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THE DIVINE HANDCLASP IN THE HEBREW BIBLE
AND IN NEAR EASTERN ICONOGRAPHY

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The topic of this paper is the form and meaning of a gesture mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: a handclasp exchanged between God and his human servant, a gesture I refer to as the “divine handclasp.”\(^1\) Taken together with comparative evidence, the contexts in which this gesture occurs suggest that it had a place in ancient Israelite temple worship, perhaps as a ritual gesture performed with the help of a priest who stood as proxy for God.\(^2\) Whether or not a concrete gesture is described, biblical references to the divine handclasp are profound expressions of close interaction with Deity, a concept that was rooted in the rites of the temple.

The divine handclasp has been interpreted in various ways. Mitchell Dahood considers it a means of reception into the divine council and ultimately of assumption into eternal life.\(^3\) John Eaton posits that it refers figuratively to God’s favor and aid rendered to the king during his reign.\(^4\) Both of these ideas are picked up by Othmar Keel, who further suggests that the divine handclasp was part of an ancient Israelite coronation ceremony like those of Egypt and Mesopotamia.\(^5\) Implicit in many of the suggestions on the meaning of this gesture are assumptions about the gesture’s form, such as the direction in which the participants face and whether the right or left hands are used. For example, in their discussions of the divine handclasp, both Eaton and Keel refer to a Hittite relief showing a god leading a king by the hand.\(^6\) In this relief, the god’s left hand grasps the king’s right, and the king faces the same direction as the god (see illustration and discussion below). Accordingly, the interpretations of Eaton and Keel presuppose that biblical references to God grasping the king’s hand refer to leading by the hand.

My purpose in this paper is to investigate what we can responsibly say about this gesture’s form and meaning based on the biblical texts in which it is mentioned and on a comparison of these texts with Near Eastern iconography. I will begin by reviewing the eleven occurrences
of this gesture in the Hebrew Bible and pointing out clues to the form of the gesture in these passages; I will then review the evidence from iconography. After we have established the form of the gesture to the extent possible, I will conclude with some observations about what this implies for the meaning of the gesture.

**Clues to the Gesture’s Form from Textual Sources**

The divine handclasp is mentioned twice in the Psalms using the Hebrew verb הֶזַּל הַיְדָיָם (haz hayydym), meaning “grasp.”

Psalm 73:23-24 I am with you always; you have grasped my right hand [haz hayydym]. You guide me with your counsel and will afterwards receive me to glory.

Psalm 139:9-10 I will ascend with the wings of dawn, I will dwell at the distant horizon of the sea. / Even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will grasp me [haz hayydym].

The fact that the gesture in both of these passages is parallel to a verb of motion (הנהה—“lead, guide, conduct”) has led most interpreters to assume that the gesture is one of leading by the hand. This is especially clear in Dahood’s translation of Psalm 73:24: “Into your council lead me, and with glory take me to yourself.” However, as will be shown below, comparison with other passages argues against this interpretation and causes us to reevaluate the meaning in these Psalms passages. Both Psalm 73 and Psalm 139 happen to have thematic and linguistic connections to wisdom literature, and from this perspective, one might suggest that rather than referring to physical motion, הנהה has the sense of “instruct,” as it sometimes does in Proverbs. The parallelism would then call attention not to the gesture’s function of transporting the Psalmist, but to its function as a means of imparting knowledge. The symbolism of God’s hand as an agent of instruction can be found elsewhere in the Psalms and in other parts of the Hebrew Bible (see Psalm 45:5; Job 27:11; Isaiah 8:11; see also Psalms 18:34; 144:1).

As Matt Brown has noticed, if we conflate the gestures in Psalm 73 and Psalm 139 (as the contextual similarity between the two verses encourages us to do), we see that both God and the Psalmist use their right hands. This would suggest that the participants in the gesture are facing each other, as we do when we shake hands. In contrast, leading by the hand, both is similar to walk adjacent hand of th

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the divine handclasp:

Isaiah 41:9 I will and “Yo you

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31:31–32.

Jeremiah 31:31-32 אֶל כָּלַי כָּלַי

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by the hand, both in ancient iconography and in usual practice today, is similar to walking side-by-side, with one participant grasping the adjacent hand of the other.

We turn now to four passages in the latter part of Isaiah that describe the divine handclasp using the verb ḥḥzqyq, meaning “grasp.”

Isaiah 41:9 I who have grasped you [ḥḥzqṭyq] from the ends of the earth and have called you from its corners, and have said to you, “You are my servant. I have chosen you and have not forsaken you.”

Isaiah 41:13 For I am Yahweh your God, he who grasps your right hand [mḥḥzq yḥmnk], who says to you, “Do not fear, I will help you.”

Isaiah 42:6 I am Yahweh. I have called you in righteousness, and I will grasp your hand [wḥḥzq ḥydḥ], watch over you, and make you a covenant of the people, a light to the nations.

Isaiah 45:1 Thus says Yahweh to his anointed one, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped [ḥḥzqṭ ḫmḥmḥ] to subdue nations before him, ungirding kings, and to open the doors before him, the gates not being closed.

The context in these passages has to do with entering into a covenant, which includes an oath made by Deity. In Isaiah 45:1, the content of the oath is mentioned in connection with the gesture. The text might more clearly be translated, “whose right hand I have grasped (in oath, swearing) to subdue nations before him.” Again, this tends to invoke a handclasp between parties facing each other, such as when we clasp hands to strike a bargain.

A fifth example belonging to the prophetic genre is found in Jeremiah 31:31–32.

Jeremiah 31:31-32 Behold, days are coming, says Yahweh, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, / not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors in the day that I grasped their hand [ḥḥzqṭ ḥydḥm] to bring them out of the land of Egypt, which covenant of mine they broke, though I had become their husband, says Yahweh.

This passage, like those from Psalms 73 and 139 above, has often been misinterpreted as referring to leading by the hand. However, the context here in Jeremiah 31:31–32 refers to a covenant, and the clause in
question may be rendered as “I grasped their hand (in oath, swearing) to bring them out of the land of Egypt,” like the clause “whose right hand I have grasped (in oath, swearing) to subdue nations before him” in Isaiah 45:1:

Jeremiah 31:32:  
I grasped their hand  
(in oath, swearing)  
to bring them out of the land of Egypt

Isaiah 45:1:  
whose right hand I have grasped  
(in oath, swearing)  
to subdue nations before him

Further, the language here in Jeremiah 31:32 is very similar to passages that describe raising the hand to make an oath, such as Ezekiel 20:6: “in that day I lifted up my hand to them to bring them out of the land of Egypt.” The two passages can be compared almost phrase for phrase, as follows:

Jeremiah 31:32:  
in the day that  
I grasped their hand  
to bring them  
out of the land of Egypt

Ezekiel 20:6:  
in that day  
I lifted up my hand to them  
to bring them  
out of the land of Egypt

As this comparison suggests, the handclasp in Jeremiah 31:31–32, like the lifting of the hand in Ezekiel 20:6, is most likely an oath-taking gesture exchanged between two parties who face each other rather than a form of leading by the hand.

Finally, the verb *tmk*, meaning “hold,” is used both in the Psalms and in Isaiah to describe the divine handclasp:

Psalm 41:13  
As for me in my integrity, you have held me [tmkt by]; you have set me before you forever!

Psalm 63:9  
My soul clung to you, your right hand held me [by tmkh ymynk].

Isaiah 41:9  
Do not fear, for I am with you; do not gaze about fearfully, for I am your God; I have strengthened you, I have helped you, I have held you with my saving right hand [tmktyk bymyn sdy].

Isaiah 42:1  
Behold, as for my servant whom I hold [itm-bw], my chosen (in whom) my soul delights, I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring judgment to the nations.
Another example of the verb tmk being used to describe a handclasp may be found in an Aramaic text written in Demotic script, Papyrus Amherst 63. However, this example is doubtful due to the fragmentary state of this portion of the text. A few extant words in this portion seem to have to do with blessing (such as the words peace and cup). As for the phrase describing the gesture itself, the only really legible word is ymynk, meaning “your right hand”; some (but not all) scholars who have studied this text restore the verb ‘tmk, meaning “I will hold,” before it.13

Other verbs and phrases have also been linked with the three listed above as means of expressing the divine handclasp. These include ’sp, meaning “gather” or “take up” (see Psalm 27:10);14 lqh, meaning “take” or “receive” (see Psalms 49:15; 73:24);15 nwn yd ’m, meaning “of the hand, be firm or fixed with” (see Psalm 89:20–21);16 hqyt yd, meaning “strength of hand” or perhaps “grasping the hand” (Isaiah 8:11);17 and ntn ... yd, meaning “give ... a ‘hand’” (Isaiah 56:5).18 Compared to the three types listed above—which use the verbs ’hz, hhzqyq, and tmk—the connection to a handclasp gesture for these other phrases is less certain, and the number of proposed examples in each case is small. For these reasons, I exclude them from the present study.

In my judgment, the eleven passages quoted above—in which the verbs ’hz, hhzqyq, and tmk are used—all describe one gesture. By examining these passages, one sees a web of contextual similarities that would make it difficult to separate them into different gestures. For example, both Psalm 139:9–10 and Isaiah 41:9 emphasize the remoteness of the location in which God grasps his mortal servant’s hand. Both Psalm 73:23–24 and Psalm 41:13 mention being with God always. Further, many of these passages convey the general sense of the gesture’s mortal recipient being chosen and having a special relationship with the Deity. Aside from these general contextual similarities, one notes that the verb ’hz is used to describe a handclasp only in the Psalms, the verb hhzqyq is used in this way only in Isaiah and Jeremiah, and tmk is used in both the Psalms and the Prophets. Given this distribution, one is tempted to consider ’hz and hhzqyq to be equivalent verbs for the same gesture, each verb being limited to a particular genre.

Once again, as Matt Brown noted, when we combine the examples with hhzqyq and tmk in Isaiah 41, we can see that both the right hand of God and the right hand of His chosen are mentioned.19 This, together with the oath-taking function that is present in some of the examples, suggests that both parties are facing each other and not walking side-by-side or one after the other.
Divine Handclasps in Near Eastern Iconography

Many kinds of handclasps are found in Near Eastern iconography. In the Mesopotamian world, many cylinder seals feature what is known as a "presentation scene," in which a deity is shown leading a worshipper or supplicant by the hand into the presence of another deity (see Figure 1).

A similar kind of scene is found in Egyptian art of the New Kingdom, featured on the walls of royal tombs, in temple reliefs, and in vignettes from Spells 117 and 125 of the Book of the Dead. In these Egyptian examples, the king or deceased person is inducted by one or more deities into the presence of another deity (see Figures 2–3). Together with these induction scenes in Egyptian art, we find scenes in which the god who stands in front of the king and holds his hand faces him instead of leading him by the hand. Variations of these Egyptian scenes are very commonly found on scarab seals from the Levant during the same time period. Othmar Keel compares the presentation scene in Mesopotamian art and the induction scene in Egyptian art to biblical passages that mention the divine handclasp, but ultimately he rejects this connection because it is hard to reconcile with the Bible's monotheistic viewpoint. In addition, the kind of handclasp shown in the presentation and induction scenes does not seem to fit with the biblical descriptions, in which the right hands of both parties are used.
Figure 2. Scene from the tomb of Nefertari, Thebes, ca. 1200 BC. The god Horus, son of Isis, leads the queen Nefertari by the hand into the presence of the deities Re-Horakhty and Hathor. Redrawn by the author from Zahi Hawass, The Royal Tombs of Egypt (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 256.

Figure 3. Vignette from the Book of the Dead, Spell 117. The god Anubis leads the deceased person by the hand toward a false door that leads to the presence of Osiris. From the papyrus of Nakht (BM 10471). Redrawn by the author from Raymond O. Faulkner and Carol Andrews, The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 112.

We have already mentioned the Hittite relief of Tudkhaliya IV from Yazilikaya (see Figure 4). This seems to be the preferred comparandum to the biblical divine handclasp for those who have studied this gesture most closely, namely Eaton and Keel. However, once again, note that the god uses his left hand, not his right, to grasp the king’s right hand. This does not match the biblical descriptions, in which it is clearly the god’s right hand that is used. Further, we have shown that the idea of leading by the hand does not seem to be a major aspect of the biblical divine handclasp.

Those who have sought iconographic parallels for the biblical divine handclasp have generally turned to the art of Israel’s neighbors in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Anatolia. This is certainly better than, say, a comparison with Chinese or Greek art, yet it is not fully satisfactory either, since there are significant cultural and religious differences between Israel and her Near Eastern neighbors. Therefore, we have good reason to ask if there are any depictions of handclasps that are closer to the Israelite context. In fact, there are. A couple of cylinder seals from the Middle Bronze Age Levant\(^{22}\) and assorted scarab seals from the same...
Figure 5. Hyksos scarab seal showing a figure seated on an animal-legged throne, clapping hands with a standing figure. Redrawn by the author from Fiona V. Richards, *Scarab Seals from a Middle to Late Bronze Age Tomb at Pella in Jordan* (Fribourg: University Press, 1992), pl. 3.

Figure 6. Phoenician ivory fan handle. A figure on the right (possibly a deity or a priest) claps hands with a man (possibly Abdi-ba'al, the owner of the fan, whose name is given in the inscription at the bottom) across what appears to be a curtain or veil. On the left is an attendant. The incense altar at the far right indicates that the scene takes place at the temple. Redrawn by the author from Karl P. Katz, P. P. Kahane, and Magen Broshi, *From the Beginning: Archaeology and Art in the Israel Museum* (New York: Reynal and Company, Inc., 1968), 76.

periods show a handclasp exchanged between a divine personage and a mortal (see Figure 5). In addition, a Phoenician ivory fan handle from the Iron Age shows a handclasp exchanged between a divine personage and a mortal (see Figure 6).
Interestingly enough, the parties of the gesture in all these instances are facing each other. I am not aware of any Levantine art showing the motif of leading by the hand other than the New Kingdom scarabs mentioned earlier, which are more closely tied to Egyptian artistic conventions.

One may, of course, object that the confronted figures in these Levantine examples are clasping adjacent hands, the left hand of the figure on the left and the right hand of the figure on the right. Thus, on the surface, this does not seem to fit precisely with the biblical descriptions. However, it is quite likely that Levantine iconography depicts the figures in this way for compositional reasons, so that each figure is presented to maximum advantage. Similar rearrangement of figures frequently occurs in Egyptian art as well, so it is often difficult to tell which hand would have been used in a given ritual. In this case, we can guess that this kind of rearrangement is at work, since there is a discrepancy between the artistic motif and how people actually clasped hands when they face each other in ritual contexts. Therefore, we may posit that what is shown for compositional reasons as a clasping of adjacent hands would have transpired in real life as a clasping of right hands. This small assortment of Levantine pieces thus provides a suitable parallel for the biblical descriptions of the divine handclasp.

**Implications for the Meaning of the Gesture**

In conclusion, let us see what our findings imply about the meaning of the divine handclasp in the biblical world. In the beginning, I mentioned that Eaton and Keel assume that this gesture was a form of leading by the hand. However, our study shows that what we have here is quite different. Since the parties of the gesture would likely face each other, transport could not have been an integral aspect of the gesture, except in the limited sense of one party pulling the other inward. The Psalmist's statement that God will "receive [him] to glory" in Psalm 73:23–24 can be understood in this latter sense. As we have seen, the idea of "guiding" in connection with this gesture in the Psalms may be interpreted in the sense of giving instruction. In Isaiah 45:1, it is likely a matter of God granting access to His chosen rather than transporting him.

The form of the gesture, with both parties facing each other and clasping right hands, is compatible with the idea that the divine handclasp was performative in saying, "I hereby . . . raising the hand with deities in the F handclasp and the words, Isaiah 45:1 and Jer 3:27 . . . from raising the hand to the recipient's family member, as . . .

As mentioned, handclasp was performed to be a curtain or veil, precise ritual here is it more in harmony with the antique and medieval hand of a mortal as is the Hebrew text of the Zech 22:15.

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1. Matt Brown, "divine handclasp Hanclasp, the graciously she which is at last his insights, a of this topic a enlightening our understanding of Latter-day Saint
2. Shalom M. Pat, "Journal of the Handclasp," with example see Todd M. of Recognitio


7. Also relevant here are the Hebrew royal names Ahaziah, Jehoahaz, and the shortened form Ahaz, all of which express the idea that “Yahweh has grasped” the bearer of the name. See Eaton, Kingship, 77.

8. All translations from Hebrew herein are my own unless otherwise noted.


11. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 634-35. It should also be noted that b’štk should be translated “with your counsel, advice” and not “into your council” as Dahood translates. The word ’šh is used often in wisdom literature in the sense of refer to a bod

12. Matt Brown, communicat independent


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17. Although m strong hand translation c hand seized on a suppose discussed ab

18. For the inter Avraham Gi Press, 1982), (Salt Lake Ci Tina M. Pet 1998), 496-9 the setting t Winkle, “II Testamentu

19. Matt Brown

20. Henriette A Essay on Sp Near East (1
in the sense of “counsel, advice” but does not, as far as I am aware, refer to a body of personages in the sense of “council.”

12. Matt Brown, personal communication, May 2011. By the time Matt communicated with me, we had both reached the same conclusion independently.


17. Although most translations render the phrase in question as “with a strong hand” or similarly, the New Jerusalem Bible and the Tanakh translation of the Jewish Publication Society translate as “when his hand seized hold of me” or similarly. The latter translation is based on a supposed connection with the idiom *hzyq yd* “grasp the hand,” discussed above.


23. Fiona V. Richards, Scarab Seals from a Middle to Late Bronze Age Tomb at Pella in Jordan (Fribourg: University Press, 1992), 90-91, pl. 3 (no. 11); Raphael Giveon, Egyptian Scarabs from Western Asia from the Collections of the British Museum (Fribourg: University Press, 1985), 152-53 (no. 49); Othmar Keel, Corpus der Stempelsiegel- Amulette aus Palästina-Israel, Katalog Band I (Fribourg: University Press, 1997), 334-35 (no. 679), 460-61 (no. 1045); Othmar Keel, Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina-Israel, Katalog Band III (Fribourg: University Press, 2010), 388-89 (no. 855).

24. Karl P. Katz, P. P. Kahane, and Magen Broshi, From the Beginning: Archaeology and Art in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (New York: Reynal and Company, Inc., 1968), 76-77, 277; Oscar White Muscarella, ed., Ladders to Heaven: Art Treasures from Lands of the Bible (Toronto, Canada: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), 286, 326-27. Muscarella, in Ladders to Heaven, 286, suggests that the design may be a modern forgery, but his only evidence for this is the “crude” nature of the design elements, which may just as well be an argument for the design being a forgery. He also cites a personal communication from Irene Winter to the effect that “the decoration could fit into a first millennium Phoenician or Punic background” on the basis of parallels from various sites in the Mediterranean.


27. See Betty J. Bäuml and Franz H. Bäuml, Dictionary of Worldwide Gestures, second edition (Lanham, MD, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 251-52 (examples of handclasps under “Agreement”), 305-7 (examples under “Oath”). An ancient Assyrian relief from Nimrud, which shows a king and his vassal clasping right hands, perhaps illustrates more accurately what the gesture would have looked like.

Collins, 196

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hand gestures in with his wife, Ru


David Calabro received a PhD in ancient Near Eastern studies from the University of Chicago in 2014. His research focuses on the ritual use of hand gestures in the ancient Levant and Egypt. He lives in Provo, Utah, with his wife, Ruth, and their six children.