Phenomena of Clapping of Hands in the Bible and the Present Time
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Abstract

The clapping of hands has become a practice in many church gatherings in the contemporary time. Occurrences of the clapping of hands in the Scriptures pose the issue of its place in the worship service of the church. This study surveyed the occurrences of the clapping of hands particularly in the Old Testament to see if there is any theological basis for the current practice of clapping in the church. The study shows that the gesture of clapping pertaining to people can either be positive or negative. However, it is always positive when the gesture is pertaining to God. It was an expression of religious adoration and worship during the time of Israel. Clapping of hands in the Temple is only to exalt God as King. It was used in recognition of Him as the Sovereign Lord, the Ruler of the Universe, and the Savior. Thus, rightly understood and practiced, clapping can be suggested to be a part of worship.

Keywords: clapping, worship, adoration, Israel

Introduction

There are a number of instances in the Bible where there are occasions of clapping of hands which are used as the basis of the present practice of clapping today. The clapping of hands is mentioned in the Scriptures such as, “And he brought forth the king's son, and put the crown upon him, and gave him the testimony; and they made him king, and anointed him; and they clapped their hands, and said, God save the king” (1 Ki 11:12). The Psalmist says, “Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy” (Ps 47:1). Similarly, it appears as a personification, “Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together” (Ps 98:8), and “For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isa 55:12). Moreover, clapping of hands are done as an act of ridicule (Lam 2:15; Job 27:21-23; Nah 3:19). As an act of rejoicing over sinfulness (Eze 6:11; 21:14; 25:6) and Balak’s anger to Balaam (Num 24:10) the Lord Himself claps (Eze 21:17). From these evidences, this study determined on what occasion that clapping of hands is an expression of worship, discovered the context of the passage that clapping is the order of the occasion, and related its biblical setting to the present time.

As Expression of Joy at the Ascension of the King

In the history of the kings of Israel, in the time of the kingly ascension of Joash in particular, it is noticeable how the gesture of clapping is used by the people. Austel and Patterson (1994:550) remark that on the news of the death of her son Ahaziah, Athaliah, the dowager queen, takes whatever measures are necessary to seize the throne for herself, including the murder of her own grandchildren and all that remains of the royal family. With all natural heirs put out of the way, she ascends the throne and inaugurates a seven-year reign.
Wiersbe (2008:699-700) verifies that knowing what Athaliah has planned to do, the priest and the princess steal one-year-old Joash from the royal nursery and hide with his nurse, first in a room where old bedding is stored and then in a room in the temple. As he grows older, he mingles and plays with the other children in the temple area and is not recognized as an heir to the throne.

Patterson (1988:216) states that in the seventh year, with the child now older, Jehoiada musters his courage (2Chro 23:1) and lays plans to dislodge the usurping queen from her ill-gotten throne (v. 4). First, he secures the allegiance of the military officials and temple personnel. Second, he summons the Levites and heads of families throughout the southern kingdom to Jerusalem and swears them to loyalty to the true king (cf. 2Chro 23:2). Third, on a set day he prepares the temple personnel, seal off the temple area at the changing of the guard and deploys guards in strategic fashion (vv. 5-8).

Later, after outlining his plan, he sends them throughout the kingdom of Judah to order the Levites living away from Jerusalem and the heads of the Jewish families (clans) to come to Jerusalem on a specific Sabbath day. They are to assemble at the temple as though they are there to worship the Lord.

Henceforth, when everybody is in place, Jehoiada brings out the seven-year-old king and presents him to the people. Jehoiada puts the crown on Joash’s head and gives him a copy of the law of God that he is to obey (Deut 17:14-12; 31:27). The high priest anoints him and the people joyfully welcome him as their ruler.

The Bible says, “And he brought out the king’s son, put the crown on him, and gave him the Testimony; they made him king and anointed him, and they clapped their hands and said, ‘Long live the king!’” (2Ki 11:12) Concerning the ascension, Henry (1996:768) mentions that in token of his being invested with kingly power, he put the crown upon him...In token of the people’s acceptance of him and subjection to his government, they clapped their hands for joy, and expressed their hearty good wishes to him: Let the king live; and thus they made him king, made him their king, consented to, and concurred with, the divine appointment.

Moreover, Freeman and Chadwick (1998:264) add that “here we have the most important ceremonies connected with the coronation of a Hebrew king.” First, the crown is put upon him. Next, they give him “a copy of the covenant.” That is where they formally present him a copy of the divine law as an indication that this is to be his guide in administering the government. Then, they anoint him. This is not done in every case of coronation, and from the expression that they “proclaimed him king,” which precedes the statement of his anointing, it is inferred that the essential parts of the coronation ceremony are those connected with the crown and the covenant. Anointing is a ceremony connected with coronation before the Israelites ever have a king, as evident in Judges 9:8, 15.

Furthermore, it is by divine command that the people of God adopts it (1Sam 9:16, 10:1; 1Ki 1:34, 39). Because of the custom of anointing at a coronation, the king is called “the Lord’s anointed” (1Sam 12:3, 5; 2Sam 1:14, 16; Ps 2:2, Hab 3:13). The people then clap their hands and shout “Long live the king!” This is part of the ceremony and denotes approval of the newly crowned sovereign.

Likewise, in the book, Observations on Various Passages of Scripture, written in 1801, the Rev. Thomas Harmer points out that the Hebrew word translates hands in text-verse is actually singular and is more properly rendered hand. Harmer suggests that a different sort of clapping may have been meant by this than what is ordinarily understood by clapping hands, where the palm of one hand is forcibly struck against the palm of the other hand.
Finally, Harmer concludes that it is an ancient Middle-East custom of striking the fingers of one hand gently and rapidly upon the lips as a token of joy, and believes that the expression “clap the hand”, as distinctive from “clap the hands”, relates to some similar custom observed by the ancient Hebrews.

The Clap of Indignation

In relation to Job’s experience, Smick (1994:769-770) conveys that this poem is mainly about God’s just punishment of the wicked. Job opens by denying he is such, though his counselors have labeled him. An oath based on the existence of God is the most extreme measure available (the last resort) in Job’s society for a condemned person to plead innocent either he is blasphemying God. He is saying that his integrity (blameless, not sinlessness) is more important to him than life itself. But Job does not fear death because he speaks the truth.

Notably, Job’s oath is followed by an imprecation against his detractors. The imprecation has a juridical function and is frequently a hyperbolic function and a hyperbolic means (Ps 109:6-15; 139:7-9) of dealing with false accusation and oppression. Legally, the false accusations and the very crimes committed are called down on the perpetrator’s head. Since the counselors have falsely accused Job of being wicked, they deserve to be punished like the wicked.

In actuality, they know nothing of mercy though Job pleads for it (19:21). They speak only of God’s justice and power; yet they would soon become the objects of God’s mercy despite Job’s imprecation, which is later changed to prayer on their behalf (42:7-9). The imprecation is a dramatic means by which Job, as a blameless man, declares himself on God’s side.

Job expounds eloquently the subject which the counselors know so much about – the fate of the wicked – to dramatize the punishment they deserve for the false and arrogant accusation. Wiersbe (2008:851-852) affirms that one can recognize in this description many of the images that Job’s friends use in their “judgment” speeches against him. Job does this deliberately to remind them that they should be careful what they say lest they declare their own punishment.

In the 23rd verse of chapter 27, Job pronounces that, “Men shall clap their hands at him, And shall hiss him out of his place.” However, Wiersbe points out that scholars do not agree on the interpretation of Job 27:23. Heavenor (1970:435) stipulates that the clapping of hands is a token of indignation and Rowley (1976:178) comments on Job 27:23 saying that when disaster overtakes the wicked man, all men rejoice, clapping their hands in scorn, and hissing at the thought of him.

Speaking about who performs the act of clapping, Wiersbe explains that the NASB reads, “Men will clap their hands at him, and will hiss him from his place,” and most translations agree with that; but the word men is not in the original text. It simply reads, “He claps his hands against him.” It simply reads, “He claps his hands against him.”

Seemingly, Smick relates that the reference is to God in v. 23, not to the storm in the preceding verse. Also, “his place” at the end of v. 23 means “heaven,” God’s place. The verse should read: “He claps his hands against them and hisses at them from his dwelling (heaven).” But whatever is the case, Wiersbe emphasizes that whether God or men, there is rejoicing at the destruction of the wicked.
The Clap of Derision

In Ezekiel’s first major judgment oracle, Alexander (1986:774-775) observes how God interrupts Ezekiel’s muteness to announce judgment on Judah’s mountains, hills, ravines, and valleys (vv. 2-3). Ezekiel sets his face against these four geographical features of the land, for it is in them that the pagans normally establish their religious shrines (2Ki 23:10).

Hence, the syncretistic Canaanite religion with its perverted emphasis on sex, war, cults of the dead, snake worship, and idolatry preferred high places and groves of trees for its place of worship. Manasseh, king of Judah (695-642 B.C.), has led in the resurgence of these pagan cults that has engulfed the people by Ezekiel’s day.

The Lord pronounces judgment on the heathen shrines and their cultic practices that have been adopted by his people. He would remove the temptation facing his people by destroying all the “high places,” “altars,” incense altars” (vv. 3-4), and “idols” (v. 6), thus eliminating their pagan practices.

Reverting to his theme of impending judgment, the Lord instructs Ezekiel to demonstrate joy because of the coming judgment (v. 11a). The verse asserts, “Pound your fists and stamp your feet, and say, `Alas, for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.” Darr (2001:1161) comments that the oracle in vv. 11-13a commences with the messenger formula, followed by Yahweh’s command that Ezekiel performs other expressive gestures: “clap your hands and stamp your foot, and say, Alas…” By these actions and exclamation, Ezekiel will publicly portray Yahweh’s malevolent delight in venting fury against Israel (Deut 28:63).

Indeed, Ralph admits that clapping the hands and stamping the feet signify either joyful praise or derision over sin and judgment. Here Ezekiel exhibits God’s delight over the comprehensive eradication of pagan shrines and practices from the land. Everyone would be touched by the judgment: the distant ones by disease, the near ones by the sword, the remainder outside and inside Jerusalem by famine.

The Clap of Approval for God’s Judgment

On God’s judgment, Ralph (1986:840) reveals that having surveyed the history of Israel’s rebellion and found the nation deserving of judgment in Ezekiel’s day, God announces and describes the judgment that he is about to bring on Judah. Four messages describe God’s judgment by Babylonia (Eze 20:45; 21:1,8,18). The first message consists of a parable (Eze 20:45-49) and its explicit interpretation (Eze 21:1-7). The parable describes a forest fire in the southern forests that burns every tree, whether green or dry (Eze 20:46-47). Each person would see that God kindles the unquenchable fire (v. 48).

Ralph attests that verse 49 provides a transition between the parable and its interpretation. Ezekiel’s hearers are frustrated. Ezekiel, the old parabolic speaker, is at it again. This is another one of those parables they do not understand. Therefore, God would give the interpretation (v. 1-5). He even acknowledges that God’s judgment would be comprehensive. When God would pour out his wrath on the sinner, the effects would cover the entire land from north to south. Each person would be touched by the sword of his fury (vv. 4-5; 20:47). Both the righteous and the wicked would experience the land’s devastation. Everyone would know that the Lord was the one who brings the judgment (v. 5; 20:48).

The Bible declares in Ezekiel 21:14, “You therefore, son of man, prophesy, And strike your hands together. The third time let the sword do double damage. It is the
sword that slays, The sword that slays the great men, That enters their private chambers.” Moreover, verse 17 states, “I also will beat My fists together, And I will cause My fury to rest; I, the LORD, have spoken.”

Darr (2001:1299-1300) believes that the second half of this oracle (vv. 14-17) commences with God’s command that Ezekiel prophesy and “strike hand to hand.” The latter directive appears in 6:11 (accompanied by stamping of the feet). Although the significance of this gesture is not clear, its reappearance in v. 17a suggests that it expresses anger.

Meanwhile, Wilson (1988:680) reacts that in the poem describing God’s sword, the prophet communicates his dreadful message by using repetition and by piling up evocative images. The result is a passionate and an urgent song that fully captures Ezekiel’s horror as he watches the divine sword do its deadly work. The poem begins with an ominous description of the sword’s construction. It is sharpened and polished so that it can be an efficient instrument of destruction (21:8-11).

Wilson continues on that with the preparation of the sword completed, the prophet’s attention is drawn to the sword’s purpose: the slaughter of God’s people. The prophet is told to cry and wail when he realizes that Jerusalem cannot escape destruction. God will no longer use the sword simply to test the city’s willingness to obey but will use the blade only for slaughter (vv. 12-13).

Wilson declares that after seeing the use to which the sword will be put, the prophet is himself drawn into the action. He is to clap his hands, and that act will make the sword fall on the people. God then joins the prophet’s action whereupon it becomes clear that the real agent of Jerusalem’s destruction is God acting through the prophet (vv. 14-17).

Consequently, Ralph (1986:842) relates that Ezekiel clapped his hands in approval of the judgment but with scorn and contempt for the iniquity that has precipitated God’s wrath (v. 14a; 6:11; 22:13; 25:6; Num 24:10; 2Ki 11:12; Job 27:23; Ps 47:1; Isa 55:12). By this act, Ezekiel demonstrates the Lord’s attitude of justice toward Judah’s sin and encouraged the sword’s greater effectiveness.

Even more, the intensity of the judgment is emphasized by the doubling and tripling of the sword; it becomes three times more effective than it normally would be. Two and three swords are not present; rather, the sword’s swiftness and intensity manifested in God’s wrath produced two to three times the normal slaughter. The sword totally encompasses the people; their hearts melt, and many fall in their gates in the lightning fast invasion (vv. 14-15).

Ultimately, the sword seems to be in God’s hand (v. 11; cf. vv. 15,17). The judgment is comprehensive (cf. vv. 4-5,7,47). The song (poem) builds to a climax. The sword’s devastation covers the entire country from right (or south) to left (or north), a play on words depicting the sharpening of the sword blade back and forth as well as comprehensiveness of the judgment from north to south (v. 16). The Lord gives His approval by clapping. But He also declares that His wrath would cease when this judgment is complete (v.17).

The Clap of God’s Anger

The last part of this section carries on at the time of Ezekiel where Ralph (1986:846) asserts that though Israel’s history of wickedness demanded discipline (chs. 20-21), it is the abominations of contemporary Israel and her rulers that has ignited the punishment. Since the people failed to see this fact, God directs Ezekiel to deliver three judgment messages to make this clear once more. Ezekiel would act
as a prosecutor of the nation (v.2), thus causing the “city of bloodshed” to become conscious of all her abominations that are the bases of the coming judgment.

Even more, the chief cause of Jerusalem’s wickedness has been her evil rulers, especially her recent kings (e.g., Manasseh and Jehoiakim) and prince (Zedekiah). Each has acted in his own strength to shed blood through the misuse of his power (cf. 2Ki 21:16; 24:4). Each goes as far as his power enables him. Each breaks the explicit prohibitions of the Mosaic covenant. (Exo 20:13).

Ezekiel concludes this judgment speech with God’s verdict of scorn for Jerusalem’s dishonest gain and murder. God strikes his hands (v. 13) in a gesture of disapproval, venting his fury and expressing his triumph in judgment (so Zimmerli). Because of that, the prophet gives cautions in verse 13 of chapter 22, “Behold, therefore, I beat My fists at the dishonest profit which you have made, and at the bloodshed which has been in your midst.”

Darr (2001:1311) believes that Ezekiel initiates the sentencing phase of Jerusalem’s case. A summon to attention (“See!”) is accompanied by a sign act: The prophet claps his hands in anger (see 21:14,17) on account of Jerusalem’s illicit profiteering (v.12) and the bloodshed in her (with its consequent bloodguilt).

More so, Wiersbe (2008:1310) insists that God strikes His hands in angry response to the sins of His people (6:11; 21:14, 17), and He announces that a day of reckoning is coming. The people of Jerusalem have the resolution to persist in their sins, in spite of God’s warnings, but do they have the will and courage to endure God’s day of judgment? His first act of judgment would be dispersion (22:13-16); the people would be exiled to Babylon and others scatter to the surrounding nations (vv. 15-16). The second judgment would be fire (Eze 22:17-22), the destruction of their beloved city and temple. The prophet pictures a smelting furnace with different kinds of metals in it, and the dross (slag) being removed.

The Scornful Clap for Nineveh’s Fall

The setting of Nahum’s prophecy, according to Armerding (1994:1481), is the long and painful oppression of Israel by Assyria and the divine prospect of its end. Although God is the ultimate author of Israel’s affliction, Assyria, the rod of God’s anger, is the agent of his wrath; and the cup in the Lord’s right hand was now coming around to her.

The verse in Nahum expresses malicious glee declares, “Your injury has no healing, Your wound is severe. All who hear news of you Will clap their hands over you, For upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually?”

Francis D. Nichol (1955:1043) affirms that at the news of Nineveh’s downfall, the surrounding nations are pictured clapping their hands in joy because it will mean the end of Assyria’s ceaseless “wickedness” and relentless oppression. The prophet ends his message on a note of certainty and finality. Assyria has received its day of grace; but now it is useless to offer mercy longer.

Henry (1991:1351) confirms that the judgment they are under is as a wound, and it is incurable; there is no relief for it, “no healing of thy bruise, no possibility that the wound, which is so grievous and painful to thee, should be so much as skinned over; thy case is desperate (v. 19) and thy neighbors, instead of lending a hand to help thee, shall clap their hands over thee, and triumph in thy fall; and the reason is, because thou hast been one way or other injurious to them all.

Those that have been abusive to their neighbors, will one time or another, find it come home to them; they are but preparing enemies to themselves when their day comes to fall: and those that dare not lay hands on them themselves will clap their
hands over them, and upbraid them with their former wickedness, for which they are
now well enough served and paid in their own coin. The troublemakers shall be troubled
and will be a burden of many, as it is here the burden of Nineveh.

The Contemptuous Clap for the Gentile Nations

The destruction of Jerusalem, as expressed by Wiersbe (2008:1314), is
welcomed by the Gentile nations that are located in the vicinity of the kingdom of
Judah. During the great days of their nation, the Jews have been separated people,
and this irritated their neighbors. The Jewish claims that Jehovah is the only true
and living God. Both Saul and David have met many of these nations on the
battlefield, and the Gentiles remember and resent those humiliating defeats. But as
the kingdom of Judah drifts from the Lord, the Jewish people adopt the gods and the
practices of the Gentiles, and to their neighbors it is pure hypocrisy.

In fact, nothing pleases the Gentiles more than to be able to laugh at the Jews in
their day of humiliation and claim that the gods of the Babylonians are stronger than
the God the Jews worship. What the nations do not realize is that the destruction of
Jerusalem is not just a punishment to the Jews; it is also a warning to the Gentiles.

Further, there is a great difference between a loving parent chastening a child
and a judge punishing a guilty criminal. Israel knows God’s Word and therefore
have sinned against a flood of light, but the Gentiles have the clear witness of
creation (Rom 1:18-32; Ps 19) and conscience (Rom 2:11-16) and are without
excuse. But God is also judging the Gentiles for the way they have treated His
people, because this is the covenant promise He had made with Abraham (Gen 12:1-
3).

The prophet is ordered, as Henry (1991:902) asserts, to address himself to the
Ammonites, in the name of the Lord Jehovah God of Israel, who is also the God of
the whole earth. But what can Chemosh, the god of the children of Ammon, say, in
answer to it? He is bidden to set his face against the Ammonites, for he is God’s
representative as a prophet, thus, he must signify that God set his face against them,
for the face of the Lord is against those that do evil (Ps 24:16).

Therefore, the Lord speaks through the prophet Ezekiel announcing, “For thus
says the Lord GOD: ‘Because you clapped your hands, stamped your feet, and
rejoiced in heart with all your disdain for the land of Israel.’”

Henry (1991:902) expounds that they clapped their hands, to irritate the rage of
the Chaldeans, and to set them on as dogs upon the game; or they clapped their
hands in triumph, attended this tragedy with their Plaudite – Give us your applause,
thinking it well acted; never was there anything more diverting or entertaining to
them. They stamped with their feet, ready to lead and dance for joy upon this
occasion; they not only rejoiced in heart but they could not forbear showing it,
though everyone that had any sense of honor and humanity would cry shame upon
them for it, especially considering that they rejoiced thus, not for anything they got
by Israel’s fall (if so, they would have been the more excusable: most people are for
themselves); but this was purely from a principle of malice and enmity; Thou hast
rejoiced in heart with all thy despite (which signifies both scorn and hatred) against
the land of Israel.

Nichol (1955:665) accepts that to clap the hands and to stamp the feet are
gestures of strong emotion (Num 24:10; Eze 21:14, 17; 22:13); these actions are
manifestations of malicious joy. The cause of the rejoicing is apparently not the
prospect of material advantage, but malice and “despite against the land of Israel.”
Alexander (1994:1315) alleges that the Ammonites have clapped their hands and have stamped their feet in joyous contempt over the temple’s defilement, the desolation of the land of Judah, and the captivity of the Judean people by Babylonia.

The Clap of Mockery for Jerusalem

Wiersbe (2008:1266) attests that Jeremiah expresses his own sorrow at the destruction of the Holy City and the beautiful temple of the Lord. For Jeremiah, it is like 40 years of faithful ministry are wasted, for the people do not heed his messages. Jeremiah describes the terrible plight of the people with the use of numerous similes and metaphors, and he prays to the Lord for assistance and deliverance.

In the same way, Jeremiah wrestles with the Lord over what He has allowed to happen, knowing fully the sins of the people are to blame (1:5, 8; 5:7,16). They have violated the terms of the covenant, knowing very well what the consequences would be (Lev 26; Deu 28-30; 2Ki 17:13-15; 2Chro 36:15-16). Jeremiah has warned that if Judah persisted in rebelling, God would send the Babylonians (Jer 1:13-16; 4:5-9; 5:15; 6:22-26; 10:22; 50:41-43), and Isaiah has preached the same message (Isa 13-14; 43:14ff; 47:1ff.).

Wiersbe (2008:1268) advances that the God of Israel would ever permit the Gentiles, and especially the Babylonians, to enter and destroy Jerusalem and the temple was something inconceivable to the Jewish people (Hab. 1). By ignoring covenant and depending on the presence of the people and its sacred furnishings, especially the ark, the leaders and most of the people have replaced living faith with dead superstition.

From the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah cries, “All who pass by clapping their hands at you; They hiss and shake their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem: ‘Is this the city that is called ‘The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth’?”

Henry (1991:725) points out that their neighbors laugh at them, all that pass by thee clap their hands at thee. Jerusalem has made a great figure, got a great name, and borne a great sway, among the nations; it is the envy and terror of all about; and, when that city is reduced; they all (as men are apt to do in such a case) triumph in its fall; they hiss, and wag the head, pleasing themselves to see how much it has fallen from its former pretensions.

Smith (1981:590) explores that the union, in this and the following verse, of scorn, hatred, and exultation over Jerusalem’s fall, carries the mind involuntarily to the scene round the cross of the Redeemer.

Expression of Joy on Account of God’s Saving Action

John N. Oswalt (1998:433-435) considers the 55th chapter of Isaiah as the second part of Isaiah’s celebration of the work of the Servant. In the first part (ch. 54), he rehearses the effects of that work as Israel’s estrangement from her husband is healed and as her spiritual poverty and despair are replaced by the glorious city of righteousness. Now he moves from the descriptive mode to the prescriptive mode, calling Israel to receive what is now hers to have.

The celebration closes with a promise (vv. 12-13), utilizing the language of restoration from exile but also the language of nature’s rejoicing that has typically accompanied passages about the Servant and his work (42:10; 44:23; 49:13). Speaking both for God and as God, the prophet issues a sweeping invitation: every thirsty person is invited to come to the water. Water is associated with the giving of
the Spirit of God, pours on the ground that has been parched by sin and disobedience.

Isaiah testifies to the children of Israel in verse 12, “For you shall go out with joy, And be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

Oswalt (1998:447) looks at Isaiah’s audience and offers a notion that most of the recent commentators (e.g., Muilenburg) limit the reference of these verses to the return from exile. Without doubt, as pointed out throughout chapters 49-55, the return from exile provides the central image for the poet.

Likewise, Henry (1991:321) proposes that this refers to the deliverance and return of the Jews out of Babylon. They shall go out of their captivity, and be led forth towards their own land again. God will be before them as surely, though not as sensibly as before their fathers in the pillar of cloud and fire. They shall go out, not with trembling, but with triumph, not with any regret to part with Babylon, or any fear of being fetched back, but with joy and peace.

To return to the subject of clapping, Henry reminds that the hills and their inhabitants shall, as in a transport of joy, break forth into singing; and, if the people should altogether hold their peace, even the trees of the field would attend them with their applauses and acclamations.

Evenmore, Nichol (1955: 298) stresses that the accomplishment of the Lord’s will (v.11) brings joy. Verses 12, 13 picture the people of God going out to the world on their mission to bring life and healing. They go forth as sowers, scattering everywhere the words of divine life. Nature breaking forth into happy anthems of praise here represents the joy that fills the hearts of men when they learn of God’s love and will for them.

The Enthronement Clap

The first verse of Psalms 47 expresses, “Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph!” As Nichol (1954:746) phrases it, Psalm 47 is a festal anthem of purest praise to Jehovah, who is exalted as God not only of Israel but of all nations on the earth. Kselman and Barre (1996:584) affirm that this is associated with the alleged feast of Yahweh’s enthronement...The kingship of Yahweh is clearly the central idea, whatever is the precise life setting.

Craigie (2002:347) confirms that Psalm 47 is a hymn; the “peoples” (v 2), both Israel and foreign nations, are called upon to sing the praise of God’s kingship. Precisely, Psalm 47 is classified as an enthronement psalm. The so-called enthronement psalms are joined by the common theme of the praise of the Lord’s kingship.

With regard to its structure, Murphy indicates that in verses 2-6, “all peoples are invited to praise the Lord, the supreme king who has chosen Israel; 7-10, Yahweh is enthroned and receives the praise of all. The phrase all peoples that conveys universalism follows upon the Lord’s prerogative as supreme ruler (cf. 8-9) and creator. The proof of Yahweh’s dominion is drawn from the salvation history: the conquest of Palestine (“our inheritance”) for Israel. The trumpet blast is a characteristic of royal enthronement (2Sam 15:10; 2Ki 9:13) and also of the Feast of Tabernacles (Ps 81:4; Num 29:1).

On the other hand, Stuhlmueller (1988:455) suggests that there are two calls for praise (Ps 47:2,7), with the motivation after the first more patriotic (vv. 3-5) and after the second more religious (vv. 9-10a). Each stanza ends with a reference to the ritual enthronement of Yahweh (vv. 6, 10b).
With regard to the setting of the psalm, Stuhlmueller clarifies that various temple ceremonies are reflected here (cf. Ps 24; 68). The first part is sung during a procession with the Ark through the city (47:2-5) and its return to the Holy of Holies (v. 6), the second part during the obeisance of vassal nations before the princes of Israel. Rogerson and McKay (1977:223) agree that if the psalm accompanies a drama, the setting must be the temple where the Ark was a symbol of God’s heavenly throne. 

Craigie (2002:347) states that an act of worship is taking place in which both Israel and her subject peoples are to praise (and thereby acknowledge) the ultimate sovereignty and kingship of God. The praise of God’s kingship (47:8–10), God’s kingship over the whole earth repeats the introductory theme of the opening portion of praise (v 3).

Briggs and Briggs (1906-1907: 398) verify that the celebration is to be in the temple, with rhythmic accompaniment, expressed by,—clap the hand/shout with the sound of jubilation. Whereas, Williams and Ogilvie (1986:361) agree that the psalm begins with a call to worship. The psalmist’s expectation here is for a high volume of praise—clapping and shouting.

Tesh and Zorn (1999: 341) assert that the psalm is intended for use in the worship of God in Jerusalem. Consequently, the call to worship with which it opens would be addressed to the people of Israel, assembled for worship... The call to worship is repeated and intensified in verse 6 with its fourfold use of the plural imperative.

The Clap of All Creations

The eighth verse of Psalm 98 proclaims, “Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills be joyful together.” This psalm, as Wiersbe (2004: 35-36) offers, is written to praise the Lord for a great victory over Israel’s enemies (“salvation,” vv. 1–3), perhaps the victory of the Medes and Persians over Babylon (Dan 5) that leads to the return of the Jewish exiles to their land (Ezra 1)... The focus in this section is on the Jewish people and the wonderful new demonstration of God’s power they have seen. It is so great it demanded a new song from His people.

Wiersbe proposes that the command goes out to all nations of the earth to shout joyfully in praise to the Lord for what He has done for Israel, and the emphasis is on the King (v. 6)...But the shout is only the beginning, for singing and the playing of instruments followed. Loud music played and sung with enthusiasm is characteristics of Jewish worship (2Chro 5:11–14; Ezra 3:10–13; Neh 12:27–43).

Tate (2002:524) perceives that the verses call for acclamation before King Yahweh, who is coming in a worldwide manifestation of his salvation and judgment...The enthusiasm of Israelite worship is illustrated in this passage. Shouts are raised, praises chanted and sung, while musical instruments are played and horns blown. The noise of temple worship was legendary (see 2Chr 29:25–30; Ezra 3:10–13; 1 Esdr 5:59–66).

Williams and Ogilvie (1989:200) express that here the psalmist exhorts all the earth to join in joyful worship. The sea is to roar “and all its fullness” (waves? fish? see Ps 96:11). The world is also to join “and those who dwell in it,” both humankind and the animals.

Also, in verse 8, the “rivers” (“floods”) are to “clap their hands” in praise before Yahweh. The “hills” also join in joy “before the Lord.” Creation is personified in order to express the totality of the earth celebrating God’s salvation.
Likewise, Nichol (1954:854) writes that the phrase “Floods clap” is “A personification suggests by the breaking waves on the shore.”

Anderson (1972:692-693) proves that the lyre (NEB ‘the harp’) is a stringed instrument with a varying number of strings; the minimum is three the maximum is 12. It could be used both on religious and secular occasions. The same is true with trumpets which are used, primarily, on religious occasions; trumpets are blown during the accession ceremony of Joash and the horn is also associated with the enthronement ceremonies.

Bratcher and Reyburn (1991:846) discuss that in verse 6b the phrase translates before the King (or “in the presence of”) is translated by New English Bible “acclaim the presence of the Lord our king” (similarly New Jerusalem Bible). This is a command to praise Yahweh in the Temple, where he is present with the people.

Finally, Willem A. VanGemeren (1991:629) points out that the particular form of the joyful expectation of the Great King expresses itself in a great variety of musical instruments used in the worship of God in the temple (vv. 5-6; cf. 47:5; 1Chron 16:5-6)

**Clapping in the Secular World**

Jones (2006:20) affirms that in cultural context, applause is for the theater, the concert stage, the comic routine, and the political speech. As a professional musician, Jones (2006:18) submits that he is accustomed to applause. This is what a performer walking onto the concert stage expects as a greeting and anticipates again following a successful performance.

Rodriguez [as cited by Patrick Etoughé Anani (2011:10)] admits that clapping is usually associated with the entertainment industry. Anani (2011:9) identifies that audiences are usually expected to applaud after a performance, such as a musical concert, speech, or play. The custom of clapping is perceived as an audience’s nonverbal communication that could indicate its relative appreciation of a performance; the louder and longer the noise, the stronger the crowd’s approval. In addition, Anani (2011:10) notes that they even go to the extent of using an applause meter to select winners of a competition.

Jones (2006:20) acknowledges that people applaud when they receive good news, hear a funny joke, or express appreciation. In fact, it has become so customary to clap that people instinctively applaud for almost anything they enjoy.

**Clapping in the Church**

To cite instances of when clapping is used in the church today, Jones (2006:20) describes that more often in the context of worship, if people are honest, they applaud people with the hope of making them feel appreciated, to demonstrate approval of the rendition or statement, or to show affirmation of the message of the music. Jones adds that when it comes to worship music, this response is most commonly witnessed at the end of a fast piece or one that concludes loudly and in a high tessitura.

Jones (2006:19) also relates his observations in churches he visits that they applaud at the end of each praise song led by the worship team, although there is no clapping during the singing itself. They applaud when a baby is dedicated to the Lord and also when his/her mother left the platform. Jones witnesses congregational applause of a preacher, particularly when a powerful demonstration of rhetorical
skill is displayed. Jones evaluates that it is likely that few genuine “clap offerings” are exclusively offered to God, although they may exist in the case of individuals, perhaps, more so than among masses.

Summary

In the Old Testament, several instances occur on the use of the gesture of clapping. Initially, clapping is used to express joy at the ascension of a king at the time of the kings of Israel. When Joash is crowned king, people clap their hands which is a part of the ceremony of their approval to their new ruler.

In contrast, clapping can also be an expression of disgust and anger. Job’s friends accused him of wickedness which resulted to his present condition. Here, scholars are divided whether it is men or it is God who will be clapping their hands at the wicked. The same is Ezekiel’s reason for his expressive gesture of clapping to manifest God’s anger against Israel’s wickedness.

Likewise, another negative aspect of the use of clapping is to express malicious glee. At the time of Assyria’s downfall at time of Nahum, they are maligned by other nations by clapping their hands as if triumphant on Nineveh’s fall. What is more in the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah laments rebellious Jerusalem who becomes a laughing stock of the nations and clapping their hands at their fall.

Conclusion

The gesture of clapping has been used in several occasions in the Old Testament. It has been observed that clapping pertaining to people can either be positive or negative. When the gesture only pertains to God, it is always positive. In this study, much attention has been given to clapping as an expression of religious adoration and worship during the time of Israel. During those days, the mention of clapping in the temple is only to exalt God as their king. He is their Sovereign Lord, who is the Ruler of the universe. He is their Saviour, the one who bestows upon them salvation from their enemies and is therefore worthy of their praise and adoration. Thus, rightly understood and practiced, clapping can be suggested to be a part of worship.
Bibliography


