

Postures and Gestures

The Bible includes many references to what we call “body language,” movements or positions of the body that convey meaning within a particular culture. Israelites may have even had a form of sign language (cf Lk 1:62).

Just as words and symbolism must be interpreted, biblical postures and gestures likewise require interpretation. Many of the postures and gestures below will be the same or similar to postures and gestures you use today. However, others are surprisingly different. This list includes wording from both the ESV and the more literal/traditional KJV, which helps round out the expressions for postures and gestures that appear in the original languages. To discover more examples of an expression, consult the concordance, pp 2243–2372.

anger kindled/hot. Literally describes the “burning” of a person’s nose, which grows flush red with anger (Ex 4:14).

beat the breast. Striking the chest with one or both hands to indicate sorrow (Lk 18:13).

bless. Could involve kneeling and laying on of hands (see below). See p 842.

blush. Sign of guilt or shame (Ezr 9:6).

bold face. Intensely confident (Pr 7:13).

bow. Synonymous with worship toward God (Ex 4:31; 34:8; Ps 95:6; 1Sm 1:28; see note, Ex 33:10) or respect and service for a human being (Gn 33:3; 43:26–28; 1Sm 20:41; 28:14; Est 3:2). God expressly forbade bowing to false gods (Ex 20:4–5). People also bowed to (1) greet someone (Gn 18:2; 19:1), (2) signal humility and repentance (Ezr 9:5; 10:1), and (3) express thanks (Gn 24:52). Bows were done in a variety of ways (1Ch 29:20; 1Ki 18:42; Ne 8:6) and likely included tilting the head, tilting the upper body, kneeling with one’s face to the ground, or lying prostrate. The more elaborate the bow, the greater the expression of devotion or emotion (cf Gn 33:3). See fall.

capture with eyelashes. Probably fluttering the eyelids in order to make eye contact with a potential lover (Pr 6:25).

clap. Expressing joy (Ps 47:1) through rhythm. See p 993. However, clapping the hands at someone expresses derision (Jb 27:23).

color changed. Pale from shock or anxiety (Dn 5:6–9).

come before the LORD. Draw near to the place of sacrifice with intent to worship and pray (Mi 6:6). See “presence,” p 843.

cry tears. See weep.

embrace. Hugging to express great affection, which may have included kissing (Gn 33:4).

face fallen. Likely refers to a frown resulting from disappointment.

face shine. To smile or “beam” at someone (Nu 6:25; Ps 4:6).

fall. Extreme form of bowing, expressing repentance (Gn 50:18), fearful submission (Nu 22:31), awe (Nu 24:4; 22:31), pleading (Nu 14:5), humility (Nu 16:4, 22, 45; 20:6; Lk 8:41), worship (Lk 17:16), or grief (Mk 14:35).

feet signals. Scraping the dirt to alert a partner (Pr 6:13). The signs made are not known.

fold the hands. Sign of idleness (Pr 6:10).

gape the mouth. Shouting widemouthed in a threatening manner (Jb 16:10).

gnash teeth. Bare and grit teeth as expression of anger (Jb 16:9).

groan. Translates various words for sighing to express mourning or complaint (Ex 2:23).

hand of fellowship. Like the modern handshake, a gesture of friendship and goodwill (2Ki 10:15; Gal 2:9).

haughty eyes. Raising eyelids or tilting head upward as gesture of superiority over another person (Ps 18:27).

hide the face. Expresses fear or shame (Ex 3:6).

hiss. Breathe out forcefully, usually to express derision (1Ki 9:8). However, it is also translated “whistle” as an act of summoning someone (Is 7:18; cf 5:26 KJV).

hold the tongue. Refrain from speaking.

incline the ear. Bend the head in order to hear someone, eager to learn from or about that person (Is 55:3).

kiss. Hbr verb may describe pursing of the lips (Pr 24:26). Kissing was a sign of greeting and great affection toward family members, friends, and countrymen. A kiss might be placed on the neck or cheek (cf Gn 33:4), the hand or foot (cf Ex 18:7; Lk 7:45), or the lips. Scripture rarely notes the placement of a kiss because the usual social customs would have been obvious to the readers. Kissing someone’s hand or foot showed humility and submission. The wording of Lk 7:45 shows that kissing the feet was an unusual gesture. Idols were kissed as an act of worship (1Ki 19:18; Hos 13:2).

kneel. Form of bowing (see “bow”) sometimes used in prayer (1Ki 8:54; Ezr 9:5; Dn 6:10; Lk 22:41; Ac 7:60). Israelites usually stood while praying.

laugh. Expression of derision and scorn. See p 1335.

lay hands on. Positively, to bestow a blessing or appoint for service (see bless). Negatively, to arrest (Ne 13:21) or to transfer guilt to a sacrificial animal (Ex 29:10).

lift up the eyelids. See haughty eyes.

lift up the eyes. Expression for directing sight toward something distant (Gn 13:14).

lift up the face. To look toward someone with confidence or care (see face shine).

lift up hands. Various uses: (1) Common posture of prayer or praise—standing, face raised to the heavens, arms held out and up with palms upward (Ex 17:11; Lm 2:19; Ps 28:2; 63:4; 119:48; 134:2; 141:2; 1Tm 2:8). For prayer, this posture shows the need and expectancy of the one who prays. For praise, it captures both the outer and inner attitudes that accompany devotion. Early Christians regarded this posture as an emblem of Jesus’ crucifixion. (2) Taking a vow to signify the truth of what one says (Dt 32:40). (3) Act of blessing (Lv 9:22; Lk 24:50).

mincing. Taking short, choppy steps; used by women to draw attention to the movement of their legs and lower torso (Is 3:16).

point. Sinister or obscene gesture (Pr 6:13; Is 58:9).

prostrate. See bow.

purse the lips. Gesture to kiss (with intent to deceive), or signal to a partner (Pr 16:30).

right hand. See p 843.

salute. Greeting that likely involved a gesture.

set the face. Turn toward someone or something with fixed determination.

shake hand. See wave.

shake the feet. Gesture of derision toward the inhabitants of a place, removing even the dust that belongs to their land (Mt 10:14; Ac 13:51).

sigh. See groan.

sit. Sermons and authoritative pronouncements were normally delivered while sitting (Mt 5:1–2; 23:2; Lk 4:20–21). A person sat to mourn (cf Jb 2:13; Ps 137:1; Ne 1:4). However, in 1Ch 17:16, David “sat before the LORD” while praying thankfully—the only OT reference to sitting as a position for prayer. In the examples of mourning and praying, sitting probably signifies shock or amazement.

smite. Strike someone or something as expression of anger or act of punishment (Is 53:4).

spit. To express derision. However, see note, Mk 8:23.

spread out hands. Posture of prayer (1Ki 8:22; Ps 44:20; 88:9). See lift up hands.

stand. Expression of readiness to serve (Gn 18:8, 22; 1Ki 17:1; 2Ch 34:31), the common posture for prayer (Jb 30:20; Mt 6:5; Mk 11:25; cf 1Ki 8:14) and also of worship (Ne 9:4–5). In Ne 8:5, the people stand to show their respect for the public reading of God’s Word.

stare. Fixing eyes on someone due to amazement.

step. See tread.

stiffen the neck. Description of stubbornness, referring to an ox, donkey, or horse that will not turn (Jer 17:23).

stretch out hands. (1) Gesture of prayer that turns into reaching, a sign of longing for God’s help (Ex 17:12; 1Ki 8:38; Ps 143:6). See lift up hands. (2) Directional motion (Ex 14:16, 21, 26–27; Jsh 8:18).

stretch out the neck. See haughty eyes.

strike the hands. Gesture showing support or agreement between two parties (Is 2:6). See note, Pr 17:18. However, see also clap.

tear clothes. Symbol of one’s heart or feelings being ripped apart by grief (Gn 37:29).

tears. See weep.

tread. To walk on a place or a person symbolized ownership or dominance. See note, Ru 4:8.

wag the head. To express derision (Ps 64:8).

wail. See weep.

wave. Hand motion to get someone’s attention. See note, Lv 7:30–35.

weep. Expression of sorrow or regret (Ne 1:4), but also of joy (Gn 46:29). On mourning practices, see note, Jb 1:20.

whistle. See hiss.

wink the eye. Gesture used as a signal, possibly alerting a partner to act treacherously (Pr 16:30).