

Nonverbal Communication and Narrative Literature: Genesis 39 and the Ruth Novella¹

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1. Introduction

In a world driven by verbal and written communication we easily tend to forget that there is also another way of communicating. This non-spoken, non-written medium is sometimes even more important than the written or verbal. Unfortunately this channel of communication has for a long time been the founding child of the social sciences. According to Farnell the relative neglect of this fundamental form of communication is cultural and stems “from a long-standing bias against the body in the Western philosophical and religious traditions ...”². In this Western model the mind was regarded as the locus of rationality, while the body was seen as the “material locus for physical expression of irrationality, feeling and emotion.”³ Bodily practices were therefore seen as “primitive” and “uncivilised.”

In remarks on gestural language in the Hebrew Bible of a century or two ago one still detects a bias towards this mode of expression. Mackie, for example, notes at the end of the 19th century: “Gesture is much resorted to by Orientals in the communication of their thoughts and expression of their feelings. ... Where we control our feelings, *they are controlled by them.*”⁴ This notion of “primitivism” as far as this type of communication is concerned, is also evident in Vorwahl’s remark on Oriental gestural language: “... am ausgeprägtesten findet sie sich bei den Völkern Asiens, *die sich nicht scheuen, ihren Gefühlen freien Lauf zu lassen.*”⁵

That this medium of communication was of fundamental importance in the ancient world, however, is clear from an observation made by Petermann, a traveller to the ancient Near East in the 19th century:

„Bei der Begrüssung wie beim Ausdruck des Dankes fahren sie mit der rechten Hand nach unten, gleichsam um Staub von dem Boden zu nehmen, dann nach der Brust, dem Mund und der Stirn, und die Untergebenen ergreifen die Rechte des Höheren, küssen sie und legen sie dann zum

¹ This contribution is an adapted version of an article published in the Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages 24/1 (1998), 141-164.

² Farnell, *Gesture* 536.

³ Farnell, *Gesture* 537.

⁴ Mackie, *Gestures* 162 (my emphasis).

⁵ Vorwahl, *Gebärdensprache* 5.

Zeichen der Unterwürfigkeit auf ihren Kopf ... wenn sie etwas bejahen wollen, so schütteln sie mit dem Kopfe ... wollen sie bemerklich machen, dass sie keinen Anteil an einer Sache haben, so greifen sie mit der rechten Hand an den oberen Rockzipfel und schütteln ihn.“⁶

Note that this manner of communicating testifies to a total absence of speech.

If one glances through the indexes and tables of contents of Hebrew Bible encyclopaedias, however, one usually searches in vain for an entry on “non-verbal communication”/“gesture”/ „Gebärden“.⁷ Yet the phenomenon of non-verbal communication is such a fundamental ingredient of human nature that no culture, including that of the Hebrew Bible, can be fully comprehended without also taking cognisance of this central characteristic. Very often one comes across the description of some or other kind of nonverbal behaviour. Already at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, where the story of creation is recounted, a certain emotion is expressed in a nonverbal fashion (Gen 3:8). A little later (Gen 4) we hear that Cain became very angry and again this inner feeling is manifested in a nonverbal manner: “his face fell” (v.5).⁸ Fortunately the subject of nonverbal communication has gained in popularity in recent decades, especially in the social-scientific disciplines of psychology and anthropology⁹ and this also has a positive impact on the study of the similar evidence in the ancient Mediterranean/classical and ancient Near Eastern worlds.¹⁰

One of the first landmark investigations on the study of this phenomenon in the ancient Mediterranean world is the one by Sittl¹¹ (1890). At more or less the same time Goldziher (1886) conducted an investigation into the gesture and sign language of the ancient Arabs¹² and placed special emphasis on the fact that gestural language was the normal and not the exceptional means of expression for that part of the world. Half a century later Vorwahl (1932)¹³ published his study, which is limited to the ancient Israelite culture. In the course of time the focus of attention became broader, but also more and more specific. Gruber

⁶ Goldziher, *Geberden* 370.

⁷ See, however, the fine contribution by Burke, *Gesture*.

⁸ For the nonverbal expression of emotions, cf. Kruger, *Emotions, with literature*.

⁹ See especially the studies by Poyatos, particularly *Poyatos, Perspectives, and Poyatos, Communication*.

¹⁰ For the former, see e.g. Botha, *Gesture, with literature*, and more recently Boegehold, *Gesture*.

¹¹ Sittl, *Gebärden*.

¹² Goldziher, *Geberden*.

¹³ Vorwahl, *Gebärdensprache*.

(1980)¹⁴ restricts his examination to only one sphere of life, viz. the emotional-expressive side. The advantage of his work is that semantic parallels from Mesopotamia and Ugarit are likewise taken into account. With regard to the provenance of law, the fine studies of Viberg (1990, on the Hebrew Bible)¹⁵ and Malul (1988, on Mesopotamia)¹⁶ may be mentioned. Malul continued his research along the same lines and in 2002 produced his *magnum opus*,¹⁷ which should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in the cultural-symbolic fundamentals underlying the ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew Bible worlds. This (physically heavy) monograph is exemplary in the sense that it traces, amongst other things, the significance of any piece of symbolic evidence in the minutest details of Hebrew Bible narratives.¹⁸

The exploration of nonverbal information in iconographic sources, likewise, did not lag behind and one of the first investigations on this topic was by Müller (1937)¹⁹. It was taken further by, amongst others, Keel in his pioneering iconographic study on the conceptual and symbolic world of the peoples of the ancient Near East, and especially the Bible world (1972, first edition).²⁰

The more modest aim of this contribution is to illustrate, on the basis of only two examples from the Hebrew Bible (Gen 39 and the Ruth novella), the interesting perspectives that may be opened up if the explicit focus is directed to some (sometimes apparently insignificant) nonverbal-symbolic details in these narrative accounts, which, in the traditional way of reading/exegesis, are mostly overlooked.

2. The significance of legal symbolic acts in narrative literature

In many so-called pre-industrial societies (sometimes also called “performative cultures”)²¹ the weakness of literacy explains the importance of symbolic acts. Legal results were not written, but symbolically “acted;” as Maine aptly remarks: “Gestures and words took the place of written technical phra-

¹⁴ Gruber, Aspects.

¹⁵ Viberg, Symbols.

¹⁶ Malul, Studies.

¹⁷ Malul, Knowledge.

¹⁸ Besides these contributions, cf. also the seminal study by Kilmer, Gestures. See also Kruger, Hem; Kruger, Significance; Kruger, Acts.

¹⁹ Müller, Darstellungen.

²⁰ Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik. For more recent contributions along the same lines, cf. Dominicus, Gesten, and Choksky, Reverence.

²¹ See Hibbits, Senses.

seology.”²² It was only in the thirteenth century, when state bureaucracies started to grow and helped to spread literacy, that this situation changed.²³

One of the areas in the ancient Near East where “symbolic acts” played an important role was in establishing or dissolving agreements or relationships.²⁴ Viberg,²⁵ referred to above, explores the significance of various of these “acts” in the Hebrew Bible context. If one glances through his Table of Contents, it is interesting to note that the overwhelming majority of instances he lists focus on the constitution of relationships, such as “shaking the hand,” “anointing the head with oil,” “transferring the mantle,” “sharing a meal,” “piercing the ear of a slave,” “covering the prospective wife with a mantle” and “putting the child on the knee.” In the case of the opposite, viz. the dissolution of an association, only one example is supplied, viz. “the removal of the sandal.” In this connection he could have included a couple more rituals representative of the legal nuance of dissociation, like (i) “the washing of the hands” (Deut 21:6-7);²⁶ (ii) “the shaking of the fold of the robe” (Neh 5:13); (iii) “the stripping of the garment” (Ezek 26:16; Hos 2:5-12); (iv) “the symbolic activity of driving someone out into the street;” and (v) “leaving the garment in someone’s hand” (Gen 39:12). The first four examples have been discussed elsewhere²⁷ and I will not elaborate on them further. I will deal only with the last example (Gen 39:12), the legal significance of which is usually overlooked in exegetical expositions.

2.1 Leaving the garment in another’s hand (Gen 39:12)

The item of clothing, being an extension of the bearer’s personality, was of the utmost importance in the ancient Near Eastern legal sphere.²⁸ In Genesis 39 we come across another survival of such a legal rite relating to clothing, but, as mentioned above, it is not commonly regarded in this light. The legal meaning of the ritual is confirmed by the appearance of a similar one in comparable circumstances in the Wisdom Book of Ahiqar (see below). The episode in Genesis recounts the encounter between Joseph and the wife of Potiphar and how he managed to escape her advances. At the beginning her designs on him

²² Maine, Law 286. See also Schmidt-Wiegand, *Gebärdensprache*.

²³ Schmitt, *Rationale* 59.

²⁴ See Munn-Rankin, *Diplomacy*; Kruger, *Acts*; Hillers, *Rite*, and more recently Malul, *Idioms*.

²⁵ Viberg, *Symbols*.

²⁶ He refers to this act, but does not discuss it further for he regards it as a borderline case: “legal acts within cultic law” (Viberg, *Symbols* 4).

²⁷ See Malul, *Studies* 97-100.335-337, and Kruger, *Acts* 166-168.

²⁸ Petschow, *Gewand(saum)* 318-319.

were merely of a “nonverbal” nature (“she looked up at him,” literally: “raised her eyes to him,” v.7a), but it was not long before she started enticing him with her verbal propositions (“lie with me,” v.7b, 10). And when all these attempts failed, she went over to calculated action. This happened one day while Joseph was busy with his royal duties in his master’s house: “She grabbed him by his cloak and said: ‘lie with me.’ But he left his cloak in her hand and fled out of the house” (v.12).

Two distinct gestures are described, each signifying a different intention: the first one is performed by Potiphar’s wife and the second one by Joseph. The first one (“to grab”: **שָׁפַט**) not only has a definite sexual connotation,²⁹ but at the same time has a clear juridical nuance pointing to a „*zeichenhafte(r) Besitzanspruch*“.³⁰

Joseph’s gesture, on the other hand, is likewise not an automatic reflex in order to elude her grasp. That Potiphar’s wife must have been cognisant of the juridical significance of Joseph’s gesture becomes evident when one listens carefully to her version of the story to her household. She manipulates an important piece of evidence in her favour. Instead of saying that he left the cloak “in her hand” (v.13), she makes the claim that he left it “near” (**אֵצֶל**) her (v.15) so as to shift the blame to Joseph and make it appear that he was the initiator.³¹ That Joseph’s action could not have been accidental, but was invested with specific juridical content, becomes apparent when comparing it with a parallel ritual in similar circumstances in the Wisdom Book of Ahiqar (Saying 77).³² The text runs as follows:

If a wicked man grasps the fringe of your garment,
leave it in his hand.
Then join³³ Shamash,
he (will) take what is his and will give it to you.

As in the case of the Joseph narrative, the *dramatis personae* each performs a separate rite: the wicked man resorts to a gesture (“grasping the fringe of the garment”) which is widely attested in different ancient Near Eastern social and

²⁹ See e.g. Prov 7:13 and Kottsieper, El 32.

³⁰ Liwak, *ips* 735.

³¹ Hamilton, Book 467.

³² Lindenberger, Proverbs 174. Designated by Kottsieper, El 36, and Cowley, Papyri 225 as Column xii:13-14, and Sayings 171-172, respectively.

³³ This rendering stems from Kottsieper, El 36, who connects the root with the GT of *dnh* in Syriac and Mandaic. Lindenberger, Proverbs 174, suggests “appeal” and Cowley, Papyri 225, “approach” (with a question mark). See also the recent translation of Niehr, Aḥiqar 45, who opts for “Zuflucht nehmen.”

religious contexts as having varying significations.³⁴ In line with Ugaritic texts such as Ugaritic KTU 1.6 II 9-11, Hebrew Bible passages such as 1 Sam 15:27 and Zech 8:23, such a gesture could be regarded as an act of supplication in order to persuade someone to hearken to a plea.³⁵ Our passage is not explicit on the specific content of the petition, but viewed in the light of Gen 39:12 and Prov 7:13 it most probably points to a sexual connotation.³⁶ This, according to the proverb, the victim should resist with all power. To signal that he is serious in his intention to do so, he is summoned “to leave the fringe of his garment” in the hand of the adversary.

The possession of someone’s hem could, however, have a negative connotation. This is known from several Mari letters where the “prophet” puts himself under the domination and authority of another (in that case the king) by presenting a piece of his garment and a lock of his hair.³⁷ Westermann explains the Genesis passage (v.13) in the same vein. He writes: „Jetzt sieht sie sein Gewand; sie nimmt wahr dass er es in ihrer Hand zurückgelassen hatte. ‘In meiner Hand’, d.h. im Hebräischen auch: ‘in meiner Gewalt’“.³⁸ This could be the significance when viewed from the perspective of the antagonist, but definitely not from that of the protagonist. A much closer parallel is found in ancient Near Eastern treaty texts, where various rituals were performed by the contracting parties on the occasion of the establishment of these pacts, such as “to bind the hem of the garment”, “to hold the hem” and “to seize the hem of the garment of X.”³⁹ While the “seizing of the hem of the garment” hints at a gesture of submission (usually the subject was the vassal and the object the Great King), the precise opposite, viz. “the abandoning of the hem of the garment of X”, functions as a ritual of defection.⁴⁰

If we now consider the Ahiqar and Genesis passages against this background, it is important to note that the gesture of “the leaving of the garment in the hand,” like “the abandoning of the hem,” marks the conclusion of a certain process. It juridically communicates the final spatial separation from a potentially negative sphere. In the Ahiqar example the nuance of finality is even more distinct: only when the intention of dissociation is given public (and juridical) expression by the performance of the ritual, then (note the temporal

³⁴ Kruger, Significance.

³⁵ Kruger, Significance.

³⁶ See e.g. Kottsieper, El 36-37.

³⁷ Ellermeier, Prophetie 102-103.

³⁸ Westermann, Genesis 37-50.63.

³⁹ See Munn-Rankin, Diplomacy 91-92, and Kruger, Significance.

⁴⁰ Munn-Rankin, Diplomacy 91-92; McCarthy, Treaty 89.

“then”[אָדער]: “*then* join Shamash”) the victim may deem himself fit to constitute a new alliance, this time with the sacred sphere.⁴¹

3. Some aspects of nonverbal communication in the Ruth novella

The Ruth novella has been painstakingly explored from various literary angles: syntactically, semantically, rhetorically, structurally, etc. The equally vital source of nonverbal information is mostly neglected or not adequately attended to. In the study of classical literature more attention has thus far been devoted to this theme and many positive results have been obtained through such analyses.⁴²

If it is borne in mind (according to the expert on nonverbal communication, Poyatos) that

- (i) a substantial part of any narrative text is aimed at describing nonverbal activity;
- (ii) that the author, by so doing, acknowledges the limitation of a written-typographical presentation; and
- (iii) that the ratio between verbal and nonverbal activities must be an indication of certain characteristics of the writers,⁴³

then the investigation of any narrative from this perspective, including Hebrew Bible accounts, can be most rewarding and fruitful. Especially profitable are those aspects which are “produced by the human body as a socializing organism.”⁴⁴ Subjects of enquiry could be the following: physique and personal appearance, bodily signals (gestures, postures, bodily movements), facial expressions and bodily contact (e.g. territoriality, spatial behaviour / proxemics).⁴⁵ This type of information is present in any narrative text to a lesser or greater degree, depending on the overall artistic design of the writer.

Most of the categories relating to nonverbal communication are also present in the Ruth story and likewise merit a detailed investigation. It is not my objective here, however, to investigate them all. What I will do in this section is to make a few observations on the representation of the category “proxemics” (spatial behaviour) in this novella, and more specifically on Chapters 2 and 3, where the first encounter between the main characters, Boaz and Ruth, is

⁴¹ See Kottsieper, El 36.

⁴² See e.g. Poyatos, Forms; Lateiner, Communication; Holoka, Communication; Boegehold, Gesture. For similar investigations regarding the Joseph and David stories in the Hebrew Bible, cf. Matthews, Anthropology, and Prouser, Throne, respectively.

⁴³ Poyatos, Forms 296-297.

⁴⁴ Poyatos, Forms 297.

⁴⁵ See Holoka, Communication, who investigates these categories in classical literature.

recorded. Proxemics in these two chapters reveals a lot about the inner emotional stances of the characters.

Hall defines proxemics as the “interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture.”⁴⁶ He further holds that “Writers, like painters, are often concerned with space. The success in communicating perception depends upon the use of visual and other clues to convey *different* degrees of closeness.”⁴⁷ One of Hall’s most important contributions is his discrimination of four distance zones: intimate, personal, social and public. It is important, he says, “to recognise these various zones of involvement and the activities, relationships, and emotions associated with each.”⁴⁸ The *intimate distance*, for example, begins with a close phase (“the distance of love-making and wrestling, comforting and protecting”),⁴⁹ and a far phase where “heads, thighs, and pelvis are not easily brought into contact but hands can reach and grasp extremities.”⁵⁰ The next “zone of involvement” is *personal distance*. In the close phase interactants can reach out and touch each other, but at the far phase they can do so only if they extend their limbs. The physical location signals the nature of the relationship: the closer, the more involved. In *social distance* the important social interactions are the modalities of hearing and seeing. In far social distances social interactions can be terminated or initiated without rudeness. Finally, he also distinguishes a *public distance* domain where the mandatory recognition of the others is no longer socially required.⁵¹

An examination of Ruth 2 and the first part of Chapter 3 in terms of these “zones of involvement” reveals much about the inner motivations and emotions of the characters. It appears that there is a subtle interplay between the different social distances. At the beginning the characters maintain a public distance, but as the relationships develop there is a distinct movement through social to personal space and a final culmination in the invasion of intimate space. These shifts are communicated by gestures and nonverbal actions which are skilfully co-ordinated with the politeness in speech.⁵²

When Boaz and Ruth see each other for the first time (Ruth 2:3), it is on the level of *public distance*. Ruth is one of those (according to the Levitical regulation in Lev 19:9-10 dealing with the poor and foreigners) who are allowed to

⁴⁶ Hall, Dimension 1.

⁴⁷ Hall, Dimension 94.

⁴⁸ Hall, Dimension 129.

⁴⁹ Hall, Dimension 110.

⁵⁰ Hall, Dimension 111.

⁵¹ See also Harper / Wiens / Matarazzo, Communication 246-247.

⁵² For a study of the latter phenomenon, see Ehlich, *Historicity*.

gather ears of grain behind the reapers. For Boaz she is part of the public domain; therefore he refrains from addressing her directly. He inquires through his foreman about her identity (“To whom does this young lady [הַנְּעִרָה] belong”?, v.5).

When he addresses her for the first time (v.8), she is promoted to his *social space*. Indicative of this new status is the manner in which he addresses her: “my daughter” (בְּרִי). Ehlich⁵³ regards such a form of address as acceptance into the clan. Being part now of Boaz’s social space, she is consequently allowed to share his water sources and to be placed under his protection (v.9). Commenting on this “informal status” granted to her here (v.8), Hubbard remarks: “... here she stepped from ‘outside’ Israel to the outer edge of the ‘inner’ circle.”⁵⁴

In a subsequent move she is drawn into his *personal zone* of involvement. This happens when she is invited to their communal meal (v.14). Compare Sasson’s insightful remark in this respect: “It is to be noted that this act of sitting on the same side as the reapers must certainly have implied acceptance in the ‘familia.’ Beyond receiving water promised her in verse 9, she is now to share in the communal meal. Furthermore, Boaz himself introduces her in the circle of his family by presenting her with the first handfuls of roasted grain ... It is not impossible that this act of Boaz was ceremonial, perhaps quasi-legal, in nature.”⁵⁵

The invasion of *intimate space* is reported at the beginning of Chapter 3 in the well-known scene of the threshing floor. The vocabulary of these verses contains a number of words with *double entendre*, and I will not comment upon this further.⁵⁶ What is of interest here, however, is the manner in which Ruth intrudes on Boaz’s intimate space. This takes place in two stages. With the first move she comes within “the distance of love-making” (Hall). That happens when she quietly at midnight “bares the region of his legs and lies down” (v.7). Whatever the precise nature of this activity, or its exact locus (“at the feet” / “beside him”),⁵⁷ it was at close enough physical distance to disturb him in his slumber.

Having invaded Boaz intimate sphere, she also assumes a new social role definition: “She takes egalitarian role labels while rejecting subservient ones,” as Berquist quite correctly remarks.⁵⁸ This becomes evident when one takes note of how she presents herself in this new situation. At the initial meeting

⁵³ Ehlich, *Historicity* 82.

⁵⁴ Hubbard, *Book* 156.

⁵⁵ Sasson, *Ruth* 55.

⁵⁶ See the commentary by Bush, *Ruth*.

⁵⁷ For this rendering, see Bush, *Ruth* 158, and Zenger, *Ruth* 67. See also Sasson, *Ruth* 93.

⁵⁸ Berquist, *Role dedifferentiation* 30.

between her and Boaz she was still regarded as a foreigner (2:6), a little later she is upgraded to a “slave-girl” (שפחה; 2:13) and here in Chapter 3:9 she speaks of herself as a “servant” (אמה), which is appreciably higher on the social ladder than a “slave-girl.”⁵⁹ By referring to herself in this manner, she identifies herself as a woman “who might be taken as a concubine or as a wife.”⁶⁰ She then accordingly challenges Boaz to take the final (proxemic) step: “Spread your robe over your maidservant” (v.9). “The spreading of the hem of the garment over the wife” refers to a marriage proposal.⁶¹ By accepting this invitation, which he (according to Chapter 4) formally does, he extends his intimate sphere to enfold hers. With this gesture he solemnly declares his willingness to protect, to comfort and to sustain her and through this he acts as the new provider, the role Ruth has been fulfilling for both herself and Naomi up to that moment.

4. Concluding remarks

I have touched only on two exemplary cases of the much larger field of “nonverbal” communication in the Hebrew Bible. There still remain very interesting aspects to explore. The whole field of religious symbolism, as evidenced in especially the cultic texts in the Pentateuch, still awaits thorough investigation.⁶² Another interesting theme could be nonverbal communication as indicator of social values. A volume of essays edited by Bremmer and Roodenburg⁶³ investigating this aspect in the classical, medieval and the modern worlds, has shown what interesting insights can be gained through such analyses.

Summary

This contribution draws the attention anew to the relative neglect of the phenomenon of nonverbal communication in Hebrew Bible encyclopaedias. After a short survey of the most important studies published thus far on this topic in the fields of ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew Bible studies, a passage in the Joseph story (Gen 39:12) and some indicators of the nonverbal category “proxemics” (spatial behaviour) in the Ruth novella are selected as cases in point. This illustrates what interesting perspectives may be gained if the explicit focus is directed to some of these (apparently insignificant) nonverbal-symbolic details in these narrative accounts.

⁵⁹ Sasson, Ruth 80.

⁶⁰ Sasson, Ruth 81.

⁶¹ Kruger, Hem; Viberg, Symbols 136-137; Malul, Knowledge 224 n. 283.

⁶² See e.g., Wright, Disposal; Gorman, Ideology, and Klingbeil, Study.

⁶³ Schmitt, Rationale. See e.g. also Kruger, Indications, and Choksky, Reverence, for references relating to the ancient Near Eastern world.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz lenkt die Aufmerksamkeit erneut auf die relative Missachtung des Phänomens nonverbaler Sprache in Lexika der hebräischen Bibel. Nach einem kurzen Überblick über die wichtigsten Studien, die auf diesem Gebiet publiziert worden sind, werden eine Passage in der Josef-Geschichte (Gen 39:12) und einige Anzeigen der nonverbalen Kategorie „proxemics“ (Räumlichkeit) in der Ruth-Novelle als typische diesbezügliche Beispiele gewählt. Es wird angezeigt, welche interessanten Perspektiven gewonnen werden können, wenn einige dieser (scheinbar unbedeutenden) nonverbalen symbolischen Einzelheiten in diesen Erzählungen besondere Beachtung finden.

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