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Ancient Temple Worship / Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, John S. Thompson — 1st edition
Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions

Stephen D. Ricks

The Sacred Embrace in Ancient Egypt: Introduction

A number of years ago, while planning to travel to Egypt to visit our son who was studying Arabic there, my wife and I were encouraged to visit the White Chapel of Senusret I at the Temple of Karnak in Luxor, Egypt. There, we were told, we would see a number of scenes of “sacred ritual embrace,” in which the king is depicted being embraced by one of the gods before being received into heaven (the “Fields of Bliss”). We were also told that there were several other scenes of sacred embrace in the temple complex at Karnak. We went expecting to see a few at Karnak and elsewhere but were nearly overwhelmed with the embarrassment of ritual riches we saw there at that time and on a subsequent visit: many scores of scenes of embrace (at least 150) at the temples at Karnak, at the ancient Egyptian Ptolemaic temple at Philae near modern Aswan, Egypt, as well as at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Here we will focus on examples of the sacred embrace in the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms of ancient Egypt.

The Sacred Embrace in Ancient Egyptian Iconography

One of the earliest scenes of sacred embrace may be seen on the (Hor) Qa Hedjet stela (Figure 1), dating from the Third Dynasty of the Old Kingdom around the middle of the 27th century BC. The stela itself is made of polished limestone and shows the divine Horus (depicted with a falcon head) embracing the royal Horus with foot by foot, knee facing knee, hand to back, and mouth to nose so that the divine Horus might “inspire” (i.e., breathe life) into the royal Horus.
Figure 2: Left: The pharaoh Senwosret faces the god Amon, who embraces him. Right: Senwosret is embraced by Ptah, who faces him from the left.

An eleven-foot pillar from the Middle Kingdom (Figure 2) celebrates the sed (royal jubilee) festival of the Egyptian King Senusret (reigned 1971-1925 BC) in about 1940 BC. Two sides of this four-sided pillar group are illustrated. In the first scene Senusret stands opposite the god Amon, who faces him foot by foot, knee to knee, and hand on back. In the fourth panel Senusret faces the god Ptah from the right; both hands grasp his back, and he stands face to face in order to breathe life into him.

The final scene (Figure 3) is from a New Kingdom relief from the tomb of Tutankhamun who died as a very young king in his teens in the 14th century BC. The discovery of his tomb by the British archaeologist Howard Carter in 1923 created an international sensation. Tutankhamun — known popularly as “King Tut” — ruled Egypt after the death of Akhenaten, the king of Egypt who introduced the monotheistic belief in the solar disk Aten in the 15th century BC. This sacred embrace scene illustrated below is part of a larger “Opening of the Mouth” scene in which Tutankhamun is being prepared to enter the Fields of Bliss. In the final, culminating scene, Tutankhamun, accompanied by his ka, embraces Osiris, who is depicted as a man in a sarcophagus. In this scene the deceased king faces Osiris with foot facing foot, knee facing knee, the king’s hand behind the head of Osiris, with his arm around the deity’s waist. Osiris, in turn, touches the king’s chest. As Tutankhamun embraces Osiris he is described as “given life for all time and eternity.” The rite, according to Svein Bjerke, “transfers vital power [his ka]’ from the god to the king.”

What is recorded in a ritual for Amenophis I (18th dynasty, 16th to 15th centuries BC) may also be understood for Tutankhamun:

You go forth from embracing your father Osiris.
You revive through him, you are made whole through him.

The scenes illustrated a the sacred embrace by moth was current in the sacred lit individual entering the after Egyptologist Jan Assmann, ‘ dead. The dead king as Osiri arms.’ This embrace by the with the entrance of the de separation of mother and cl hour ritual of the “Rural of t who embraces you, has puri and full of life … Your fath you.’ You lead millions on Leiden K I from the reign of bc), Isis is substituted for Hr

You go forth, as you are From the embrace of yr
The pharaoh Senwosret faces the who embraces him. Right: Senwosret I by Ptah, who faces him from the left eleven-foot pillar from the kingdom (Figure 2) celebrates royal jubilee) festival of the. King Senusret (reigned 5 BC) in about 1940 BC. Two four-sided pillar group are. In the first scene Senusret posite the god Amon, who foot by foot, knee to knee, on back. In the fourth panel faces the god Ptah from the hands grasp his back, and he to face in order to breathe life

New Kingdom relief from the young king in his teens in the ib by the British archaeologist Ison. Tutankhamun led Egypt after the death of ized the monotheistic belief BC. This sacred embrace scene scene "of the Mouth" scene in enter the Fields of Bliss. In nun, accompanied by his ka, in a sarcophagus. In this scene foot, knee facing knee, the th his arm around the deity's st. As Tutankhamun embraces time and eternity. The rite, power [his ka] from the god or Amenophis I (18th dynasty, ered for Tutankhamun: her Osiris e whole through him.

The Sacred Embrace by Mother Deities in the Religious Literature of Ancient Egypt

The scenes illustrated above are of male deities embracing kings. But the sacred embrace by mothers, or mother deities, was also a concept that was current in the sacred literature of ancient Egypt. "The embrace of the individual entering the afterlife by his mother," observes the distinguished Egyptologist Jan Assmann, "is an idea that has its origins in the cult of the dead. The dead king as Osiris embraces his mother Nut and revives in her arms." This embrace by the goddess can be understood "in connection with the entrance of the deceased into the afterlife as overcoming the separation of mother and child at birth." Thus, for example, in the 11th hour ritual of the "Ritual of the Hours" from Edfu we read: "Your mother, who embraces you, has purified your bones, she causes you to be healthy and full of life ... Your father embraces you [lit., 'wraps his arm around you!'] You lead millions on the western horizon." On the Pyramidion Leiden K 1 from the reign of Amenophis III (18th Dynasty, 14th century BC), Isis is substituted for Hathor, the mother of the sun god:

You go forth, as you are well,
From the embrace of your mother Isis.
The Purpose of the Sacred Embrace

Scenes in which a god or goddess embraces a king “often appear,” observes the Egyptologist Horst Beinlich, “since the embrace by a deity appears to have been a privilege of the king … . Such scenes of embrace on pillars may have to do with a god’s greeting the king.” Beinlich further notes that “through close contact with the body of the deity … the king is (in the role of a child) newly enlivened, transfigured, and receives the power of the "ka." The sacred embrace is thus part of an initiatory ceremony in which the king is made priest as well: “Before becoming a king, he must first become a priest, and for that also he must be purified with divine water, receive a garment, be crowned, and be led into the sanctuary to receive” the god’s embrace. The embracing (Eg. šn) of the king by the god” is the definitive consecration of the king, “who at that moment becomes fully consecrated, crowned, and sanctified.” The embrace represented on the walls of the inner sancta of Egyptian temples — forbidden or inaccessible to others — may be either the preparatory embrace by a priest representing a god at his coronation when he is “consecrated, crowned and sanctified” or also the confirmatory embrace by the god at the time of the king’s passing beyond the halls of judgment to the Fields of Bliss.

By way of conclusion, we may note that (1) in scenes of sacred embrace, the deity faces the king foot by foot, knee to knee, hand to back, and mouth to nose to “inspire” (breathe life or vital force — his "ka") into him; (2) scenes of sacred embrace in ancient Egyptian religion occur in the Holy of Holies — the most sacred and (to the unauthorized) inaccessible precincts of the temple (the center of the temple, the rear of the temple, the side chapel); (3) scenes of sacred embrace are found throughout ancient Egypt (from the Delta to Philae) and throughout Egyptian history (from the Old Kingdom on); (4) the sacred embrace is preparation for entrance into the presence of the gods; and, finally, (5) although the scenes depict only royalty being embraced by the gods and entering into their presence, in ancient Egypt everyone — men, women, and children — of whatever social status and era, were candidates for entrance into a blessed afterlife.
Embrace

aces a king “often appear,” since the embrace by a deity ... Such scenes of embrace reeking the king.” Beinlich the body of the deity ... the ed, transfigured, and receives is thus part of an initiatory as well: “Before becoming a that also he must be purified crowned, and be led into the “The embracing (Eg. shn) of eocration of the king, “who at owned, and sanctified.” The sancta of Egyptian temples ay be either the preparatory : his coronation when he is so the confirmatory embrace beyond the halls of judgment

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The Sacred Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions

On a gravestone dating to the end of the fifth century BC from Attica in Greece, the husband Philoxenos (whose name, as well as that of his wife, is carved in the register above his head) is seen grasping the right hand of his wife Philoumene in a solemn and ceremonial handclasp (Figure 4).

This handclasp, the description informs us, “was a symbolic and popular gesture on gravestones of the Classical period,” which could represent “a simple farewell, a reunion in the afterlife, or a continuing connection between the deceased and the living.” The handclasp, known in Greek as dexiosis and in Latin as dextrarum iunctio, means “giving, joining of right hands” and is to be found in classical Greek art on grave stelai but especially in Roman art, where it is to be seen on coins and sarcophagi reliefs as well as in Christian art in mosaics and on sarcophagi reliefs.

Why were early Christians in the Roman world also depicted performing the dextrarum iunctio? They did so in part because they agreed with the non-Christian Romans that “fidelity and harmony are demanded in the longest-lasting and most intimate human relationship, marriage.” But they also did so because they accepted, perhaps, the ancient Israelite view that marriage was a sacred covenant and further because they understood “marriage,” in the words of the Protestant scholar Philip Schaff, “as a spiritual union of two souls for time and eternity.” For the ancient Christians, the sacred handclasp — the dextrarum iunctio — was a fitting symbol for the most sacred act and moment in human life.
The Sacred Handclasp in Scenes of Introduction to the Heavenly Realms in the Classical and Early Christian World

The dexiosis/dextrarum iunctio is used as a symbol of union, harmony, equality, and fidelity in marriage. But the right hand is also given in scenes of introduction into the realm of the blessed in ancient Mediterranean religions. The first scene (Figure 5) is from a series of illustrations from the tomb complex of the Sabazian priest Vincentius near Rome, dating from the second century. One depicts the "good angel" (labeled in the scene as bonus angelus) grasping Vibia, the deceased wife of Vincentius, by the right hand in a dextrarum iunctio and leading her into a place where the blessed (some of whom are identified by name) are enjoying a celestial banquet.

The hand is held out to introduce individuals into the celestial realms. Two other scenes are mosaic illustrations from Christian churches built in the sixth century AD in Ravenna, Italy, one from the Basilica of San Vitale (Figure 6), the other from the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe (Figure 7). Each of the scenes shows the altar on which Melchizedek is making an offering to the Lord. In the mosaic in St. Apollinare in Classe, Melchizedek, clad in a purple cloak and offering bread and wine at the altar, is flanked to the viewer's left by Abel, who holds a sacrificial lamb toward the altar, and, to the viewer's right, by Abraham with his young son Isaac, whom he gently pushes to the altar (in the scene in San Vitale, Melchizedek is at the viewer's right, opposite Abel holding the lamb). In front of the altar is the so-called "Seal of Melchizedek," two golden interlocking squares.

Behind the figures (in San Vitale, above the altar in Ravenna, behind the veil, inviting them to grasp it in the dextrarum heavenly realms behind the veil)

In both actions depicted, the sacred handclasp — then into the celestial realms. To prepare, the sacred hand the divine presence.
Introduction to the Heavenly Christian World

...a symbol of union, harmony, light hand is also given in scenes depicted in ancient Mediterranean art. In a series of illustrations from Vincentius near Rome, dating to the “good angel” (labeled in the narrative as deceased wife of Vincentius, and leading her into a place sanctified by name) are enjoying a heavenly embrace with their spirits.

Behind the scenes (in St. Apollinare, to the right of Melchizedek; in San Vitale, above the altar) there is a right hand stretching out from behind the veil, inviting the figures (and, by implication, the viewer) to grasp it in the *dextrarum iunctio* in order to be introduced into the heavenly realms behind the veil.

In both actions depicted in these scenes — the sacred embrace and the sacred handclasp — there is an invitation and promise of entrance into the celestial realms. The sacred embrace may well have been a preparation, the sacred handclasp the culminating act of entrance into the divine presence.
Figure Credits

Figures 1-3 appear courtesy of Brigham Young University's Neal A Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. Figure 4 is courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA. Our thanks to the Maxwell Institute for Figure 5, which was redrawn from an image found in Johannes Leipoldt, *Die Umwelt des Urchristentums* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), fig. 60. Figures 6 and 7 are used with the kind permission of Val Brinkerhoff.

Notes


4. Svein Bjerke, “Remarks on the Egyptian Ritual of ‘Opening the Mouth’ and Its Interpretation,” *Numen* 12 (1965): 215. As an additional note, Jacob, before his return to Canaan, met a “man” (in fact, a heavenly being) who “struggled” with him: “And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled [Het of the day. And when he touched the hollow of b out of joint, as he wrestled day breaketh. And he sa And he said unto him, he said, Thy name shall prince hast thou power And Jacob asked him, a he said, Wherefore is it blessed him there” *(Gen Given that this episode (symbolizing Jacob’s ent gel’s hesitation to disclose Hebrew ye’aveq (“wrestle)

5. “Libation Utterance for the I” = Papyrus Chester Beatty Liturgische Lieder an der

6. Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder an der


8. Émile Chassinat and M (Cairo: Institut francais 3:226–27, cited in Assma


14. I wish to thank my form...
and there wrestled [Heb. ye'aveq] a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there" (Genesis 32: 24–29).

Given that this episode includes the giving of a new name to Jacob (symbolizing Jacob's entering a new, higher stage in his life), the angel's hesitation to disclose his name, may we not also understand the Hebrew ye'aveq ("wrestle") in an additional sense of "embrace."


6. Assmann, Liturgische Lieder, 56.


14. I wish to thank my former student, now colleague, Egyptologist John
Thompson, for this insight.


17. Gordon P. Hugenberger, Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage, Developed from the Perspective of Malachi (Leiden: Brill, 1994), has argued persuasively that marriage was a covenant, using sources ranging throughout the entire Hebrew Bible.

18. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, 5th ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 2:367. Further, see John Meyendorff, Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 196–97, who observes that "as a sacrament, or mysterion, marriage reflects the union between Christ and the Church, between Yahweh and Israel, and as such can be only one — an eternal bond, which death itself does not destroy. In its sacramental nature, marriage transfigures and transcends both fleshly union and contractual legal association: human love is being projected into the eternal Kingdom of God." Later (pp. 198–99) Meyendorff notes that "the most striking difference between the Byzantine theology of marriage and its medieval Latin counterpart is that the Byzantines strongly emphasized the unicity of Christian marriage and the eternity of the marriage bond; ... the West seemed to ignore the idea that marriage, if it is a sacrament, has to be projected as an eternal bond into the Kingdom of God."


20. In the view of Henri Leclercq, "Sabazios," in Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie (Paris: Librairie Letouzey, 1924-53), 15:213, the "good angel," whose identification may have been influenced by Judaism or Christianity in Asia Minor, was the god Sabazios himself.


**Stephen D. Ricks** is a professor of Hebrew and cognate learning at Brigham Young University, where he has been on the faculty of Brigham Young University for thirty-two years. He is the author or editor of twenty books and more than one hundred articles, volume chapters, and reviews focusing on the ancient temple, the religious and social institutions of ancient Israel, the Book of Mormon, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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