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Laying on of Hands

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Laying on of Hands

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HANDS, LAYING ON OF

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Semikhah, imposition (pressing) of hands, in biblical times related to animal sacrifice by individuals. This gesture also was used to designate a successor (Moses and Joshua- Num. 27-18-23; Deut 34:9) or collaborator (Num 11:16-17, 24-25). The imposition of hands expressed succession of authority from one generation to the next. Ordination was required for one to belong to the Sanhedrin or other courts relating to criminal cases, declaring *herem* and deciding other serious issues.

After the destruction of the Second Temple and loss of priestly leadership in 70, Johanan ben Zakkai and his contemporaries instituted ordination of scholars to signify their capacity as teachers of Torah and judges (see Mishnah Sanhedrin IV:4). Thus "rabbi," previously a term of direct address, became a title. Ordination took place in the presence of three elders when a teacher ascertained that a student was qualified. In both the land of Israel and Babylon there were periods in which validity depended on the consent of the patriarch or exilarch respectively.

Even before the devastation of communities in the Black Death, a certificate was given to rabbis so that they could be recognized in distant communities. *Hattarat Hora'ah*, "authorization to make decisions" regarding what is permitted or forbidden by Jewish law, was a "diploma" showing that the person could function as a rabbi.

In modern times, the demand for academic programs rather than guidance by a single teacher, plus demands for a secular education, has changed the nature of preparation for ordination to the rabbinate. In Reform and Conservative Judaism women may be ordained.

In the New Testament, the imposition of hands comes in a context of prayer for healing, baptism and assignment to a special function in the community. The latter drew on biblical precedent to develop ceremonies for ordination to the episcopate, priesthood and diaconate. In Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Anglican traditions the imposition of hands by the bishop is an essential part of the ordination to any of these three orders. The gesture is of lesser importance in baptism and anointing of the sick.

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