

Acheiropoietos: 'Made Without Hands' - The Lord's Work of Resurrection and Salvation

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Revision Table

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In this paper I will identify several monotheistic and monergistic verbal expressions from the Hebrew Old Testament. I will then demonstrate that these ideas and phrases interacted and developed over time via a series of linguistic steps which led ultimately to the creation of a specific Greek word by early Christian communities.¹ This word was used to describe the role of God's power in several aspects of Christian salvation. Specifically, this article examines the origin and usage of the early Christian word ἀχειροποίητος, 'made without (human) hands.'²

Contrasting the Work of the Hands of the Creator and of the Craftsman

The monotheistic basis of the Jewish faith is expressed in a variety of ways in the Hebrew scriptures. One primary component of that teaching is the fundamental idea that the Lord God is the unique creator of heaven and earth (Gen 1.1; 2.1–2). According to this idea, all created things derive directly or indirectly from this original work of creation which the Lord God alone has done (Gen 2.4). And thus it follows that there is no god like him. He is above all created things and thus he alone is to be worshiped (Deut 33.26; Exod 8.10; 1 Sam 2.2; 2 Sam 7.22; 1 Kgs 8.23; Ps 86.8). As an expression of the uniqueness of the Creator, Israel confessed: 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one.' (Deut 6.4). This confession of the Lord God as 'one' served to distinguish Israel's Lord God from 'other' gods, the gods of the nations.³ He is true God. They are false gods, idols.

¹ All references given are to the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise noted. Abbreviations used for names of the various books are those given in Billie Jean. Collins, *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014). Hebrew words are referenced via transliteration as per the Academic Style of transliteration suggested in *The SBL Handbook of Style* as implemented on the website www.transliterate.com.

² For similar observations and treatment of another early Christian *testimonia* theme see 'Christian deification and the early Testimonia,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 53, no. 3 (1999): 289-304.

³ This Jewish confessional usage of the word 'one' was inherited by the early Christians (e.g. Rom 3.30; 1 Cor 8.4–6; Gal 3.20; Eph. 4.6) and eventually became embedded in the Nicene Creed's monotheistic phrases: 'I believe in one God ... in one Christ ... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord'.

Related to the above, are the ideas that the creation was God's 'work' (Gen 2.2) and the idea that mankind was created to labor within the creation, to 'work and to keep' Eden (Gen 2.15). There is no mention of 'hands' in relation to divine or human work in the Genesis creation chapters but this connection is made explicitly in other places.⁴

An important example of 'work' and 'hands' language for the topic of this paper are the numerous texts which emphasize the contrast between the idol made by the hands of a craftsman and the Lord God, who is the maker of heaven and earth (e.g. Jer 10.3–5). A key text from the Pentateuch introduces this language:

The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. (Deut 4.27–28)⁵

The contrast is clearly made via this phraseology. The idols are made of wood and stone; He has created all things including wood and stone. They do not 'see, nor hear, nor smell', that is, they are not alive; He is the source from which all life comes. He has made all things in heaven and on earth; they are literally fabricated by the hands of a man.

⁴ This appears in a negative sense in Gen 5.29 where regarding Noah it is said by his father, 'Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.' This connection between work and hands appears many times in other texts in both positive and negative senses.

The anthropomorphism referring specifically to the creation as the work of the 'hands of God' is relatively uncommon, but does occur, for example, in Isa 45.12, 'I made the earth and created man on it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host.'

⁵ The Hebrew phrase is literally the 'works of the hands of man'. In the Septuagint it is ἔργοις χειρῶν ἀνθρώπων.

This same pejorative expression of the idols being made by the hands of man is repeated in many other Old Testament monotheistic texts.⁶ In some places other materials are mentioned besides wood and stone, especially gold and silver. But the idea is precisely the same. And in some texts the genitive phrase 'of man' is changed to the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person possessive pronoun, to change the phrase to work(s) of 'our hands', 'your hands', or 'their hands'. For example, in Jer 1.16 God states, 'I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands.'⁷ This change of phrase was intended to be particularly mocking in spirit. It pokes fun at those people who would worship an object they themselves have made rather than the Lord God who made them and their physical hands.⁸

⁶ For example, in 2 Kgs 19. 17–19, Hezekiah prays to God regarding the approaching army of Sennacherib,

Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone.

See also 2 Chr 32.19; Isa 37.19.

⁷ See also 2 Kgs 22.17; Hos 14.3; Jer 25.6; 44.8.

⁸ This mocking is made explicit by many other texts of the prophetic books. See, for example, Isa 46.5–7.

Via such usage, the Hebrew phrase 'works of the hands of men' or 'works of your hands' became a functional monotheistic commonplace in Hebrew, which could be used as a direct substitute for 'idols'.⁹ For example, it stands as an equivalent parallel with 'other gods' in 2 Kgs 22.17.

Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched.

'Worthless Gods' as a Synonym for 'Idols'

The influence of this idea of idols as lowly works of human hands can be observed also in its influence on the translation of the Hebrew word 'ēlîlî in the Septuagint. The root of this word refers to 'something weak', 'feeble', or 'worthless'. In the plural, 'ēlîlîm, 'worthless things', the word is used to mean 'worthless gods', or 'idols'.¹⁰ Here the original disdain expressing idols as poor quality objects 'made by human hands' is easily detected. And if one places the words side by side.

God - 'ēlōhîm

idols - 'ēlîlîm

⁹ This same type of verbiage is presented in Acts 19.26 as being used by a pagan silversmith, when he complains that Paul 'has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods (οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοὶ οἱ διὰ χειρῶν γινόμενοι).'

The phraseology was most likely not native to the pagan craftsman. Instead, his words are an echo of Paul's monotheistic preaching against the works created by the craftsman, which preaching likely used the well known Old Testament phrase 'made with hands.' Thus this text is a clue to the ongoing usage of this monotheistic phraseology against pagan idols in early Christian preaching.

¹⁰ So in Lev 19.4: 'Do not turn to worthless things (idols) nor make to yourselves molten gods.' (RSV)

the similarity is easy to see. And if one recalls that these two words have very different root word origins, then one can safely suggest this was a purposeful word play by the Hebrew authors. It is a Hebraism used to mock the false gods and those who would worship them.

'Worthless gods' as 'Things Made by Hands'

Importantly, when this Hebrew word was translated in the Septuagint a literal translation of 'worthless things' into Greek was apparently considered too obscure to be understood, as is often the case with moving word plays from one language to another. So some books within the Greek Old Testament handled this by moving directly to the word εἶδωλον, 'idol'.¹¹ However in other places, especially in the book of Isaiah, the translators made use of a form of a different word: χειροποίητος. This word is an adjective formed by the combination of χεῖρ (hand) and ποιέω (to make), resulting in 'hand made', or 'made by hand'. The plural neuter form, χειροποίητα, meaning 'things made by hand', was used by the translators as a Greek shorthand for 'idols' by using it to translate ʾēlîlîm. For example,

Isa 2.18: 'and the idols (χειροποίητα) shall utterly pass away.'

Isa 19.1 'the idols (χειροποίητα) of Egypt will tremble at his presence'

So in such texts, a Hebrew word for 'idols', based literally upon the root meaning 'worthless', is translated by a Greek word meaning 'things made by hand' or 'hand fabricated things'. And in this way, the Greek word χειροποίητα became closely associated with various monotheistic texts of the Old Testament and the corresponding rejection of lowly hand-made gods. It is important to note that this word is used in the Septuagint only in such contexts.

'Not By Hands': the Works of the One Lord God

¹¹ For example, in Lev 19.4 the Greek has 'οὐκ ἐπακολουθήσετε εἰδώλοις'. The Latin does the same: '*nolite converti ad idola*.' Many English translations do the same.

Once the black and white contrast had been made between the 'works of the hands of man' and the works of the Lord God, it is not surprising that the negative of the phrase "hand-made" would be used to describe the works of the Lord God. That is, God's work could be described as made or done 'not by hand' or 'not by human hand'. Things 'not made by hand' are things divinely created or done by God Himself. It is not common, but the development of this language can be seen already in the Hebrew Old Testament. For example, when contrasting the Lord God to those who are considered powerful in this world, Elihu in Job 34.20 states of such mighty people that, 'In a moment they die; at midnight the people are shaken and pass away, and the mighty are taken away by no human hand.'

The last phrase is somewhat obscure when considered by itself but its meaning is made clear by the immediate context and the recognition that 'by no human hand' is a purposeful contrast to 'by hands of man'. It indicates that the Lord God can remove the mighty 'in a moment'. They can not stand against him. 'By no human hand' is thus equivalent to 'by the Lord God' or 'by the Lord'.

The same phraseology is used in Daniel 2. And importantly this text would become a Christian messianic text. In this chapter, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream and seeks a wise man to explain it to him. God reveals the meaning to Daniel and he approaches the king to explain the dream. Daniel says,

You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, **a stone was cut out by no human hand**, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind

carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth (Dan 2.31–35).¹²

The phrase 'by no human hand' indicates the stone cut from the mountain was not the product of human labor in a quarry. This stone will be cut out by of the Lord God himself. The words and the imagery are highly loaded with implicit meaning when it is contrasted to man-made idols. To early Christians, the stone cut 'not by human hands' was the opposite of a false object of worship made by human hands out of gold or silver, wood or stone. This one is a stone cut out by the Creator God himself.¹³ He is God's own anti-idol, a true God. And so, Daniel concludes, the stone 'not cut by hands' will become a mountain filling all the earth. It is not far indeed from here to the New Testament reference to Christ as the cornerstone upon which the church is established.¹⁴

ἀχειροποίητος: a new Christian Word

As described above, in Job 34.20 the Hebrew phrase 'not by hand' describes how the mighty of this world are taken away by God's powerful action. In Daniel 8, the Hebrew phrase 'and without hand he will be broken' describes how one of the mighty rulers of Daniel's dream will be destroyed by God's action alone. In Daniel 2, the Hebrew 'without hands' describes how the stone which destroys the great

¹² The Hebrew used for 'not by (human) hand' is the same construction as in Job 34.20. The ESV adds 'human' in an attempt to make the translation clearer. The Greek has 'ἀνευ χειρῶν' and the Latin has '*sine manibus*'. See also verse 45.

¹³ This can also be related to the theme of the Lord God as the Rock of Israel. This theme is widely used in the Old Testament and forms yet another thematic contrast to the other worthless rocks, the man made idols of stone.

¹⁴ A study of the Jewish and Christian interpretations of this text are beyond this paper. But suffice it to say that in such a study it would be important to consider texts such as Isa 28.16; Ps 118.22, Matt 21.42, Eph 2.20 and 1 Pet 2.6. The theme of Christ as the 'stone' or 'cornerstone' is one of the most prevalent and enduring themes in the early Christian proof texts of the first several centuries of Christian *testimonia* traditions. For a more complete discussion see *Jewish/Christian Conflict and Origen's Use of the Christian Testimonia Proof Text Tradition*, Diss. University of Nebraska, 2003.

kingdoms of the world is cut from the mountain by the Lord God himself. Each of these phrases forms a contrast with the phrase 'made by human hands'. But, as seen from the foregoing, the precise form of words used to express this contrast varied among the Hebrew authors and their Greek translators. That is, there was no fixed terminology for this idea even up to the date of the writing and translating of Daniel.

It was left to early Greek speaking Christians to make the next linguistic innovation. They created a new word in order to express this Old Testament idea, ἀχειροποίητος (acheiropoiētos). This word was formed by adding the Greek alpha privative to the word χειροποίητος ('made by hand'). The Greek privative alpha serves the same purpose as adding a leading 'a' to words in English, as if prefixing a 'not' to the word.¹⁵ So ἀχειροποίητος is 'not made by hand'.

This adjective should also be considered in light of the Septuagint usage of the neuter plural χειροποίητα (idols), which, as shown earlier, was used as a translation of the Hebrew phrase 'worthless gods.' 'Not made by hand' is then at least in part a Greek derivative from a Greek translation of a Hebrew word play. And with this insight comes recognition of the word's monotheistic connotation of 'not of a false god', or stated positively, 'of the One Lord God'. Or stated directly, only an action carried out by the power of the One Lord God, the Almighty Creator, could be described as 'made without (human) hand(s).'

It is important to note that this word is used neither in earlier secular Greek writers nor in the Septuagint. Historically this term has all the markings of a word created among the very early Christian communities as part of the early creative activity in Jewish Christianity which resulted in many of the early Christian *testimonia* traditions. But unlike other *testimonia* which are often phrases conflated from several specific

¹⁵ So, for example, 'atypical' is 'not typical'.

Old Testament texts and then used as proof texts themselves, this term is a single word, an adjective.

And as such it could be used by Christian authors to modify a variety of nouns as we will see shortly.¹⁶

But first we must take a step back and look at the manner in which the idea of 'not made by human hands' was already part of the Hebrew way of talking about the Lord God's dwelling place or temple and then see how this specific theme was merged with the new Christian word ἀχειροποίητος.

¹⁶ Perhaps because of this variety of applications the typical translation suggested by commonly used Greek lexicons is 'spiritual' or some equivalent. But this completely fails to do the word justice in its early Christian context.

Temple Talk: Sinai as God's Sanctuary Established By His Hands

In the pre-conquest period Horeb was called 'the mountain of God' and is also known as Mt. Sinai.¹⁷

The mountain and the area around it were considered holy, sanctified by the presence of 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exod 3). And it is there at Mt. Sinai that God descended in fire and smoke, called Moses up the mountain, and spoke to Moses from the cloud. (Exod 19–20). And there Moses received the law while the people waited below.

In Exod 15.17, in a well known text within the Song of Moses, presented just after the description of the Exodus from Egypt, it is stated regarding Sinai and Israel that:

You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O Lord, which
you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have estab-
lished.¹⁸

Here an idea is expressed which serves as a background for much subsequent sanctuary and temple language in the Hebrew bible. The idea expressed is that the Lord has established his own sanctuary with his own hands, that is, without human help. And this contrasts with the later man-made temples of the idols of the nations. It also contrasts with the tabernacle Moses constructed at the command of God and according to the pattern he is shown. Likewise Solomon built the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. It was Solomon's 'work' (1 Kgs 7.51) to create such a dedicated building where God's name would dwell.

¹⁷ Exod 3.1; 1 Kgs 19.8. Exodus refers to the mountain as Mt. Sinai in the account of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. Deut 1 refers to the place as Horeb. Exod 3 uses this name when giving the account of Moses and the burning bush. Exod 33.6 calls it 'Mt. Horeb'.

¹⁸ On this text and the interpretations of Sinai as the divine dwelling place established by God's hands as well as the Hebrew idea of the heavenly temple, see David N. Freedman, 'Temple Without Hands,' in *Temples and High Places in Biblical times*, proceedings of Colloquium in Honor of the Centennial Of Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, Jerusalem (Jerusalem: Hebrew Union College, 1977).

Solomon himself is aware of this contrast and states that God is not contained nor dwells exclusively in any building built by men including Solomon's own magnificent temple. Nevertheless, he prays that God would keep his eyes fixed upon this new building and hear the prayers of his people offered toward this building made by his human hands (1 Kgs 8.27–29).

The operational idea here is that God continues to be in his own dwelling place. This is because the Lord is the God of heaven and the earth. And he rules this creation from his throne. Various Old Testament texts describe this as the heavenly throne from which God rules heaven and earth.¹⁹ And this imagery includes the idea that the throne is within the heavenly temple or sanctuary built by God's own hands, that is, without the hands of man (e.g. Ps 11.4). And so it is in agreement with Solomon's words above when Paul standing in the Areopagus states, 'The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man (χειροποιήτοις ναοῖς). (Acts 17.24).

Resurrection 'Made Without Hands': the Power of the Lord God to Make Alive

Many of these Old Testament ideas, themes, and expressions interact via the early Christian usage of the word ἀχειροποίητος. First, in the Gospel of Mark we read that Jesus at his hearing before the high priest is accused of saying 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands (χειροποίητον), and in three days I will build another, not made with hands (ἀχειροποίητον).' (Mk 14.58) The Gospel of John reports Jesus said this as part of the Cleansing of the Temple (John 2.18–21). This text adds the explanation that Christ was speaking 'of the temple of his body', referring to Christ's resurrection. But what does this mean?

Describing the resurrection body of Jesus as ἀχειροποίητος expresses the idea that Christ's resurrection is a powerful action that only the one true God could perform. It is an action beyond any idol, as the

¹⁹ For example, 1 Kgs 22.19; Psa 11.4; 103.19; Isa 66.1. The book of Revelations in the New Testament makes heavy use of this imagery. See Rev 11.19, 14.17, and 15.5.

Lord states, 'there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive.' (Deut 32.39) Accordingly it is likely that early Christian teaching regarding the resurrection was the earliest context for the usage of the word ἀχειροποιήτος. The idea that Jesus was raised from the dead specifically by God's mighty power is embedded very deeply within the early Christian message and is regularly expressed explicitly and implicitly. One example of a Christian traditional confession predating even Paul is reproduced by the him in 1 Cor 15.3–4.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.²⁰

Paul uses this passive construction 'raised' in reference to the resurrection of Jesus many times.²¹ In some places the agent for this action is added. For example, he states that Christ was raised from the dead 'by the glory of the Father' (Rom 6.4). This power of God not only raised Jesus but seated him at the right hand of the Father in heaven, 'according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.' (Eph 1.20) ²²

Other New Testament authors speak similarly. In Acts, Luke reproduces examples of early Christian preaching which regularly speaks of Jesus 'whom God raised from the dead'.²³ Likewise 1 Peter connects the resurrection and the exaltation saying God 'raised him from the dead and gave him glory' (1

²⁰ See also Rom 10.9.

²¹ See Rom 4.24–25; 6.9; 7.4; 1 Cor 15.15–20; 2 Cor 5.15; Gal 1.1; 1 Thess 1.10.

²² The seating of Jesus at the 'right hand' of God is a clear reference to another very important resurrection *testimonium*, the combination of Ps. 110.1 and Ps. 8.6(7) indicating again the early connection made between God's power in making Jesus alive and the exaltation of Jesus to the heavenly throne.

²³ Acts 2.24, 32; 3.26; 4.10; 5.30; 10.40; 13.30; 13.33–37.

Pet 1.21) All of this is summarized in the early Christian confession of Jesus as Lord, or even 'one Lord'²⁴, ruling over all things at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly temple. The letter to the Hebrews states the same thing using the alternative imagery of the heavenly tabernacle, stating that Christ is seated in the tent 'made without hands' which is not of this creation. (Heb 9.11)

From these texts, it is clear how the description 'not made by hands' could easily be applied to Jesus' resurrection as 'not made by human hands'. It expresses that God's power of creation was at work in Jesus' resurrection.

But in the Gospel of Mark Jesus not only described his resurrected body as a temple 'not made by hands.' He also contrasts this body with the Jerusalem temple which was 'made by human hands.' And this is suggestive of the next area where ἀχειροποίητος was applied, in the early contrast made between the Jewish law and the Christian gospel, between the church and the temple.

The Church: New Earthly Temple 'Made Without Hands'

In Col 2.9-13, Paul instructs the church in Colossae to avoid false philosophy and points them to the foundation of Christian teachings instead. In doing so, he weaves together many of the above ideas:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.

²⁴ 1 Cor 8.6; Eph 4.5.

Just as Jesus' resurrection and exaltation is said to be ἀχειροποίητος, the believer is said to be made alive through faith, having been buried with him through baptism, which is the circumcision 'made without hands'. And Paul states in 2 Cor. 5.1-2, that the believer is promised a post-resurrection body which like Christ's is described as ἀχειροποίητος,

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.

These texts pertain to the individual believer. But other texts describe the church collectively as the temple of God. For example, 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?'²⁵ In other places, Paul makes a more complete expression of the metaphor by tying together the ideas of the church as the temple, Jesus as the cornerstone, and God's action of building the church:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Eph 2.19–21).²⁶

²⁵ 1 Cor 3.16. See 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.21; 2 Thess 2.4. Note the connection with the idea of the temple as God's dwelling place. Related to this are expressions which name the church the 'building', 'dwelling place', or 'house' of God such as 1 Cor 3.9.

²⁶ The description of Christ as the cornerstone of the church, God's kingdom, his temple, is derived from yet another important Old Testament Christian *testimonium* Isa 28.16.

therefore thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation.'

Compare Rom 9.33; 1 Pet 2.6–7.

And so the church is the new temple of God. It is God's proper dwelling place built 'without human hands', that is, by his power given in the Gospel and received in faith. In contrast, the church as we see it in this world, like Solomon's temple, is where God visits and reveals his Word and gathers and enlightens his people who gather in that place. But no building or physical place 'built by (human) hands' is the proper eternal dwelling place of God.

So, in summary, the Greek word ἀχειροποίητος , 'made without hands', played an important part in early Christian teaching. I suggest it is likely the word was first created to describe Jesus as 'raised by the power of God.' At the same time it could be used to describe the future promised resurrection of each believer promised to them in their own individual baptism. The term also played a role in the early Christian controversy regarding the applicability of Jewish law and ceremonies to uncircumcised Greek converts to Christianity by contrasting the old temple 'made by hands' and the new 'not made by hands.' In these contexts, this word described Christian salvation as being the work of Lord God alone, beyond any idol. *Soli Deo Gloria.*