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The Sacred Embrace and the Sacred Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions

Stephen D. Ricks

Abstract: *This article describes examples of the sacred embrace and the sacred handclasp in the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms of ancient Egypt, in ancient Mediterranean regions, and in the classical and early Christian world. It argues that these actions are 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.*

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See Stephen D. Ricks, "The Sacred Embrace and the Sacred Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions," 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), 159–70. Further information at https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/ancient-temple-worship/.]

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

Figure 1: The Divine Horus (with a falcon head) embraces the Royal Horus on the Qa Hedjet Stela

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.[1] 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.

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."[2] The rite, according to Svein Bjerke, "transfers vital power [his *ka*[3]] from the god to the king."[4] What is recorded in a ritual for Amenophis I (18th dynasty, 16th to 15th centuries BC) may also be understood for Tutankhamun:

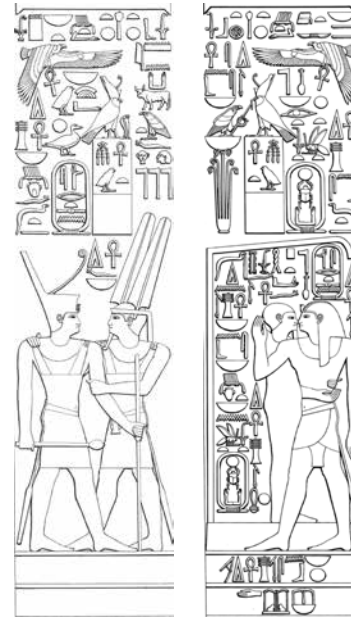

Figure 2: Left: The pharaoh Senwosret faces the god Amon, who embraces him. Right: Senwosret is embraced by Ptah, who faces him from the left.

> You go forth from embracing your father Osiris
> You revive through him, you are made whole through him.[5]

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."[6] 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."[7] Thus, for example, in the 11th

Figure 3: Tutankhanum (middle), accompanied by his *ka* (right), embraces Osiris (left), from the tomb of Tutankhamun, ca. 1320 BC

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."[8] 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.[9]

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."[10] 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.[11] "The embracing (*Eg. shn*) of

the king by the god"[12] is the definitive consecration of the king, "who at that moment becomes fully consecrated, crowned, and sanctified."[13] 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.[14]

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."[15] 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."[16] But they also did so because they accepted, perhaps, the ancient Israelite view that marriage was a sacred covenant[17] 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."[18] For the ancient Christians, the sacred handclasp — the *dextrarum iunctio* — was a fitting symbol for the most sacred act and moment in human life.

Figure 4: Late fifth-century BC Greek gravestone showing Philoxenos grasping the hand of his wife Philoumene

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

Figure 5: The "good angel" (Lating *bonus angelus*) grasps the hand of Vibia to lead her to the banquet of the blessed, from a Sabazian tomb near Rome

priest Vincentius near Rome, dating from the second century.[19] One depicts the "good angel" (labeled in the scene as *bonus angelus*)[20] 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[21] (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.[22]

Behind the figures (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

Figure 6: Abel and Melchizedek making an offering, with the hand reaching from behind the veil, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy

Figure 7: Abel, Melchizedek, Isaac, and Abraham surround the altar, with the hand reaching from behind the veil, Basilica of St. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy.

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), 3:fig. 60. Figures 6 and 7 are used with the kind permission of Val Brinkerhoff.

Notes

1. The name Qor Hedjet may also be an archaizing "representation of Thutmose III" a New Kingdom ruler from the eighteenth dynasty, who reigned in the fifteenth century BC, cf. Jean-Pierre Pätznick, "L'Horus Qahedjet: souverain de la 3eme dynastie," in ed. Jean-Claude Goyon and Christine Cardin, *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of Egyptologists/ Actes du neuvième Congrès international des égyptologues* (Leuven/Dudley MA: Peeters, 2007), 145. I have been greatly benefitted in the preparation of this paper by reading sections in Hugh W. Nibley's *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri:*

An Egyptian Endowment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), dealing with ritual sacred embraces.

2. Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 433.
3. The *ka* is the vital power (conceived of as a doppelganger) or spirit that departs from the body at the time of death, in Peter Kaplony, "Ka," in ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1980), 3:275-76; Liselotte Greven, *Der Ka in Theologie und Königskult*. Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 17 (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1952), 27; Ursula Schweitzer, *Das Wesen des Ka im Diesseits und Jenseits der alten Ägypter*. Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 19 (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1956), 13-19.
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 [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 hesitance to disclose his name, may we not also understand the Hebrew *ye'aveq* ("wrestle") in an additional sense of "embrace."
5. "Libation Utterance for Re," from the "Ritual for Amenophis I"=Papyus Chester Beatty IX recto 5:13–6:3 cited in Jan Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder an den Sonnengott* (Berlin: Hessling, 1969), 57.
6. Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder*, 56.

7. Horst Beinlich, "Umarmung," in ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto, *Lexicon der Ägyptologie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1985), 6:844.
8. Émile Chassinat and Marquis de Rochmonteix, *Le Temple d'Edfou* (Cairo: Institut francais d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1984) 3:226–27, cited in Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder*, 56.
9. Pyramidion Leiden K 1, cited in Assmann, *Liturgische Lied*er, 58.
10. Beinlich, "Umarmung," 6:844–45.
11. Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 433.
12. Alexandre Moret, *Du caractère religieux de la royauté pharaonique*. Annales du Musée Guimet. Bibliothèque d'études, vol. 14 (Paris: Leroux, 1902), 101.
13. Nibley, *Message*, 433, citing Alexandre Moret, *Rituel du culte divin journalier en Égypte*. Annales du Musée Guimet. Bibliothèque d'études, vol. 14 (Paris: Leroux, 1902), 100–101, n. 4.
14. I wish to thank my former student, now colleague, Egyptologist John Thompson, for this insight.
15. *J. Paul Getty Museum Handbook of the Antiquities Collection* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002), 22.
16. "Fides und Concordia sind im besonderen Masse gefordert bei der intimsten menschlichen Dauer-verbindung, der Ehe." Kötting, "Dextrarum iunctio," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Theodor Klauser (Stuttgart: Hiersemann,1957), 3:883.
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."

19. On the illustrations of the tomb of the Sabazian priest Vincentius, see Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols. (New York: Bollingen/Pantheon, 1953-58), 3: figs. 839, 842, 2:45-50; Franz Cumont, *Recherches sur la symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (Paris: Geuthner, 1942), 418, n. 1.
20. In the view of Henri Leclerq, "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.
21. Hugh W. Nibley, "Sacred Vestments," in ed. Don E. Norton,, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 109.
22. On the "seal of Melchizedek," see Alan Rex Mitchell's informative study *Melchizedek's Seal and Scroll* (n.c.: Greenjacket Books, 2012).

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