



By Bennie R. Crockett, Jr.

Modern studies reveal that about 85-90% of people are right-handed.¹ Despite the dominant right-handed preference, some people exhibit the ability to use either hand for specific tasks, and rare ambidextrous people are able to use either hand equally well.

IN FACT, THE LATIN term *ambidexter*—the basis for the English word “ambidextrous”—derives from the Greek word *amphidexios*, “with two right hands” (meaning, equally handed).

Handedness

Researchers debate the identification of left-handedness with experiences such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, or even the stuttering problem of Great Britain’s King George VI (1895–1952).² Some teachers of young children have discouraged—and at times prevented—students from learning to write with the left hand. After being frustrated with the cultural and educational preference against the left hand, Benjamin Franklin even wrote a humorous essay personifying and defending against the “unhappy fate” of the left hand.³

In the Greek and Latin World

As early as Homer (ca. 800 B.C.), people greeted others with the right hand.⁴ People also employed the right hand in oaths, pledges, and salutes; so the term “right” came to refer to a person’s pledge or promise to fulfill a commitment.⁵ For a family dispute, Euripides, a fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright, offered some famous lines regarding a pledge for peace, “A truce is between us, and anger has passed away. Take hold of his right hand.”⁶

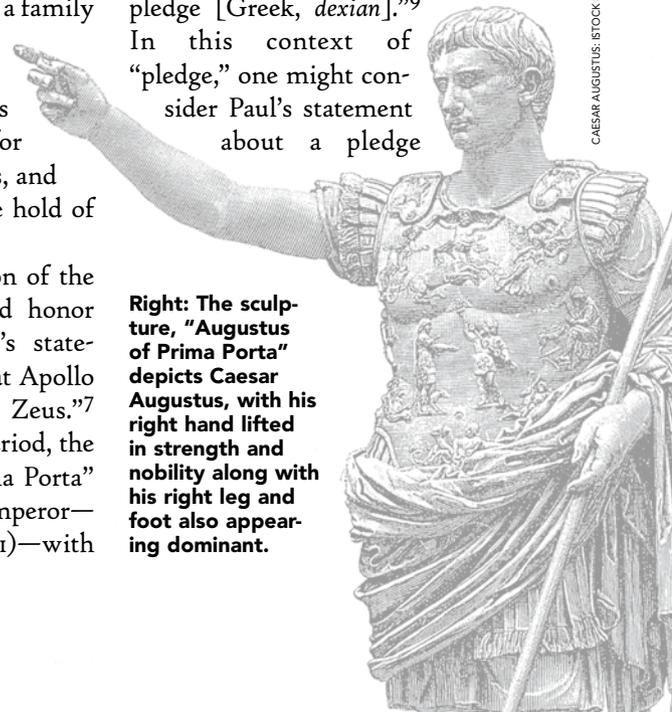
The classical identification of the right hand with power and honor is clearest in Callimachus’s statement (third century B.C.) that Apollo sits “on the right hand of Zeus.”⁷ From the New Testament period, the sculpture “Augustus of Prima Porta” displays the first Roman emperor—Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1)—with

Above: From the Fosse Temple at Lachish, southwest of Jerusalem; the

hand, dated 1400–1200 B.C., was likely part of the temple’s cult figure.

his right hand lifted in strength and nobility along with his right leg and foot also appearing dominant.⁸

Subsequent to the New Testament, the use of “pledge” continued as illustrated in a late second to early third century A.D. papyrus text from Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. The text refers to business dealings, and the author Apion wrote to his son saying, “as they arranged, they are to pay me the jars of wine and must keep their pledge [Greek, *dexian*].”⁹ In this context of “pledge,” one might consider Paul’s statement about a pledge



Right: The sculpture, “Augustus of Prima Porta” depicts Caesar Augustus, with his right hand lifted in strength and nobility along with his right leg and foot also appearing dominant.

CAESAR AUGUSTUS: ISTOCK PHOTO HAND: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BRITISH MUSEUM / LONDON (6/17/4/22)



Relief showing the Carchemish royal family. King Yariris (800–740 B.C.) is leading with his right hand his son and the heir to the throne, young Prince Kamanil. King Yariris is holding in his left hand a mace, the symbol of the monarchy. The image shows the symbolism of the transference of the monarchy to the new leader.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/
ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS MUSEUM
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Bible included the word *sinister* for “left.”¹³ As *sinister* developed into a loan-word for many European languages, it provoked negative connotations for various languages.

Sophocles, a fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright, likewise identified the right hand as the sword hand. He wrote, “Do you see my right hand touching the sword handle?”¹⁴ Homer, however, previously had praised the defensive shield of Ajax,¹⁵ which Ajax would have held in the left hand. Despite classical heroes such as Ajax, the natural right-handedness

Left: Statue of Sophocles the Greek poet and playwright; marble; 2nd cent. A.D.

of Christian fellowship when he wrote that the Jerusalem church “gave the right hand [Greek, *dexias*] of fellowship to me and Barnabas” (Gal. 2:9, HCSB).

The negative development of the “left hand” in the Greek and Roman world undoubtedly related to the Greek myth of Er popularized by Plato (428–348 B.C.). Concerning the afterworld, Plato suggested that the just souls go upward to heaven, entering that realm through the right side (Greek, *eis dexian*), while the unjust go downward into that sphere on the left (Greek, *eis aristeran*).¹⁰

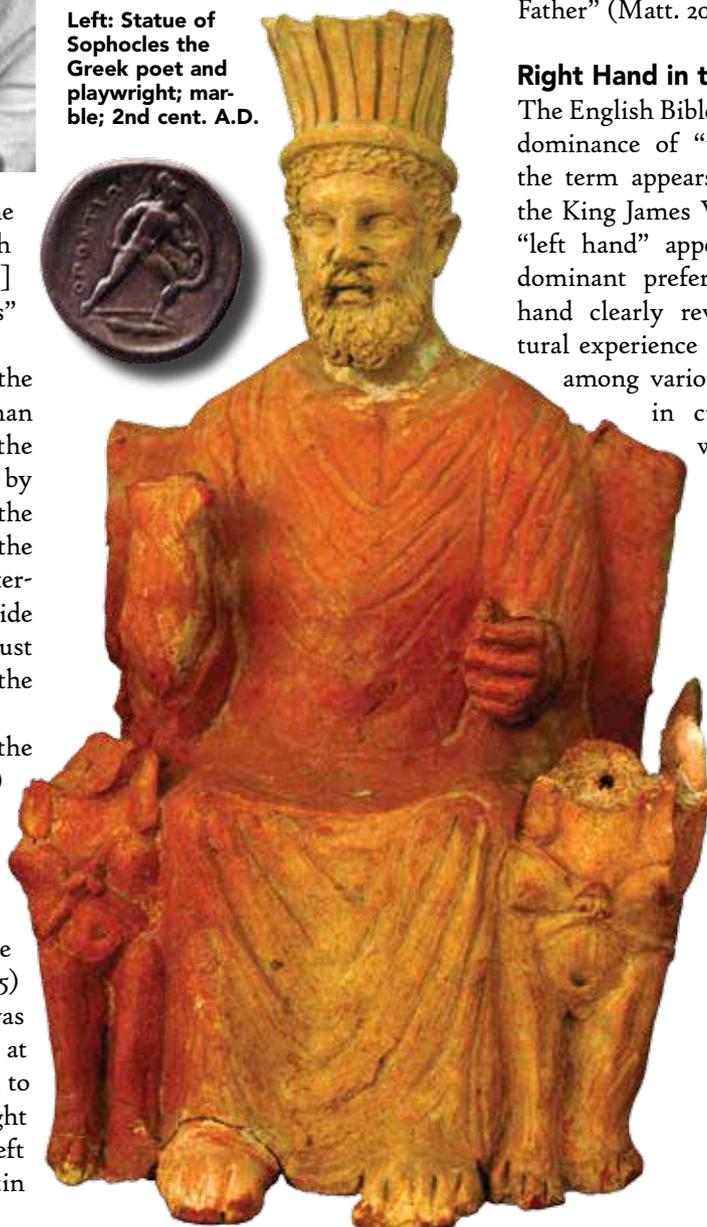
When translated to Latin, the Greek word *aristera* (“left”) became *sinister* (“left”), which originally referred to “left, on the left, on the left hand, at the left side.”¹¹ Even in first-century Latin, the term came to have a negative meaning. Quintilian (born, A.D. 35) wrote that “Marcus Caelius... was better at bringing charges than at defending his client against them, to the effect that he had a good right hand [sword hand], but a weak left [shield hand].”¹² Later, the Latin

and defensive posture of most people negatively influenced the use of “left hand” in both Greek and Latin.

Unlike the Greek and Latin non-Christian world, among the uses of “left hand” in the Greek New Testament, only Matthew 25:33 has a negative connotation (“the sheep on His right and the goats on the left,” HCSB). Matthew 20:21,23 and Mark 10:37,40 include striking *positive* connotations for the left hand: “to sit at My right and left is not Mine to give; instead, it belongs to those for whom it has been prepared by My Father” (Matt. 20:23, HCSB).

Right Hand in the Bible

The English Bible reflects the literary dominance of “the right hand” as the term appears over 160 times in the King James Version. In contrast, “left hand” appears 28 times. The dominant preference for the right hand clearly reveals the cross-cultural experience of right-handedness among various groups of people in cultures throughout world history.



Upper left: Greek coin, Locris Opunti, stater, ca. 350 B.C.; obverse depicts Ajax advancing, with a shield embossed with a griffin in his left hand and a sword in his right.

Left: A statue of the god Baal Hammon, seated on a throne with armrests formed by sphinxes, Baal wears a crown of feathers. He raises the right hand in blessing. Baal Hammon was the principal god of North Africa during antiquity. This statue is from the Thinnisut sanctuary outside of Tunis, Tunisia; dated to the 1st cent. A.D.



Above: A Roman sarcophagus lid from the Byzantine Era shows the last

judgment as Jesus separates the sheep on His right from the goats on His left.

“Right hand” in the Bible refers to strength, honor, preference, and blessing. One of the clearest examples of strength is Isaiah 48:12-13 where Yahweh—“the first” and “the last”—says, “My right hand spread out the heavens” (HCSB). Yet, God’s right hand also executed judgment against the Egyptians (Ex. 15:6). In Revelation 1:17-18, the resurrected Jesus placed His right hand on John and assured him saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one” (ESV). In all His works, “The LORD’s right hand performs valiantly” (Ps. 118:16, HCSB).

Two specific occurrences of “at the right hand” appear in the Old Testament: Psalm 109:31 and Isaiah 63:12. The psalm refers to the natural preference of the right hand as a sign of protective strength, while the Isaiah text refers to Moses’ right hand as God’s preferred implement of strength.

Reflecting the natural preference for the right hand, the New Testament includes 45 uses of “right hand” in the KJV.¹⁶ Among these are simple, general references to the right hand.¹⁷ Other appearances of “right hand” likely refer to the dominant hand of most people.¹⁸ But two occurrences reveal the right hand as the hand of preference *instead* of the left hand, Matthew 25:33,34.

At God’s Right Hand

The phrase “At the right hand of God” occurs eight times (Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33; 7:55,56; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 10:12; 1 Pet. 3:22).¹⁹ In all eight verses, the phrase conveys the

authority of the exalted and ascended Christ above the suffering, death, and limitations of earthly existence.

The phrase in Romans 8:34 occurs third in a summary list about Jesus: death, resurrection, exaltation at the right hand of God, and intercession for believers waiting for the end of the age. Elsewhere, Paul affirmed that “God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9, HCSB); while 1 Peter 3:22 refers to angels, authorities, and powers as subject to the exalted Jesus.

The background for Jesus’ exaltation and ascension was Psalm 110:1: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (ESV). In reference to Himself, Jesus referred to this psalm 6 times,²⁰ and 12 other New Testament texts allude to it.²¹ “Christ at the right-hand of God signifies that all power is given unto him in heaven and in earth,”²² “for God has put everything under His feet” (1 Cor. 15:27, HCSB). Eternally enthroned, Jesus intercedes for the saints (Rom. 8:34) as *only* He is capable of doing. 📌

1. I. C. McManus, James Moore, Matthew Freeguard, and Richard Rawles, “Science in the Making: Right Hand, Left Hand. III: Estimating Historical Rates of Left-handedness,” *Laterality* 15 (1/2) (2010):186, 205.

2. See Shirley S. Wang, “The Health Risks of Being Left-Handed,” *The Wall Street Journal* [online], 6 December 2011. Available from the Internet: online.wsj.com; Howard I. Kushner, “The Art of Medicine: Retraining the King’s Left Hand,” *The Lancet* 377 (11 June 2011):1998-1999, [online; accessed 1 September 2014]. Available from the Internet: www.thelancet.com.

3. Benjamin Franklin, “Petition of the Left Hand,” (unpublished, 1785), *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, [online; accessed 1 September 2014]. Available from the Internet: franklinpapers.org.

4. Homer, *Iliad*, 10.542. While the word “right” does not appear in the English translations of this text, the word appears in Greek with the meaning of “hand-clasps.”

5. Euripides, *Medea*, 496, and Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 81.

6. Euripides, *Medea*, 899 (author’s translation) from

Euripides, *Ion*, *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Alcestis*, 4 vols., trans. Arthur S. Way, *The Loeb Classical Library* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), 4:352-53.

7. Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo*, 2.28-29 in *Callimachus and Lycophron*, trans. A.W. Mair, *The Loeb Classical Library* (London: William Heinemann, 1921), 50-51.

8. “Augustus of Prima Porta,” *Museos Vaticanos* [online; accessed 15 August 2014] Available from the Internet: mv.vatican.va/4_ES/pages/z-Patrons/MV_Patrons_04_03.html.

9. Papyrus *Oxyrhynchus* 533 in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, part III, ed. Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1903), 270-73.

10. *Plato Republic*, 10.614C in Plato, *The Republic*, 2 vols., trans. Paul Shorey, *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1942), 2:492-93.

11. Charlton T. Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 786.

12. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.3.69 in Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 4 vols., trans. H. E. Butler, *The Loeb Classical Library* (London: William Heinemann, 1921), 2:476-77.

13. See Matthew 6:3; 20:21,23; 25:33; Mark 10:37,40.

14. Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, 1254 (author’s translation), from Sophocles, *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Trachiniae*, *Philoctetes*, 2 vols., trans. F. Storr, *The Loeb Classical Library* (London: William Heinemann, 1913), 2:472-73.

15. Homer, *Iliad*, 7.242-248.

16. Matt. 5:30; 6:3; 20:21,23; 22:44; 25:33,34; 26:64; 27:29,38; Mark 10:37,40; 12:36; 14:62; 15:27; 16:19; Luke 6:6; 20:42; 22:69; 23:33; Acts 2:25,33,34; 3:7; 5:31; 7:55,56; Rom. 8:34; 2 Cor. 6:7; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 1:16,17,20; 2:1; 5:1,7; 13:16.

17. Matt. 6:3; 20:21,23; Mark 10:37,40; 2 Cor. 6:7.

18. Matt. 5:30; 27:29; Luke 6:6; Acts 3:7; Gal. 2:9; Rev. 1:16,17,20; 2:1; 5:1,7; 13:16.

19. See ESV. The HCSB, KJV, NASB, and NIV have the same phrase with three other introductory prepositions—“by,” “to,” and “on”—instead of “at” in some of the uses. These different English prepositions do not affect the meaning of the verses.

20. Matt. 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; Luke 20:42-43. See Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Psalm 110:1 and the New Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (October 1992):438-53.

21. Mark 16:19; Acts 2:34-35; Rom. 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12,13; 12:2.

22. “The Believer’s Challenge” in *Sermons Preached and Revised by the Rev. C.H. Spurgeon*, 6th Series (New York: Sheldon, 1860), 164.

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