς τοῦ μέλλοντος διαδέξασθαι τὴν ἐπισκοπὴν συγκεκροτημένων πλείστων τε ἐπιφανῶν καὶ ἐνδόξων ἀνδρῶν τοῖς πολλοῖς ἐν ὑπονοίᾳ ὑπαρχόντων, ὁ Φαβιανὸς παρὼν οὐδενὸς μὲν ἀνθρώπων εἰς διάνοιαν ἦει, ὅμως δ' οὖν ἀθρόως ἐκ μετεώρου περιστερὰν καταπτᾶσαν ἐπικαθεσθῆναι τῇ αὐτοῦ κεφαλῇ μνημονεύουσιν, μίμημα ἐνδεικνυνμένην τῆς ἐπὶ τὸν σωτῆρα τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐν εἶδει περιστερᾶς καθόδου. ἐφ' ᾧ τὸν πάντα λαόν, ὥσπερ ὑφ' ἐνὸς πνεύματος θείου κινηθέντα, προθυμία πάσῃ καὶ μιᾷ θυχῇ ἄξιον ἐπιβοῆσα καὶ ἀμελλήτως ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς λαβόντας αὐτὸν ἐπιθεῖναι.⁴²

No mention is made of the imposition of hands, *χειροτονία* here simply referring to election, nor of any ordination by Gospel book. Bradshaw claims that this absence is simply the result of the fact that this an abbreviated account,⁴³ but the question may be raised of who, were an imposition of hands to take place, would undertake such an action. Fabian was ordained in 236, after the very short episcopate of Antherus, but significantly at a time when moniscopate is agreed to have emerged in Rome, namely at a period subsequent to the martyrdom of Pontianus (in 235).⁴⁴ Since Antherus was dead there would thus be no Roman bishop who

⁴² EUSEBIUS, HE 6,29,2–4 (GCS 582–584; SCHWARTZ – MOMMSEN): “They say that after the death of Anteros, Fabian, who had come from the countryside with others to stay at Rome, came to the office by a most extraordinary manifestation of divine and heavenly grace. For when all the brothers had gathered to elect [*χειροτονίας*] whomsoever should succeed to the episcopate there were several notable and honourable men in the minds of many; but Fabian, who was present, was not in anyone’s consideration. But they record that suddenly a dove flew down and settled on his head, like the manifestation of the Saviour by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. At this all the people, as if moved by a single Divine Spirit, shouted out with all eagerness, and as a single person, that he was worthy, and took him and placed him on the episcopal seat without delay.”

⁴³ Cf. BRADSHAW, Rites, 49 f.

⁴⁴ This is the latest date offered for such a development, by Allen BRENT, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century. Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop* (SVigChr 31), Leiden – New York 1995, 453–457, followed by Alistair C. STEWART, *The Original Bishops. Office and Order in the First Christian Communities*, Grand Rapids 2014, 2.

might undertake the imposition of a hand. *Traditio apostolica* 2,5 directs that “one of the bishops who are present” should undertake the imposition of a hand, but even if this is allowed to be evidence of Roman practice in the third century, it would predate the election of Fabian; the passage more probably refers to other (congregational) episkopoi within the Roman church, rather than to visiting (mon)episkopoi from other cities who have been brought in to conduct episcopal ordinations.⁴⁵ It is, of course, possible that the domestic custom of ordination by presbyters had been continued, but at this point in the development of church order the presbyters had become subordinates to the bishop, rather than being a group of elders. Fabian is seated in the episcopal chair, and this seems to be the liturgical focus of the rite. The appearance of a dove, moreover, does not denote any conveyance of grace, but simply the designation of the divine choice.

The report of Fabian’s ordination thus indicates that the seating alone might constitute a rite, and may be added to the catalogue of evidence indicating that seating a bishop might in some circles have constituted the means by which a bishop was ordained.

I have argued previously that this seating is a derivative of Jewish ordination practice, and drawing support from Ehrhardt’s observation that in rabbinic “ordinations” seating was the fundamental liturgical act, rather than a laying on of hands, which is hardly to be found.⁴⁶ However, consid-

⁴⁵ The interpretation offered by Alistair C. STEWART, in HIPPOLYTUS, *On the Apostolic Tradition*. An English Version with Introduction and Commentary by Alistair C. STEWART (SVPPS 54), Yonkers 2015, 69–73. If, of course, this is not reflective of a Roman rite, as widely suggested, then its contribution is even less relevant!

⁴⁶ Cf. Alistair STEWART-SYKES, *The Seating of Polycarp in Vita Polycarpi*. A Liturgy of Scholastic Christianity in Third-Century Smyrna in: *Papers presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford, 1999*, vol. 5, ed. by Maurice F. MILES – Edward J. YARNOLD (StPatr 38), 323–329, referring to Arnold EHRHARDT, *Jewish and Christian Ordination*, in: JEH 5 (1954) 125–138. We may cite as evidence in support of this Assumption of Moses 12,1–2 (SVTP 10, 24; TROMP), where Moses seats Joshua, M Sanh. 4,4 (using the word סְמִיכָה but actually discussing seating arrangements for accession to the Sanhedrin; BERKOWITZ 511 f.), TB Sanh. 7B (a translator has to lean down to hear what a teacher is say-

eration might be given to the suggestion of Hatch that this act derives from Roman political practice, and the self-seating of a consul or a praetor.⁴⁷ What militates against this is that in every rite the bishop is seated on the throne, rather than simply occupying it.

The object of observing this ritual is to point out that this might have been the sole means of ordination of a bishop in some early communities, and that it was secondarily supplemented by the imposition of hands. On this basis we may suggest that, rather than in any way being a substitute for the imposition of a hand as Bradshaw suggests, the use of a Gospel book may, like the rite of seating, be a rite of entirely independent origin and that the early rites in which both are found, namely those of *Canones Basilio*, *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua*, and that recorded by Ps.-Dionysius, are the result of the same process of combination that occurred when seating was supplemented by handlaying in other ordination rites. In later rites the supplementary nature of the imposition of a Gospel book is manifestly secondary.⁴⁸

5 The Relevance of the Evidence of Vita Herakleidis

As already noted, Bradshaw has suggested that the imposition of a Gospel book was a substitute for the imposition of hands, and was a means of solving the puzzle of who might undertake such an imposition. In *Constitutiones apostolorum*, as in *Canones Basilio*, that might appear to be the case, as the book is imposed during the ordination prayer. However, in the case of *Constitutiones apostolorum* it is possible that such a conjunction results from the attempt to combine the Antiochene rite with that of *Traditio apostolica*, and thus that the juncture of the imposition of the

ing), and the discussion concerning the “ordination” of R Eleazar b Hisma and R Johanan b Nuri at TB Horayoth 10a–10b, which is actually a seating.

⁴⁷ Cf. Edwin HATCH *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, London 1881, 131 f.

⁴⁸ Thus note the distinct position of the imposition of the Gospels in the Coptic rite, discussed by Heinzgerd BRAKMANN, *Zur Evangeliar-Auflegung bei der Ordination koptischer Bischöfe*, in: EΥΛΟΓΗΜΑ. *Studies in Honor of Robert TAFT S.J.*, ed. by E. CARR et al. (StAns 110 / ALit 17), Rome 1993, 53–69.

book to the ordination prayer is secondary. This in turn answers Bârlea's and Bradshaw's objection to Ratcliff's thesis that the rite was a mark of selection.

We may thus observe that in the *Vita Herakleidis* the gesture seems to denote the selection of Mnason by Herakleides as the Gospel book is placed on Mnason's head as he is brought into the assembly. As already noted, Herakleides has already selected his successor. However, the appointment of a successor by a dying bishop is explicitly forbidden in the twenty-third canon of the Council of Antioch, which is indication enough that such occurred. In the same way Ps.-Ignatius appoints Hero (evidence, it may be noted, for Antiochene practice in the mid-fourth century),⁴⁹ and later in fourth-century Antioch, there was dispute because Evagrius had been appointed by Paulinus alone, apparently as Paulinus was on his deathbed.⁵⁰ In other words, the appointment of a successor by a dying bishop might have been more common in Antiochene ambit prior to the interventions of the imperial period than previously recognized. Possibly the action of imposing the Gospel book is meant to validate the will of the dying bishop.

If this is the case then the question is raised of how any appointment is to be made if the bishop has already died. Given that succession to the episcopate might be from the *ordo* of deacons (thus the pseudo-Ignatian Hero is Ignatius' deacon) this in turn may explain the rationale for deacons holding the Gospel book. If, indeed, the prayer said by Klesippos in *Vita Herakleidis* is an ordination prayer, although this must be counted as uncertain, this might again point to the order of deacons as having, historically, been the source of episcopal ordination in an Antiochene ambit, as distinct from the presbyteral system known in Alexandria, to which so much attention has been paid in the past.

However, beyond being placed on Mnason's head, the Gospel book is given to Mnason to read. Is it possible that this is a ritual *porrectio*, rather than simply a practical gesture? It should be noted that the only

⁴⁹ Cf. PS-IGNATIUS, Ad Hero. 7 (Apostolic Fathers 2/3, 248; LIGHTFOOT).


⁵⁰ Cf. THEODORET, HE 5,23,3. Theodoret states: "οὐτε γὰρ ἀνθ' ἑαυτοῦ τῷ τελευτώντι χειροτονεῖν ἐπιτρέκουσι" (GCS.NF 5, 322; PARMENTIER – HANSEN): "A dying bishop should not appoint anyone to succeed him in his place."


other instance of appointment by *porrectio* of a book is that of the reader in *Traditio apostolica* 11. Thus although I previously suggested that the *porrectio* was original and the imposition of the book related to that,⁵¹ the close relationship between the election and the imposition of the book both in *Vita Herakleidis* and *Constitutiones apostolorum* indicate that it has more to do with choice. Ratcliff may have been somewhat over-imaginative in suggesting some form of bibliomancy, but his instinct in connecting the use of the book to the choice of the candidate seems sound. Possibly this was a means of validating the choice that had been made, though to go beyond this would be to exceed the evidential bounds. If this could be shown to be a *porrectio* then it might be linked to the prominence of the teacher's chair and identified as a rite rooted in the transfer of responsibility within a school; however, while this is attractive it is indemonstrable, and the primary linkage between the imposition of the book and the rite overall seems to be in the matter of selection or validation.

6 *A Concluding Reflection on the Absent Imposition of a Hand*

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “by the imposition of hands and through the words of the consecration, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given, and a sacred character is impressed in such wise that bishops [...] take the place of Christ himself”⁵². That of the Episcopal Church of the USA (to take an example from one Anglican Church) states that “ordination is the rite in which God gives authority and the grace of the Holy Spirit to those being made bishops, priests, and deacons, through prayer and the laying on of hands by bishops”⁵³. Indeed it is a *communis opinio* that from an early stage this imposition of hands was a fundamental and universal part of the process of episcopal ordination. Thus in what is still a standard textbook we read: “The imposition of the hand is almost uni-

⁵¹ Cf. STEWART, Greek life, 39 f.

⁵² Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1558 , referring to *Lumen gentium* 21.

⁵³ EPISCOPAL CHURCH USA, An Outline of the Faith commonly called the Catechism, 860 f. 

versally attested as the principal ritual gesture of ordination"⁵⁴, and elsewhere, writing twenty years later, the same author suggests that the imposition of a hand with prayer was an invariable element in the ordination rites of the fourth century.⁵⁵ And yet we have met two rites in which such a gesture is entirely absent, and have entertained the suspicion that in others it is a secondary addition.

The question of ordination without the imposition of a hand is explored by Vogel who, asking whether there is evidence of ordination without the imposition of hands, as part of his argument that such an imposition is a necessary but not sufficient basis for ordination, discusses several passages which might indicate that an imposition of hands had not taken place. He concludes that, although these do not mention the imposition of hands, they do not provide evidence that such an imposition was wanting.⁵⁶ Since we are concerned here with the question of origins we discuss only the three earliest of these texts, namely a passage in *Traditio apostolica* relating to the presbyterate of a confessor,⁵⁷ a brief discussion of Cornelius' election by Cyprian,⁵⁸ and Jerome's *Ep.* 146 to Evangelus.⁵⁹

Turning briefly to those texts which Vogel discusses we may first suggest that the passage from *Traditio apostolica* refers to the *honor* due to a presbyter, still to be seen as a senior man within the Christian community, rather than to ordination to an office, and may therefore be put aside altogether;⁶⁰ significantly it is said that should that honoured individual become a bishop, he is to receive an imposition of the hand. We may agree, moreover, with Vogel, that Cyprian's discussion of the ordination of Cor-

⁵⁴ Cf. Paul F. BRADSHAW, *Ordination and Rite AD 200–400* in: *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. by Cheslyn JONES et al., London 1992, 355–362, here: 359.

⁵⁵ Cf. ID., *Rites*, 83.

⁵⁶ Cf. Cyrille VOGEL, *Chirotonie et chirothésie. Importance et relativité du geste de l'imposition des mains dans la collation des ordres*, in: *Irénikon* 45 (1972) 7–21. 207–238, in a discussion from 13–21. Similar ground is covered in ID., *L'imposition des mains dans les rites d'ordination en orient et en occident*, in: *MD* 102 (1970) 57–72, here: 68 f.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Trad. ap.* 9,1–2 (SVPPS 54, 108; STEWART).

⁵⁸ Cf. CYPRIAN, *Ep.* 55,8 (CCSL 3B, 265; DIERCKS).

⁵⁹ Cf. JEROME, *Ep.* 146 (CSEL 56, 310; HILBERG).

⁶⁰ The interpretation of the passage offered by STEWART, Hippolytus, 109.

nelius cannot be said to exclude the possibility of an imposition of hands, since, as Vogel points out, the whole point of the discussion is to establish that Cornelius was properly elected and appointed, rather than to enquire into the manner of his ordination.⁶¹

Turning to Jerome's report that, until the time of Dionysius (247–264), "[...] presbyteri semper unum ex se electum et in excelsiori gradu conlocatum episcopum nominabant, quomodo si exercitus imperatorem faciat aut diaconi eligant de se, quem industrium noverint, et Archidiaconum vocent"⁶² we must note that there is extensive evidence for the ordination of the Alexandrian bishop by the presbyters going far beyond the single letter of the rather presbyteral Jerome, though no detail about the process.⁶³ The key point here is that there is nothing known about the means of ordination of the Alexandrian bishop before the fourth century, except that the rite was carried out by the presbyters, and that it involved a rite of seating; it may solely been an enthronement but may have involved the imposition of hands. The report of the appointment of Achillas as bishop of Alexandria, enshrined in the account of the martyrdom of Peter, his predecessor, in describing the setting of the body of Peter upon his throne, and the transfer of the *omophorion* from the body of Peter to

⁶¹ VOGEL, *Chirotonie*, 15 f.

⁶² JEROME, Ep. 146,6 (CSEL 56, 310; HILBERG): "[...] the presbyters elected and named as bishop one of their own, and placed him in a higher degree, just as soldiers designate their emperor or as deacons do when they elect an archdeacon, known to be diligent, from their own number."

⁶³ See the discussion in STEWART, *Original Bishops*, 190–193, in summary of previous discussion and summing up the evidence. However we may note here the strange report of the sixth century *Liberatus* (PL 68, 1036–1037A) of an occasion when the succession to Alexandria was disputed, and the two parties each consecrated a bishop, each laying a hand of the deceased bishop on the head of their candidate, each putting on a *omophorion* from the prior bishop, and each then being seated on the throne. What is odd here, however, is not the enthronement, but the element of laying the deceased bishop's hand upon the candidate's head. This seems to intend that the deceased bishop was appointing his successor, or perhaps is validating the choice, so EVERETT FERGUSON, *Origen and the Election of Bishops*, in: CH 43 (1974) 26–33, here: 32. However, it is only reported because it is exceptional.

Achillas (reminiscent of the transfer of the *enchiridion* from Herakleides to Mnason in *Vita Herakleidis*) may also indicate the absence of such an imposition of hands, but the possibility cannot be totally excluded.⁶⁴

However, although we may agree with Vogel that the texts which he cites do not exclude the possibility that hands are laid, we should take account of the other texts examined above. Even if it is thought that the account of Fabian's election found in Eusebius does not prove the absence of an imposition of a hand, we may recall the common absence of any such imposition between *Constitutiones apostolorum* and *Vita Herakleidis*, whereas both have the imposition of a Gospel book and an enthronement.

We thus have three rituals of episcopal ordination in the earliest sources, which are found combined in various ways, namely the imposition of hands, the rite of seating, and the imposition of a Gospel book. It is the suggestion of this article that each of these has distinct origins, and that, as the distinct orders of seating and the imposition of hands in the pseudo-Clementine literature might indicate, the rituals have been combined. As we have seen, the rite of seating may be derived from rabbinic practice.⁶⁵ In large part dependent on the work of Siotis,⁶⁶ I have further suggested that the imposition of a hand is not, as widely suggested, derived from Jewish practice, nor is intended to convey any sort of grace, but is a relic of election, deriving from civic and associational practice in the

⁶⁴ Note the discussion of this passage by Tim VIVIAN, *St Peter of Alexandria. Bishop and Martyr* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity), Philadelphia 1988, 47–49, who suggests that ordination largely consisted of the transfer of the *omophorion*. Vivian refers to the edition of Peter's martyrdom by Paul DEVOS, *Une passion grecque inédite de S. Pierre d'Alexandrie et sa traduction par Anastase le Bibliothécaire*, in: *AnBoll* 83 (1965) 157–187.

⁶⁵ So STEWART-SYKES, *Seating*.

⁶⁶ Cf. Markos A. SIOTIS, *Die klassische und die christliche Cheirotonie in ihrem Verhältnis*, in: *Θεολογία* 20 (1949) 314–334. 524–541. 725–740; 21 (1950) 103–124. 239–257. 452–463. 605–617; 22 (1951) 108–118, 288–293. One of the key points in Siotis' work is that on many occasions it is not clear whether the use of the word *cheirotonia* and its cognates refers to election or to a liturgical act.

wider Hellenistic world.⁶⁷ The origin of the rite of ordination by imposition of the Gospel book is less clear; however if, as suggested above, its function is the validation of a candidate it might thus be seen as an alternative method of designation to the imposition of a hand which nonetheless performs the same function.

⁶⁷ Cf. Alistair C. STEWART, Office, and Appointment to Office, in *Early Christian Circles* in: *The Cambridge history of ancient Christianity*, ed. by Bruce W. LONGENECKER – David E. WILHITE, Cambridge 2024, 536–558, here: 548 f. A similar suggestion is made by BRADSHAW, *Ordination Rites*, 14, and was tentatively made by Cuthbert H. TURNER, χειροτονία, χειροθεσία, ἐπίθεσις χειρῶν (and the accompanying verbs), in: *JTS* 24 (1923) 496–504, here: 499. In this light we may note the use of the term χειροτονῶ in *Ad Jac.* 2.2 (GCS 42, 6; REHM – STRECKER) to denote Peter's initial appointment of Clement, whereas at *Hom.* 3.63.1 (GCS 42, 79; REHM – STRECKER) the word αἰρήσομαι is used, on both occasions the candidate being forced into the chair.

Abbreviations

ALit	Analecta Liturgica
AnBoll	Analecta Bollandiana
APT	Acta philosophica et theologica
BIDC	Bibliothèque de l'Institut de Droit Canonique de l'Université de Strasbourg
CH	Church History
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
EL	Ephemerides Liturgicae
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
IPM	Instrumenta patristica et mediaevalia. Research on the Inheritance of Early and Medieval Christianity
JEH	Journal of Ecclesiastical History
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
MD	La Maison-Dieu
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
SChr	Sources chrétiennes
SE	Sacris Erudiri
StAns	Studia Anselmiana
SVPPS	St. Vladimir's Seminary Press "Popular Patristics" Series
SVTP	Studia in veteris testamenti pseudepigrapha
ThZ	Theologische Zeitschrift (Basel)

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