

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 37 · 2020 · Pages 293 - 308

Understanding Ritual Hand Gestures of the Ancient World: Some Basic Tools

David Calabro

Offprint Series

© 2020 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org. You may subscribe to this journal at InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription.

UNDERSTANDING RITUAL HAND GESTURES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD: SOME BASIC TOOLS

David Calabro

Abstract: *The ritual use of hand gestures in covenant-making in ancient times is a topic of peculiar interest to Latter-day Saints. In this article, David Calabro summarizes results drawn from his doctoral research, providing readers with some tools to evaluate ancient gestures. The questions he suggests are novel, as is the way they are couched in an organized scheme. The author concludes that Latter-day Saints, who belong to a tradition saturated with ritual gestures, should be among those most educated about them.*

[Editor's Note: Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.

See David Clabro, "Understanding Ritual Hand Gestures of the Ancient Word: Some Basic Tools," in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 143–58. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/ancient-temple-worship/>.]

The ritual use of hand gestures in ancient times is a topic of peculiar interest to Latter-day Saints. A book by Alonzo Gaskill on the meaning of gospel ordinances includes several sections devoted to ritual hand gestures.¹ Gaskill explores the meaning of these gestures in ancient times in order to illuminate the meaning of these gestures for

modern Latter-day Saints. In his discussion of ritual gestures used in covenant-making, he writes, “The meaning of such oath-making rituals is sometimes defined, and at other times left for the participant to discover. But each is clearly laden with symbolic meaning and, consequently, with a divine offering to the inquisitive participant who seeks understanding.”² According to Victor Ludlow, the ordinances of the temple tune our minds to the significance of the hands as used in worship.³

From 2008 to the present, I have been conducting research on the use of ritual hand gestures in the ancient Near East. Much of this research was gathered in my 2014 doctoral dissertation on Northwest Semitic hand-lifting gestures and handclasps.⁴ Occasionally, in conversations with fellow Latter-day Saints, I am asked to summarize the findings of my research. Those who ask me this usually wish to gain insights about the ordinances of the Church, particularly temple ordinances, through understanding the ritual gestures of the ancient societies. The possibility of such comparisons is also of interest to me. Indeed, the deeper I delve into the ritual practices of ancient societies, the more I find these practices and those of the Latter-day Saint temple to be mutually instructive.

Nevertheless, like many people who have written a doctoral dissertation, the request to summarize my findings usually leaves me tongue-tied. One reason for this is that research in the humanities involves discovering questions as well as answering them; describing the answers is thus difficult without laying the groundwork of the questions that were asked. This is particularly true with ritual gestures, a topic whose complexity few realize. Discussion of sacred priesthood ordinances is subject to bounds of place and manner, which means that many members of the Church, even though they have reflected extensively on the meaning of ritual gestures, have not considered questions that arise from dialogue with those who hold alternate interpretations. In short, members of the Church readily recognize that ancient ritual gestures are relevant to their own, but they lack the tools to evaluate the ancient gestures in an appropriate way.

In this essay, I intend to provide some tools that can help interested Latter-day Saints to evaluate ancient gestures. Unlike most essays, this one does not aim to answer a research question. Instead, it aims to suggest questions, with the intent of preparing interested readers to discuss possible answers while having a clear view of the issues involved. Based on my interactions with many Latter-day Saints, even including those with academic training, I am convinced that many of the questions I will suggest are novel. The presentation of these questions as an organized

scheme is also a new contribution. The overarching assumption of this essay is that Latter-day Saints, who belong to a tradition saturated with ritual gestures, a tradition which also lays claim to ancient origins, should be among those who are most educated on ancient ritual gestures.

Sources and the Question of Gesture Reconstruction

Ancient sources relevant to the study of ritual gestures can be divided into two basic kinds. First, there are textual sources. The books of the Old and New Testaments are examples of ancient textual sources that include information about ritual gestures. For example, in Genesis 14:22, Abram says, “I have raised my hand to Yahweh El Elyon.”⁵ The raising of the hand described here is a ritual gesture, in this case one of covenant-making.⁶ Other relevant textual sources can be found in a variety of ancient languages and genres, from Homer’s *Iliad* to hieroglyphic texts on stelae from ancient Egypt. Many of these sources can be found in published collections in libraries.

Textual sources are especially useful for reconstructing the larger sequence of events in which ritual gestures were situated. For example, Abram’s reference to the gesture in Genesis 14:22 is followed by an oath, which helps to identify this as a covenant-making gesture. However, textual sources also carry some inherent ambiguities. The text does not tell us, for instance, whether Abram raises his hand with the palm inward, outward, sideways, or with some special finger articulation. Neither does it tell us how high Abram raised his hand or for how long. These questions can only be decided by comparison with other sources. Only rarely does an ancient text go into detail about the form of a gesture, and even the rare detailed descriptions are never enough to reconstruct a gesture with full accuracy.

The second kind of source is visual representations, often called “iconographic sources.” These include sculptures, cast figures, engravings, paintings, and other art forms. These sources are extremely abundant in the ancient world — as far as my own research area goes, the iconographic sources far outnumber the textual sources. As one example, a number of carved ivories from the Assyrian fortress of Nimrud show a male figure wearing a crown, kneeling and raising both hands with the palms outward.⁷

Iconographic depictions are of great value for understanding the forms of ritual gestures. However, there are limitations to this. Ancient visual representations do not depict movement, so it is impossible to know whether what is represented is one moment in a motion sequence

or simply a static gesture. Ancient iconography is also prone to sacrifice accuracy for the sake of visually pleasing composition. For example, an image of two figures facing each other and performing the same gesture in mirror image may be suspected of having switched the right and left hands of one figure in order to preserve symmetry.

The key issue to bear in mind with textual and iconographic sources is that these sources provide evidence for gestures, but they do not include actual gestures. For example, the Hebrew phrase used to describe the gesture in Genesis 14:22 is *herim yad*, “raise the hand.” Even though some scholars are accustomed to using locutions like “the gesture *herim yad*,” and some even go so far as to assume that there is a one-to-one correspondence between phrase and gesture, this is inaccurate and potentially misleading.⁸ Just as we might describe a given gesture in English as “he raised his hand” or “he put up his hand,” ancient textual sources also use different phrases to describe what is really the same gesture; they also occasionally use the same basic phrase to describe different gestures. Likewise, with iconographic sources, one has to make adjustments to account for the inherent ambiguities of the ancient artistic style.

Therefore, understanding ancient ritual gestures always involves reconstructing these gestures in the imagination, based on clues found in the ancient sources. The two main aspects that have to be reconstructed are the gesture’s form and its context. Given the ambiguities inherent in the sources, one should consider multiple possibilities. One should ask questions like the following: What might this gesture have looked like? What kind of setting was it performed in? In asking these questions, both scholars and laypeople can learn much from contemporary artists, playwrights, and moviemakers, who are accustomed to thinking about these issues. Considering the possibilities of form and context is critical, since these aspects establish the basis for comparison across sources, as well as comparison with ritual gestures that can be observed in modern religious practice.

Gestures as a System

Most studies of ancient gestures focus on one particular gesture, marshalling textual and iconographic evidence to illuminate the gesture’s form or its meaning in context. However, it is important to keep in mind that ritual gestures usually exist as part of a system of nonverbal signs in a culture. Their meaning derives as much from similarities and contrasts with other gestures as from aspects of context. In The Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints, for example, in ordinances involving the laying on of hands, each officiator typically uses two hands. But when there is a large number of Priesthood holders officiating in the circle, each uses only the right hand, while the left hand is placed on the shoulder of the person to the left. When an infant is being blessed, hands are placed under the infant rather than on the head. A full account of the gesture of the laying on of hands should account for all of these variations, which are part of the same system.⁹

One important consideration in dealing with ancient ritual gestures is the overall complexity of the system. This consideration is related to the characterization of the system as a whole, including the origins of gestures and how they have developed from those origins. In Hinduism and Buddhism, there exists a large body of gestures known as *mudra*, which appear in ritual and especially in religious dance. The *mudra* are also described in mythology and depicted in iconography. There are many dozens of *mudra*, each having a very specific form and meaning. The large number of signs in the system allows each sign to function almost like a word in spoken language; gestures can be strung together to form sequences of meanings, such as to tell a story in dance. We know a great deal about *mudra* because Hindu and Buddhist scholars wrote treatises in which the gestures are described in detail.¹⁰ Unfortunately, most ancient societies have not bequeathed to modern times a treatise on ritual gestures. Evidence of the total number of gestures in ancient Near Eastern ritual is relatively scant. But it makes a great deal of difference whether we assume on the one hand that the available evidence represents the total system, or whether we assume on the other hand that this represents only the tip of the iceberg. If the latter is true, then each gesture may have a very specific meaning.

At the beginning of the 20th century, some scholars suggested that ancient Near Eastern gestures were originally part of an extensive system like the *mudra* (other models included Masonic ritual and the nonverbal signs of Chinese secret societies). According to this point of view, gestures that originally functioned as part of an extensive system in temple rites have gradually been reduced in number and used in less sacred contexts.¹¹ More recent scholarship on Near Eastern gestures has taken a nearly opposite view: the ritual gestures are thought to be few in number and to have derived their meanings from mundane contexts. For example, raising both hands with the palms upward was thought to have begun as a simple begging gesture and to have become a prayer gesture when transferred to a temple context.¹²

Given the limited extent of available evidence, it is unlikely that any one of these views can be conclusively proven. Considering both viewpoints opens up a number of interesting questions, such as the following: Is the ancient system of ritual gestures explainable in terms of another form of behavior, such as dance, spoken language, drama, or mundane human interactions? If not, might there be vestiges of an earlier system that is explainable in these terms? In light of modern gestures that are analogous to the ancient ones and that may be historically related, could there be a development in the overall nature of the system from ancient to modern times?

Do Ancient Ritual Gestures Have Correct and Incorrect Interpretations?

One of the most interesting things I have found in my research is the great diversity of interpretations that have been suggested for ritual gestures. As one example, for the gesture of raising one hand with the palm outward (as found in Genesis 14:22 and elsewhere in textual and iconographic sources), at least 12 distinct interpretations are found in the literature. Several scholars regard it as a gesture of “adoration” or “worship,” others call it a “gesture of greeting or blessing,” some describe it as an apotropaic sign (a sign whose purpose is to ward away evil), one views it as a symbol of a deity, one suggests that it is a sign of non-treachery or purity, and the list goes on.¹³ Is there any way to say that one interpretation is correct and that another is incorrect? There are some criteria that can be applied. One of these is the form of the gesture. The interpretation that the gesture signifies either a lack of treachery or the purity of the one making the gesture, for example, is less viable if the palm of the hand is turned inward, and it is likewise less viable if the gesture involves making a fist and raising it high above the head as if to smite. As it turns out, based on comparison with iconographic sources, the gesture likely involved raising the hand in front with the palm facing toward the addressee, so this interpretation (which was made by David Seely) is among the more likely ones.¹⁴ Another criterion is the ritual context of the gesture. The fact that Abram takes an oath after making reference to the gesture, using standard Hebrew oath formulae, means that an interpretation that fits with the idea of oath-taking is more likely than one that involves, say, destroying enemies. Nevertheless, we should be careful not to assume that the idea of oath-taking is identical with the meaning of the gesture, since the gesture may impart its own distinctive meaning within the oath-taking context.

Even after applying the criteria of form and context, the number of possible interpretations of any given gesture is rather high. All of the interpretations mentioned above are still viable in terms of these two criteria, despite the fact that some who have suggested these interpretations have argued as if their interpretation is valid to the exclusion of others. In rare cases, the range of interpretation of a gesture may be narrowed if the gesture has an obvious relationship to something whose interpretation is indisputable. For example, it is thought that the ancient Mesopotamian oath gesture of “touching the throat” involved a motion signifying that the consequence of breaking the oath would be the cutting of the oath-breaker’s throat.¹⁵ Here the gesture’s visual similarity to cutting the throat would guarantee the interpretation of the gesture. Moreover, ritual gestures may change their form over time, and a gesture that once bore a strong resemblance to another action may develop into a less obvious sign. In such cases, one could possibly say that the historical origin of the gesture suggests the correctness of a certain interpretation. However, people do not always know the origins of the ritual gestures they perform, and it is questionable whether an interpretation based on historical development is more correct than one that applies directly to the current gesture as experienced by those who perform it.

Can one appeal to factors external to the gesture itself to decide if one interpretation is uniquely correct? Often, scholars who study ritual gestures appeal to ideas found in ancient sources, claiming that because an interpretation matches that of a particular source, it must be representative of the ancient culture in a way that other interpretations are not. For example, Johan Lust cites a host of ancient sources to prove that the core meaning of the raised-hand gesture has nothing to do with oath-taking but rather signifies entering into action to the addressee’s favor or detriment.¹⁶ The main problem with this kind of approach is that the ancient sources can be used to prove a great number of interpretations, and these interpretations may all be indicative of the ancient culture. It is useful to think of this in general terms, as if the gesture were practiced in our own time. Latter-day Saints are especially suited to think in these terms, since ritual gestures are an important part of our own living religious tradition. (In fact, Abram’s oath gesture of raising the hand appears analogous to the act of raising the right hand to sustain leaders and to administer the ordinance of baptism, both of which are connected with covenant-making.) As long as an interpretation is plausible in terms of the gesture’s form and context, what is there to exclude it? If a dozen people participating in a ritual interpret the same gesture, each in a

different way, who is to say that one participant is correct and the others are not? If our own religious practice is taken as a model, it would seem likely that the interpretation of gestures was a matter of private introspection and inspiration; ideas may have been shared in certain settings, but there would be no penalty for having a divergent interpretation or indeed for having no interpretation at all. This means that citing an ancient source for an interpretation does not prove that the interpretation is exclusively correct, and claims of exclusive correctness probably get us further from the ancient state of affairs rather than closer to it.

It is possible to imagine the interpretation of a gesture in the ancient society being rendered consistent by convention, either with the intervention of an authoritative institution or simply by popular consensus. A study by Desmond Morris on ritual gestures in Europe included a survey of large numbers of people to determine how people in different locales interpreted various gesture forms used in daily life.¹⁷ When a majority of the members of a community agree on the interpretation of a gesture, this lends correctness to the interpretation, just as the correct meaning of words in a language is based on consensus in the community of those who speak the language. However, interpretations of ritual gestures often are not subject to convention. According to the anthropologist Roy Rappaport, one of the main characteristics of ritual is that it is “not encoded by the performers.”¹⁸ This means that ritual gestures are viewed as deriving from a world outside that of human interaction. When asked what ritual gestures mean, informants often reply that they do not know, that they are performing the gestures simply because that is what they have always done.¹⁹ If the meaning of ritual gestures is not rendered consistent by repetition among members of the community, and if interpretations are not censored by a higher authority, then there is nothing to stop people from developing a diversity of interpretations. The question of correctness may then be essentially moot. An interpretation found in an ancient source would be speculative to the same degree as that of a modern scholar (provided that the scholar is knowledgeable about the ancient culture and has a workable reconstruction of the ritual).

The statement that ritual is “not encoded by the performers” suggests the possibility that the interpretation of a ritual gesture may be regarded as a mystery whose correctness is based not on convention but on divine ratification. This idea is implicit in the concept, familiar to Latter-day Saints, of “ordinances” — that is, rites that are prescribed by God through revelation. If God is the author of a gesture, then God is the ultimate determiner of its interpretation. In some cases, a revelation

having to do with the interpretation of a gesture may be included as part of the ritual itself or in a text associated with the ritual's origins. This is seen, for example, in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. One of the texts describing the inauguration of this ordinance includes an interpretation of passing the bread and pouring the wine: "This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me ... This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19-20, KJV). The sacrament prayers used in the Church today (which are based on passages in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants) mention eating and drinking in remembrance of the Son. However, it is almost impossible for explanations such as these to exhaust the meaning of a gesture. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper can be interpreted beyond the words of the ritual and its inaugural texts, and these interpretations are not necessarily invalid just because they are not explicit in the texts.²⁰ Thus divine revelation as encoded in the ritual can be cited as a standard of correctness, but it does not exclude other interpretations.

While it is usually impossible to narrow the interpretations of a gesture down to a single correct one, it is usually possible to find an interpretation that is more fundamental to the inherent properties of the gesture than others. Arriving at this fundamental kind of interpretation involves, once again, paying close attention to the form of the gesture and its context as reconstructed from the available evidence. It also involves paying more attention to what the gesture *does* than to what it *resembles* or *signifies*. If we take as an example the hand-lifting gesture in Genesis 14:22, we can see that the form of the gesture as revealed in iconography, with the palm of the hand facing toward an addressee and with the fingers pointing upward, has important implications for the way the ritual as a whole is organized. The gesture designates not only an agent (the one making the gesture) but also a single addressee who is roughly on the same level as the agent. It also has the potential to call attention to a participant in the ritual who is located above the agent and addressee (such as a heavenly witness), since the fingers point upward. We can thus say that the gesture sets up a ritual interaction in which there is one agent, one addressee, and sometimes a heavenly participant. All of the interpretations of this gesture mentioned above presuppose this kind of interaction format. Further, if we assemble all of the evidence for the contexts in which this gesture is performed, we find that the function that best describes what this gesture does in all cases is that of marking a performative act — that is, the gesture signals a ritual action that brings

about a new state of affairs, such as putting the agent or the addressee under an obligation.²¹

In summary, some questions that can be used to evaluate the extent of an interpretation's "correctness" are the following: Does this interpretation accord with the form of the gesture? Does it accord with the context? Does the interpretation exclude other interpretations, and if so, on what basis? Finally, is the interpretation fundamentally related to how the gesture functions in context, or is the gesture viewed in terms of a similarity or symbolic relationship to other concepts?

How Many Interpretations Can Ancient Ritual Gestures Have?

Since a ritual gesture can have multiple correct interpretations — some having to do with the gesture's basic functions and others having to do with its more abstract significance — the proper task of those interested in the meanings of gestures is not to identify a single correct interpretation but rather to identify the possible interpretations in an organized way. The number of possible interpretations is infinite, of course. However, a finite number of universal categories can be used to classify all the possible interpretations. These categories have been defined in the disciplines of semiotics (the study of signs) and linguistic anthropology. The ten sets of questions outlined below can facilitate understanding of hand gestures in ancient sources by helping the interested person to identify possible interpretations and to place these interpretations in proper perspective.

Most interpretations of ritual gestures focus on what a particular aspect of the gesture resembles or signifies. For example, Zeev Falk focuses on the upward motion of the hand-lifting gesture in Genesis 14:22, stating that this signifies affirmation (based on a perceived likeness to clasping the hand of a judge in court).²² We may call these interpretations *referential*, since they concern things that the gesture refers to through likeness or symbolism.

Referential interpretations can be classified by the aspect of the gesture that forms the basis of the interpretation. Hand gestures can be broken down into seven aspects, which include the components of the gesture itself and the larger aspects of which the gesture forms a part. First, there are the *body parts* used to perform the gesture: the arm, the hand, and the fingers. Second, these body parts are formed into a certain *shape*. For example, in one gesture depicted on Egyptian reliefs of battle scenes, the hand is formed into the shape of a bull's head, with the thumb and little finger extended and the other fingers bent forward.²³ In the raised-hand oath gesture discussed above, the hand shape is basically

flat, with the fingers extended and close together, and the elbow bent approximately to the square. A third component is the *position* of the shaped hand: whether it is held high, low, to the front, to the side, etc. Fourth, in many cases, the gesture involves a certain *motion* of the hand, such as moving it repeatedly from a high to a low position or changing its shape from an open hand to a closed fist. Fifth, the gesture may involve holding or manipulating an *object* (or pretending to do so). As for the larger aspects of which the gesture forms a part, we can mention the *body* of the agent performing the gesture and the overall *setting* of the ritual. We can outline these seven aspects as follows:

Aspects of Ritual Hand Gestures

Components of the gesture itself:

1. Body parts (arm, hand, fingers)
2. Shape
3. Position
4. Motion
5. Object

Larger Aspects:

6. Body
7. Setting

Each of these aspects can be made the basis of a referential interpretation. For example, Wolff suggests that the hand in ancient Hebrew society was a symbol of one's power. Thus raising the hand would be equivalent to exalting or vaunting one's own power, and "giving the hand" (2 Kings 10:15) would signify offering one's power in helping the addressee.²⁴ This is an example of a referential interpretation based on the body part used to perform the gesture, namely the hand. In the cases of the larger aspects of which the gesture forms a part, the meaning of the gesture fits within a referential interpretation of the agent's body or the larger setting. For example, Falk's interpretation of the raised-hand gesture as one of affirmation fits within an interpretation of the ritual setting as a legal one, akin to a courtroom presided over by a judge.

The following questions can help one to identify possible referential interpretations:

1. What might the arm, hand, and fingers symbolize? Given this symbolism, what would it mean to shape, position, and move these body parts as done in the gesture? If the gesture involves use of an object, does this relate to the symbolism of the body parts?

2. Does the hand shape (including any special finger articulation) or the shape of the arm resemble anything in the observed world? Might the shape stand symbolically for a personage or an abstract idea?
3. Is the position of the gesture high or low, and is the hand positioned toward or away from an addressee? Might this position contrast with that of another gesture? If so, might this contrast have significance in the ancient society?
4. Is there an indication that the gesture involves motion? If so, does the motion resemble any kind of movement commonly observed elsewhere? Might the features of the motion (such as its speed, its repetition, or the overall amount of movement) carry cultural significance?
5. Is there an object, real or imagined, associated with the gesture? What is the significance of this object, and why would it be used in this gesture?
6. Might the person performing the gesture represent another personage? Aside from the hand gesture in question, do the performer's ritual actions resemble actions commonly observed elsewhere? How does the gesture in question fit with the role or overall actions of the performer?
7. Is the ritual setting analogous to a setting known elsewhere in the observed world or in mythology? If so, is the gesture similar to an action associated with this other setting?

In addition to referential interpretations, there are interpretations that focus on the fundamental function of the gesture, including both what the gesture does to the context and how it is affected by the context. An example of this is the interpretation of the hand-lifting gesture that I suggested above, including the shaping of the context into a two- or three-part interaction and the function of marking a performative act. This kind of interpretation is known in semiotics as *indexical*; when a gesture either affects or is affected by an aspect of context, the gesture is said to *index* that aspect of its context.

Indexical interpretations can be classified by the aspect of context that is singled out as affecting or being affected by the gesture. A gesture's context can be analyzed in many ways. Three main aspects, however, are especially important with regard to the indexical functioning of gestures. The first aspect is the participants defined by the gesture. Some gestures are directed inward or lack a specific addressee, in which cases the format consists only of the agent of the gesture. The gestures I have studied,

however, usually have a specific outward directionality and designate at least one addressee.²⁵ The gesture may be affected by the participant format, such as when one salutes an officer of higher rank in a military ceremony. The gesture may also impact the relative status of participants, their roles (such as when a person is ordained), or their physical states. Second, ritual gestures index the surrounding space. For instance, they may be directed toward one of the cardinal directions. They may also be performed close-up or at a distance, defining the breadth of the ritual space. Third, gestures index the ritual sequence as it progresses through time. The beginning of the gesture and the return of the hands to a resting position mark off the ritual act as such. Further, the gesture may function as a key allowing the agent to progress to a new stage of the ritual.

Questions to ask in order to identify indexical interpretations include the following:

1. Who does the gesture to whom? What are the relative statuses of the agent and addressee of the gesture? Does this status change during the course of the ritual? Does one of the participants take on a new role or an obligation through the performance of the ritual? How does it feel to perform the gesture and to be its addressee? Is there evidence that the gesture was thought to bring about supernatural changes in the physical world?
2. Where are the participants located, and what is the distance between them? Do those who perform the gesture form a distinct group, so that the gesture effectively creates a boundary between participants?
3. What parts of the ritual precede and follow the gesture? How might the gesture recall, anticipate, or lead into other parts of the ritual?

In identifying indexical interpretations, one must pay attention to speech that accompanies the gesture, since the function of the ritual may be shared between gesture and speech. For instance, the oath and the gesture in Genesis 14:22-23 work in tandem to carry forward the function of obligating Abram.

Conclusion

Ritual hand gestures are a complex topic with great promise for future research. Among the most important tools for understanding the multifaceted meanings of gestures are questions that force one to probe into the gestures, their sources, and their interpretations. I have provided

several sets of questions which, I hope, will be of service to those who wish to undertake this process.

Answers to these questions can be found in the sources cited. But answers are relatively easy to come by; what is more difficult is knowing how to evaluate these answers and place them in a larger perspective. I have focused on describing the issues and suggesting relevant questions, with the aim that interested people will be better prepared to obtain their own lasting insights.

Questioning the meanings of gestures is something that can be done by scholars and laymen alike. To be sure, answers to some questions are more easily accessible to scholars trained in the particulars of the society in question. Nevertheless, Latter-day Saints have an advantage in hailing from a tradition that encourages us to think deeply about the meanings of ritual gestures. When we regard the gestures of the ancients, we can feel not only fascination but also kinship.

Notes

1. Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Sacred Symbols: Finding Meaning in Rites, Rituals, and Ordinances* (Springville, Utah: CFI, 2011), 75-78 (with notes on pp. 86-89), 186-97 (with notes on pp. 199-213), 219-23 (with notes on pp. 243-47), 259-61 (with notes on pp. 267-68).
2. Gaskill, *Sacred Symbols*, 186.
3. Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1982), 473.
4. David Calabro, *Ritual Gestures of Lifting, Extending, and Clasping the Hand(s) in Northwest Semitic Literature and Iconography* (unpublished University of Chicago dissertation, 2014).
5. The translations from ancient languages herein are my own unless otherwise indicated.
6. Calabro, *Ritual Gestures*, 63-66.
7. See David Calabro, "Gestures of Praise: Lifting and Spreading the Hands in Biblical Prayer," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 113.
8. As just one example of this tendency, compare the extremely influential book by Mayer Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 25-44. On these pages Gruber discusses the "gestures" *paraś kappayim* "spread the palms" and *naša' yadayim* "lift the hands." According to him,

- these expressions represent two gestures with different meanings. For a critique of this approach, see Calabro, "Gestures of Praise," 105-21.
9. For discussion of gestures as a system in the Old Testament, see David Calabro, "'When You Spread Your Palms, I Will Hide My Eyes': The Symbolism of Body Gestures in Isaiah," *Studia Antiqua* 9 (2011): 16-32.
 10. See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Duggirala Gopalakrishnayya, *The Mirror of Gesture: Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1936); Ernest Dale Saunders, *Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).
 11. See especially J. S. M. Ward, *The Sign Language of the Mysteries* (2 vols.; London: Baskerville Press, 1928).
 12. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 25-44.
 13. For discussion and references, see Calabro, *Ritual Gestures*, 636-51.
 14. David Rolph Seely, "The Raised Hand of God as an Oath Gesture," in *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Astrid B. Beck et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 417, no. 3.
 15. Paul Sanders, "So May God Do to Me!" *Biblica* 85/1 (2004): 91-98; Gaskill, *Sacred Symbols*, 186-88.
 16. Johan Lust, "For I Lift up my Hand to Heaven and Swear: Deut 32:40," in *Studies in Deuteronomy in Honour of C. J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. F. Garcia Martinez et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 155-64; Johan Lust, "The Raised Hand of the Lord in Deuteronomy 32:40 according to MT, 4QDeut-q, and LXX," in *Textus: Studies of the Hebrew University Bible Project, Volume XVIII*, ed. Alexander Rofé (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 33-45. Lust goes so far as to deny that this gesture belongs in an oath-taking context, which can be shown to be incorrect. However, for the sake of argument, we can adjust Lust's suggestion by applying it only to the symbolic meaning of the gesture.
 17. Desmond Morris et al., *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979).
 18. Roy Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," in *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Richmond, California: North Atlantic Books, 1979), 175, 179.
 19. Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26/1 (1979): 2-22.

20. For instance, some hymns and discourses refer to renewing baptismal covenants through partaking of the sacrament, a notion that is not found in the inaugural texts.
21. Calabro, *Ritual Gestures*, 648-51.
22. Zeev Falk, "Gestures Expressing Affirmation," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4/3 (1959): 268-69.
23. G. A. Wainwright, "The Earliest Use of the Mano Cornuta," *Folklore* 72 (1961): 492-95.
24. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 67.
25. Gestures can also designate third parties, such as by pointing out something or someone in a direction that is not the one in which the agent is facing. In some cases, the creation of a participant format may extend to nonhumans, such as when Moses and Aaron raised their hands in a ritual gesture toward various parts of Egypt, bringing about the plagues in Exodus 7-14. In a sense, the nonhuman addressees are personified through the gesture.

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.