

Southpaws of the Bible

Flint Fenton

My daughter has two grandfathers who are left-handed. Every other member of the nuclear family on both the paternal and maternal sides is right-handed. It is generally believed that anywhere from 70-95 percent of humans have a right-hand preference, with the wide range in part due to no generally agreed-upon definition of handedness (Scientific American: Why are more people right-handed?). Some naturalists have suggested that hand preference agreement is beneficial for cooperation, while hand preference disagreement is good for competition. If you are left-handed and reading this article, you can no doubt appreciate the challenges wrought by using right-handed computer mice, sitting at student desks that support the right arm while allowing entrance and exit to the left, or learning from a little league coach who can only demonstrate a pitch from the right-hand side. Both our tools and shared knowledge skew to the right-hand. Competition, on the other hand, is an area of benefit for hand disagreement. In the 2025 season, 26.2% of pitchers throw with their left hand. This trend is mirrored in boxing, fencing, and even among US presidents, each showing a higher-than-average left-handed representation.

Given this background, it is probably unsurprising that the Bible has relatively little to say about lefthandedness, and that when it does mention a left-handed individual, it is always in a military context. For example, there is nothing in the generations or account of Adam that makes his hand preferences important to his story. It seems likely that other individuals in the Bible were left-handed, but this is only revealed to us when it is an important feature of their account. To tell the story of Ehud, his left-handed preference appears to be a key factor in the successful assassination of Eglon, the Moabite King (**Judges 3:15-31**). While not explicitly stated, there seems to be an implication that being able to secure his dagger on the right thigh and draw it across his body to his dominant hand aided his mission (along with divine favor), as guards would expect the weapon to be secured on the left hip or thigh. The next occurrence of left-handedness in the Bible comes from **Judges 20**. Here, rather than being oppressed by outside forces, Israel finds itself in a civil war or skirmish of sorts. The men of Gibeah behaved vilely, that is all too reminiscent of the sins of Sodom, with the result being a dead concubine. Her body itself was divided and sent to the 12 tribes as a powerful message of sin. The tribe of Benjamin refused to give over the offenders for justice and instead went out to war against their brethren. Among the ranks of their army were 700 left-handed men who “*could sling a stone at a hair's breadth and not miss*”. Twice the Benjamites defeated the Israelites until finally God gave them into Israel's hands (**Judges 19 and 20**). Being outnumbered and lacking the moral high ground, we find that still the Benjamites defeat their brethren twice, destroying 40,000 Israelites. Here, the effectiveness of the Benjaminite army is seen: against each of the other tribes, it appears only by the agency of God that Israel overcomes them. Perhaps this is some of what inspired Jacob to prophecy: “*Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; In the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil*” (**Genesis 49:27**). Related to this topic we find among David's mighty men, aiding him against Saul's ambidextrous warriors skilled in the bow and the sling from the tribe of Benjamin, *again* (**I Chronicles 12:7**).

Not only does each Biblical reference to left-handedness happen in a military context, but every reference specifically applies to members of the tribe of Benjamin. There are three possible answers for

this anomaly, all of which could work in concert. First, it may be the result of simple sample bias. With only two references to true left-handedness and one reference to ambidextrous soldiers, each of them being from the same tribe, the results might be somewhat random. Another possibility for this anomaly is that the Benjamites might have had a genetic predisposition to left-hand preference. Identical twins share hand preference about 82% of the time, indicating genetics may contribute to this trait (National Library of Medicine: An Overview of Human Handedness in Twins). Although genetics certainly doesn't govern it solely. Finally, left-handedness might have been a military strategy employed by the Benjamite tribe. In a similar way, left-handed pitching has an advantage over right-handed pitching because most of the opponents a batter will face are right-handed. In battle, when the stakes are high, having an opponent with off-hand dominance may tilt the battle in your opponent's direction.

The right hand in the Bible has a number of connotations, but appears to be used primarily symbolically. In connection with the idea that hand preference agreement is beneficial for collaboration, the right hand can symbolize fellowship. Paul and Barnabas received the "*right hand of fellowship*" from James, Peter, and John (**Galatians 2:9**). This would be supported by the idea that hand agreement is beneficial for cooperation and, therefore, symbolic of unity. The right hand is associated with divine aid and comfort "*For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you'*" (**Isaiah 41:13**) and "*I have set the LORD always before me; Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved*" (**Psalm 16:8**). The right hand of God is associated with power "*Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? Take it out of Your bosom and destroy them*" (**Psalm 74:11**). The right hand being the hand preferred for most human actions, is anthropomorphized in the divine as the will and ability to intervene in the life of mortals. The right hand can be used to show a favored position. Jacob blessed Ephraim using his right hand and only blessed Manasseh with his left to the consternation of Joseph (**Genesis 48:13-17**). Likewise, the position of Jesus Christ is the favored right hand of God, "*The LORD said to my Lord, 'sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool'*" (**Psalm 110:1**). This is where Stephen, a deacon and first martyr saw Jesus standing in glory at the right hand of God (**Acts 7:55-56**).

God is fully able to use all varieties of people in his kingdom. God used the socialite Jesus, and his reclusive cousin, (**Luke 7:33-35**) to bring the message "*repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*". Jesus called apostles from opposite sides of the so-called political aisle in Levi, the tax collector, and Simon the Zealot. Jesus was even able to unite Jews and Gentiles into the same household of God. Each of these distinctions is far greater than hand preference. God has a use for you in his kingdom.