

Did Jesus of Nazareth Lay Tefillin?

The Jewish custom of “laying tefillin” consists in binding small boxes to one’s head and arm. These special leather items contain written excerpts from the Hebrew Bible. Their name comes from the Hebrew word for “prayer,” תפילה (tefilah).

The practice is based on a literal reading of Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18, where Moses tells the people of Israel to “bind” his words “as a sign upon your hand” and to have them be “as frontlet-bands between your eyes.”

These passages are also interpreted metaphorically. The “hand” symbolizes action, while the “head” and “eyes” indicate sight, direction, and focus. So in a non-literal reading, Moses’ instruction means to always remember, focus on, and act according to his words. Other Biblical texts may support this kind of interpretation; e.g.: Exod. 13:5-16; Prov. 3:1-3, 6:20-21, 7:1-3.

Did Jews at the time of Yeshua/Jesus “lay tefillin”? Interestingly, some (perhaps many) did – the practice seems to go back more than 2,000 years! The Jewish-Greek “Letter of (Pseudo-) Aristeas” (ca. 2nd century BCE/BC) says, “And he distinctly directs, that the sign shall be fastened about our hands, clearly indicating that we ought to perform every activity in justice” (§159). Ancient tefillin have been found at Qumran (ca. 1st century BCE/BC; site of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and in caves used by the Bar Kokhba rebels in the 2nd century CE/AD.

Moreover, in Matthew 23:5 Yeshua/Jesus says about the Pharisaic school: “They broaden their φυλακτήρια (phylaktêria)” (Matt. 23:5). This word had several meanings in the Hellenistic world, including “castle, fortification, safeguard, security, preservative, amulet, insignia, chain,” etc. Here in a Jewish-Greek text it apparently indicates a form of tefillin.

It’s not certain how many of the different Jewish streams of the first century had this practice or how widespread it was. Some customs were practiced only by an elite, not the population as a whole. So did Jesus (Yeshua) wear tefillin as he prayed and walked about Israel?

We don’t know for a fact – but it’s definitely not impossible!