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TEN WAYS TO INTERPRET RITUAL HAND GESTURES

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Hand gestures play an important part in the rituals of many of the world's religions, both past and present. One may think of the Roman Catholic "sign of the cross"; the Jewish priestly blessing gesture, a one-handed version of which was made famous by Leonard Nimoy in his role as the Vulcan Spock in *Star Trek*; and the "laying on of hands" used to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost, confer the priesthood, ordain to an office, set apart for a calling, or bestow a priesthood blessing in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹ There are also many examples outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition; a Google search on "ritual hand gestures" yields pages of links to discussions of Wiccan and Hindu religions. Hinduism, in particular, has developed a large body of hand gestures, called *mudra* (Sanskrit for "seal"), which appear in mythology, ritual, art, and dance, and are among the many legacies of Hinduism inherited by other Asian religions, including Buddhism.² Further, the ritual use of hand gestures has a long documented

1. See Betty J. Bäuml and Franz H. Bäuml, *Dictionary of Worldwide Gestures*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 261–63. A good description of the sign of the cross and its significance is found in John F. Sullivan, *The Visible Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1922), 119–20. The priestly blessing gesture is discussed by Louis Jacobs in "The Body in Jewish Worship: Three Rituals Examined," in *Religion and the Body* (ed. Sarah Coakley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 84–86. The Latter-day Saint gesture of the laying on of hands is mentioned in Latter-day Saint scripture (see, for example, Articles of Faith 1:4–5; Doctrine and Covenants 42:44) and in many manuals published by the Church.

2. Ernest Dale Saunders, *Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960). For more on Hindu mudras, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Duggirala Gopalakrishnayya, *The Mirror of Gesture: Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1936); La Meri, *The Gesture Language of the Hindu Dance* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964); Federico Squarcini, "Gesture Language as a Vehicle in the Expression of Emotion: A Phenomenological

history, being found in ancient Near Eastern texts and art going back thousands of years, perhaps most famously the art of ancient Egypt.

Since 2008, I have been engaged in dissertation research on the use of ritual hand gestures in ancient Levantine literature and art. One of the most complex and interesting issues I have encountered in my research is the diversity of interpretations surrounding what may appear, at first glance, to be very simple gestures. For example, the raising of the hand with the palm outward, which is performed by deities and mortals in many contexts in ancient Levantine art, has been described by various interpreters as a gesture of greeting, of blessing, and of adoration.³ Of course, greeting, blessing, and adoration are very different concepts; they may be seen as interrelated and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but each carries different implications for the interpretation of the ritual as a whole.

In the case of ancient Levantine ritual gestures, there is no continuous tradition of interpretation, which encourages speculation and diversity of interpretation based on hints found in the surviving sources. The situation is different, for example, with the Hindu mudras, whose interpretation is supported by a large body of native literature and by a living tradition of instruction and use. However, even with the mudras, there is plenty of room for diverse conclusions as to meaning and function: some describe their function in terms of their supernatural power to transform the person performing the gesture or to affect circumstances, while others see them as a symbolic system whose primary function is to communicate ideas.⁴ Further, since one of the main aspects of ritual is that it is “not encoded by the performers,”⁵ one may question whether a native tradition or informant has any special status above that of a perceptive outside researcher in interpreting

Investigation of the Use of Non-Verbal Expression in Monotheistic Gaudiya Vaisnava Tradition,” *Social Compass* 42/4 (1995): 451–60.

3. Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 206, 329; Martin Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 169; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1999), 216–21. In the latter, Klingbeil consistently describes the gesture as a “gesture of blessing” when performed by a deity and as a “gesture of adoration” when performed by a human, although he does not provide arguments for his use of these terms. See also the discussion in section 3.2 below.

4. Saunders, *Mudrā*, 28–38; La Meri, *Gesture Language*, xiv–xvi; John Lundquist, “Fundamentals of Temple Ideology from Eastern Traditions,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen* (ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks; Provo: FARMS, 2002), 687–89.

5. Roy Rappaport, “The Obvious Aspects of Ritual,” in *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1979), 175, 179. Cf. Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* 26/1 (1979): 2–22.

ritual hand gestures. While the form of ritual gestures is established and consistent, their interpretations can be wide-ranging, even within the culture in which they are used.

It is surprising, therefore, that currently there does not exist a unified schema or typology for identifying and classifying diverse interpretations of ritual hand gestures. The lack of such a schema or typology puts the researcher at a disadvantage, as is painfully evident in the dozens of studies that seem to assume that there can be only one correct interpretation for a given ritual gesture. Studies such as these either neglect to account for other interpretations that are different from their own, or they argue for one interpretation over against others that are, in fact, equally valid.⁶ These studies end up adding to the literature without providing a complete, satisfying account of the gesture's meaning. A schema or typology for classifying interpretations of ritual gestures would make it easier for researchers to recognize and confront the richness of diverse interpretations and would, I believe, lead to more satisfying analyses of these gestures.

The intent of this article is to present a schema which may be used both to classify previous interpretations of ritual hand gestures and to generate new possible interpretations.⁷ This schema should be viewed as a heuristic tool for those who wish to research ritual hand gestures, including philologists and art historians as well as anthropologists studying modern cultures. In what follows, I begin by describing the theoretical basis of this schema, including the relevant technical terms and conceptual categories. I then outline and discuss the schema itself, which consists of ten ways of interpreting ritual hand gestures based on the different ways in which they might function as signs. I then conclude by giving several examples of how these ten ways of interpreting have been and can be applied to actual gestures. Since the purpose of this article is to facilitate future research rather than to present a specific research narrative, the examples given do not amount to a foolproof or even a unified argument but are meant instead to be suggestive and illustrative. The majority of examples are taken from my research in ancient Levantine ritual hand gestures; although these examples are particularly interesting to me because of their long history and their presence in biblical literature, examples from any culture presumably could have served equally well for my purpose.

6. For examples of both of these tendencies, see sections 3.1 to 3.3 below.

7. This is not the first time that an attempt has been made to collect and organize ways of interpreting ritual action. Cf., for example, Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, rev. ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 36–39. The present study differs from that of Grimes in focusing on hand gestures and in being based on semiotic categories.

1. Terms and Categories

One of the luminaries of modern semiotics, the study of the interpretation of signs, is Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce developed a tripartite classification of signs that is still widely followed and that forms the basis of my approach to ritual gestures. According to Peirce, a sign can function as a *symbol*, an *icon*, or an *index*.⁸ A *symbol* is a sign that means what it means because a group of people agrees that that is what it means. An example of this is the letters of the alphabet. They are abstract signs that stand for sounds only because those who write and read with that alphabet agree on what the letters stand for; the relationship the letters bear to the sounds they “make” is called *symbolic*.⁹ An *icon* is a sign that stands for something because it resembles that thing. A picture, for example, bears an *iconic* relationship to the thing it depicts.¹⁰ An *index* is a sign that signifies something because of an actual causal relationship, or, to put it another way, because it was at some time in contact, or contiguity, with that something (either directly or by means of an intermediary). For example, a death mask is an index of a dead man’s face because the mask was physically molded around the face (the mask also resembles the face and is thus an icon in addition to being an index). In like manner, a nail hole is an index of a nail, and coughing can be an index of a virus. The death mask, the nail hole, and the symptom of coughing are said to bear an *indexical* relationship to, or to *index*, the face, the nail, and the virus respectively.¹¹ These categories of symbol, icon, and index are not mutually exclusive; most signs have symbolic, iconic, and indexical properties at the same time. However, one or another property may be more obvious than the others or may predominate in our analysis of a sign.

Michael Silverstein, drawing on the work of Peirce and others, has developed a paradigm for analyzing the semiotic properties of language and of other cultural phenomena.¹² Speaking of language, Silverstein discusses the *referential* property whereby language is used to make propositions or “predications descriptive of states of affairs.”¹³ These propositions are built mainly on symbolic associations between words and the concepts they

8. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 2:156–73.

9. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2:172–73.

10. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2:157–58.

11. Cf. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2:170–72.

12. Michael Silverstein, “Shifters, Linguistic Categories and Cultural Description,” in *Meaning in Anthropology* (ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 11–55.

13. Silverstein, “Shifters,” 14.

stand for, although iconic associations may also come into play. Examples of such propositions include the sentences “time flies when you’re having fun,” which is a predication about time, and “bees buzz because of natural frequency,” which is a predication about the sound made by bees in flight (the latter example includes an iconic association, the onomatopoeic word *buzz*).¹⁴ Language also has *indexical* properties, according to Silverstein, by which it presupposes and creates aspects of the context in which it is used.¹⁵ These indexical properties are built not on symbolic associations but on patterns of use. An example of an indexical property of English is the use of the archaic pronouns *thou* and *thee* instead of *you* in prayer. This is not a kind of proposition but rather a response to the ritual setting of prayer and the fact that the one being addressed is God; in a sense, the choice to use the archaic pronouns also defines these aspects of context. The significance of the choice of pronouns depends on patterns of use: the word *thou* stands referentially for the same thing as the word *you*, but the two pronouns are differentiated by the contexts in which they are typically used. The choice of pronouns in this example may be said to *index* the ritual setting of prayer and the divine nature of the addressee. Silverstein’s distinction between referential and indexical properties of language may also be applied to gestures, as I seek to demonstrate in the remainder of this article.

2. Ten Ways of Interpreting

Hand gestures, like language, have symbolic, iconic, and indexical properties.¹⁶ Further, any gesture used in a specific context can be analyzed both in terms of what it references through symbolic or iconic association and in terms of how it indexes—that is, presupposes or creates—aspects of the ritual context. The referential properties of ritual gestures can be subdivided by the aspect of the gesture about which the proposition is made, such as the hand itself, the shape of the hand, the motion or pose of the hand, the body including the gesturing hand, or the physical setting in which the gesture takes place. The indexical properties of ritual gestures can be subdivided by the aspect of context that is indexed, such as the bodies of participants, the physical states of participants and of objects, the social roles of participants, the ritual progression, or the ritual setting.

14. The latter sentence was found at http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Why_do_flying_bees_buzz, accessed 9 January 2013.

15. Silverstein, “Shifters,” 23–43.

16. Cf. John Haviland, “Gesture,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9 (2000): 89–90.

The resulting subdivisions of ways to interpret gestures can be outlined as in the chart below, which is explained in sections 2.1 to 2.10. In this chart, the “equals” sign (=) is used to indicate symbolic relationships. A subscript “c” to the right of the “equals” sign stands for a purely conventional (that is, arbitrary) symbolic relationship, and a subscript “i” to the right of the “equals” sign stands for a symbolic relationship that has iconic properties. A “less than” sign followed immediately by a “greater than” sign (<>) indicates an indexical relationship. The “less than” sign by itself (<) stands for “pre-supposes,” and a “greater than” sign by itself (>) stands for “creates.” The term “hand” as used herein should be understood as a catch-all term for the hand and/or its associated body parts, including the arm, palm, and finger(s).

Referential Interpretations

1. hand = concept (usually: hand =_c abstract idea)
2. hand shape = concept
 - 2a. hand shape =_i person, animal, place, or thing
 - 2b. hand shape =_c person, animal, thing, or abstract idea
3. hand motion or pose = concept (usually: motion or pose =_c abstract idea)
4. hand + body = concept (usually: hand + body =_i person, animal, or thing)
5. setting = concept₁ (usually: setting =_i place), thus hand + body = concept₂

Indexical Interpretations

6. gesture <> body of first- and second-person participant(s)
 - 6a. gesture < emotion of person doing gesture
 - 6b. gesture > physiological disposition of participant(s)
 - 6c. gesture > change in emotional state of participant(s)
7. gesture <> physical state of animate or inanimate participant(s)
8. gesture <> social status of participant(s)
 - 8a. gesture < relative social roles and status of participants
 - 8b. gesture > change in status or relationship of participants
9. gesture <> ritual progression
 - 9a. gesture < previous rituals, learning, or authorization
 - 9b. gesture > access to further rituals or ritual stages
10. gesture <> ritual setting
 - 10a. gesture < ritual setting: temple, judgment hall, etc.
 - 10b. gesture > ritual locations and boundaries

I would note that the ten ways of interpreting enumerated here do not exhaust the possible interpretations of gestures. The list may be expanded simply by finding additional aspects of the context that might be drawn into a symbolic or indexical relationship with the gesture. Nor does my breakdown of the notion of “context” lay any claim to unimpeachable truth; I have limited myself to those aspects of context that have been identified and made the object of focus in the interpretations of gestures with which I am familiar. However, as any sign can theoretically be broken down into symbolic, iconic, and indexical functions, the main categories outlined above should be serviceable as a basic model for practically any analysis of gestures.

2.1. *Referential Interpretation: Hand = Concept*

I will now describe each of these ways of interpreting in more detail. We begin with referential ways of interpreting, which seem to be the most commonly employed in studies of ancient Near Eastern texts and iconography. As already mentioned, these ways of interpreting base the meaning of the gesture on a proposition or gloss. This proposition or gloss can be formulated in a variety of ways: “x is y,” “x means y,” “x represents y,” etc. The letter “y” in these formulae stands for a “concept”—that is, a place, person, relationship, material thing, or abstract idea that is conceived of in the mind of an interpreter.¹⁷

The hand, arm, etc., may be equated with abstract concepts. For example, the proposition may be “the hand represents power,” “the hand symbolizes authority,” “the hand is a symbol of life,” or “the hand stands, by synecdoche, for the whole person.” Once such a proposition is made, it implies that what happens to or by means of the hand happens to or by means of the person’s power, authority, life, or whole self. Thus, for example, raising the hand could mean “displaying one’s authority” or “pledging one’s life.”¹⁸ In this way of interpreting, it is helpful to describe the symbolic categories in terms

17. My term *concept* corresponds roughly to Peirce’s term *object*. In contrast to Peirce, I use the term *object* herein to denote a material thing that may be held in the hand.

18. Cf. Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, new and revised edition (New York: Gordian Press, 1975), 428: “their allusion to El’s extended hand refers to his far-reaching power; this is a regular Semitic idiom (cp. Arabic *t-w-l y-d*, and the antithetical Hebrew ‘short hand’ [e.g., Numbers 11.23; Isaiah 59:1] in the sense of ‘powerlessness’), and in Oriental iconography, kings and emperors are often portrayed with outstretched arms in token of their power.” Also cf. Lewis Dayton Burdick, *The Hand: A Survey of Facts, Legends, and Beliefs Pertaining to Manual Ceremonies, Covenants, and Symbols* (Oxford, New York: The Irving Company, 1905), 130: “the key for the interpretation of some of the ceremonies in which the hand plays a conspicuous part might be found in the recognition by the ancient Egyptians of the arms and hands as the

of the language spoken by the people who practice the ritual. Questions to ask in this way of interpreting are: what does the hand represent by cultural convention? What does the gesture then imply?

2.2. *Hand Shape = Concept*

The hand shape, either as a pose or in motion, can be equated with a concept. Gestures interpreted in this way are characteristic of Polynesian dance and, to a limited extent, of Hindu dance. There are two varieties of this way of interpreting; the main distinction between the varieties is whether the interpretation is based on resemblance (iconic) or an arbitrary correlation (conventional or purely symbolic). In the first variety (2a), the hand shape may be taken to resemble something (as an iconic symbol). The thing can be from daily life (such as a tool) or from mythology (such as a sacred mountain). In the second variety (2b), the hand shape represents a thing by convention, like an abstract concept, a deity, etc.

2.3. *Hand Motion or Pose = Concept*

The motion or positioning of the hand can also be equated with a concept. This way of interpreting, along with interpretation number 2 above (hand shape = concept), is very common; numbers 2 and 3 are perhaps the easiest ways of interpreting, since they operate on the level of the gesture itself, so that the meaning of the gesture does not have to be derived from other equations. What distinguishes number 3 from number 2 is that number 3 focuses on movement and positioning of the hand, not on the shape made with the hand. In this way of interpreting, the proposition involves verbs instead of nouns: not “shape x means y,” but “to do x means to do y.” Statements like “the goddess on the stela raises her hand in a gesture of blessing” or “the lifting of the hands signifies prayer” employ this variety of referential interpretation, whether consciously or unconsciously.

2.4. *Hand + Body = Concept*

The gesture can be said to resemble and represent the motion of somebody doing an action. This conception of gestures is sometimes referred to as “mime” or “acting.” Again, the action can be from daily life or from mythology. There are two main differences between this way of interpreting and numbers 2 and 3 above: (1) The hand represents a hand, not something else. (2) The whole body is involved, even if only by implication. Gestures

visible representative of the vital principle . . . The life of the attestor was pledged in covenant with the divine spark of the Pharaoh.”

interpreted in this way are characteristic of a large part of Hindu dance; this symbolic involvement of the whole body is one feature that distinguishes Hindu dance from Polynesian dance.¹⁹

2.5. *Setting = Concept₁, Thus Hand + Body = Concept₂*

Just as the meaning of a gesture can be derived from a proposition about the whole body, the meaning can be derived from a proposition about an even larger category, the setting in which the gesture occurs. The setting can be said to resemble another from daily life or mythology; therefore the gesture has symbolic significance based on analogy. For example, the proposition could be, “the temple is the house of God,” suggesting that the actions of people in the temple derive meaning from analogous hospitality rites and other domestic actions.²⁰

2.6. *Indexical Interpretation: Gesture <> Body of Participant(s)*

Next, we move to indexical ways of interpreting. These are especially interesting for their potential to uncover aspects of culture and religious practice, aspects that may be hidden even from those who belong to the culture. These ways of interpreting are usually relatively unexplored compared to referential interpretations. In essence, they involve asking not “what does this gesture mean?” but rather “what causes this gesture?” and “what does this gesture do?”

Gestures, being directly connected to the one performing them and sometimes to another person as well (in the case of gestures involving physical contact between two people), can index the bodies of these participants. Paying attention to these phenomena yields one kind of indexical interpretation, what could be called “physiological” interpretation, of which there are three varieties. The first variety has a long history among scholars of gesture, beginning with the work of Charles Darwin and repackaged and applied to ancient material by Mayer Gruber, Othmar Keel, and others.²¹ It involves investigating what emotional state might give rise to a gesture, either in the immediate moment when the gesture is performed or in the historical origin of the gesture. For example, putting up the hands in front of the face

19. Adrienne L. Kaeppler, *Polynesian Dance, with a Selection for Contemporary Performances* (Honolulu: Edward Enterprises, 1983), 8.

20. See David Calabro, “The Lord of Hosts and His Guests: Hospitality on Sacred Space in Exodus 29 and 1 Samuel 1,” *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 27 (2007): 19–29.

21. See Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*; Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*. Gruber explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Darwin on pp. 1–3.

with the palms outward, a gesture commonly seen in Egyptian art, has been viewed as originating from a fear reaction, an attempt to avert numinous and potentially dangerous powers.²² The second variety focuses on how the gesture disposes the body to certain actions or imposes limitations on action. For example, when raising both hands during prayer, the hands and vitals are vulnerable, and one cannot secretly hold or easily reach a weapon; thus one can interpret the gesture as a form of surrender. In the third variety, one focuses on the emotional states that the gesture induces. This way of interpreting is represented by Christine Morris's studies of gestures depicted on Minoan stamp seals.²³ This way of interpreting starts by asking the question, "how does this gesture make you feel when you do it?" This variety reverses the first variety's path of inquiry, examining the creative rather than the presupposing role of gestures relative to emotional states.

2.7. *Gesture <> Physical State of Participant(s)*

Somewhat different from the function of indexing the bodies of participants is the function of changing the physical states of participants, including inanimate participants. This category applies especially to so-called "magical" gestures that exert supernatural power on an addressee, like the gesture Moses uses to turn the river to blood and to part the sea. This way of interpreting was in vogue during the first half of the twentieth century, when scholars like Heinrich Vorwahl interpreted many gestures as ways of channeling *mana* (supernatural power) to the body of the one performing it or to an addressee, for good or ill.²⁴ Although certain aspects of Vorwahl's approach have been criticized,²⁵ and although modern interpretation of biblical gestures has moved on to accommodate current issues, it should be emphasized that Vorwahl's general interpretation of hand gestures still works to explain the biblical data just as well as the equally subjective interpretations of his successors.

22. Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 312–13.

23. Christine Morris, "The Language of Gesture in Minoan Religion," *Aegaeum* 22 (2001): 245–51; Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield, "Feeling through the Body: Gesture in Cretan Bronze Age Religion," in *Thinking through the Body: Archaeologies of Corporeality* (ed. Yannis Hamilakis, Mark Pluciennik, and Sarah Tarlow; New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2002), 105–20. Cf. Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 6–7.

24. Heinrich Vorwahl, *Die Gebärdensprache im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Emil Ebering, 1932).

25. See Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication*, 13–14.

2.8. *Gesture <> Social Status of Participant(s)*

Apart from the physical plane, gestures can operate on the social plane. They can index the social roles of the participants (their status relative to one another, their gender, their profession, etc.). One variety of this way of interpreting examines what the gesture presupposes about the social roles of the participants. Looking at as many examples of the gesture as possible, one asks: who does the gesture to whom? Is it the kind of gesture one performs to a social superior or to a social inferior, to one of the same gender or to one of the opposite gender? Is the gesture only performed by priests, by kings, by women, by deities, or by a specific deity? This variety of interpretation can do much to shed light on aspects of the social structure in the culture that the ritual represents, even aspects that may not be consciously understood by the participants themselves. Another variety of this way of interpreting focuses on what effect the gesture has on the social roles of the participants. After the gesture is performed, is the addressee under some obligation to the one performing the gesture, or vice versa? Has a new relationship, such as husband-wife, master-servant, or a surrogate kinship relationship been formed? I would note that, when applying this kind of interpretation, one must be careful to pay attention to any speech that might accompany the gesture, since the function of changing social roles might be shared by verbal and nonverbal components of the ritual.

2.9. *Gesture <> Ritual Progression*

A ninth aspect of the context that gestures can index is the progression of the one performing them within ritual time and space. Every ritual gesture implies that the one performing it has somewhere learned the gesture and somehow been authorized to perform it. If the context in which people can obtain knowledge of the gesture is restricted, and if this is known to the addressee, the gesture might act as a sort of password or as an indicator of one's stage of progression within the ritual.²⁶ The idea that such-and-such actions are required by God of those who approach him, even though the actions may be devoid of any other function or of any referential meaning known to

26. Nibley, "On the Sacred and the Symbolic," 557-59; Todd Compton, "The Handclasp and Embrace as Tokens of Recognition," in *By Study and also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 1:611-42.

the worshippers, is evident in many rituals from the Near East and elsewhere, and this also falls under this type of interpretation.²⁷

2.10. *Gesture <> Ritual Setting*

Finally, a gesture can index the temporal and spatial setting of the gesture. In one variety of this way of interpreting, one focuses on how the gesture might presuppose a certain ritual setting. For example, do people do this gesture only in a temple ceremony, or only on a certain holiday, or primarily in a courtroom during a legal proceeding? The gesture may thus act as a reminder of the ritual setting and may even constitute the ritual setting. This leads to the second variety of this way of interpreting, focusing on how gestures, through their performative function or through regular practice over time, create ritual locations. Ritual gestures can define ritual areas and boundaries by varying according to place in the ritual and by being distributed according to groups that are separated in space. This form of interpretation features prominently in the work of Jonathan Z. Smith.²⁸

3. Examples

I will now show some examples of how these interpretive categories can be applied to actual gestures attested in iconographic and textual sources. Given the enormous amount of relevant primary and secondary sources, I can only give a brief sampling in this paper, touching on a few gestures and highlighting only those interpretations that are most interesting in my subjective estimation.

3.1. *Upraised Fist*

I begin with the gesture of raising the arm to the square, the hand making a fist and sometimes (but not always) holding a weapon. This gesture is performed by deities and mortals in ancient Levantine statuary and relief.²⁹

27. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 370–71; Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* 26/1 (1979): 2–22; cf. Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–22.

28. Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

29. The major studies of this motif are Robert Houston Smith, “Near Eastern Forerunners of the Striding Zeus,” *Archaeology* 15/3 (1962): 176–83; Dominique Collon, “The Smiting God: A Study of a Bronze in the Pomerance Collection in New York,” *Levant* 4 (1972): 111–34; Ora Negbi, *Canaanite Gods in Metal: An Archaeological Study of Ancient Syro-Palestinian Figurines* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Institute of Archaeology, 1976); Helga Seeden, *The Standing Armed Figurines in the Levant* (München: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1980); and Izak Cornelius, *The Iconography of the Canaanite Gods Reshef and Baal* (*Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 140; Fribourg: University Press,

The motif employing this gesture in combination with a striding pose is known as the “smiting god” motif (despite the fact that it is not only deities who perform the gesture). In the Hebrew Bible, some phrases referring to God or his human representative extending or raising the hand to enact large-scale divine judgments may describe this gesture or one like it.³⁰

One recent line of interpretation has suggested that the smiting god motif points to a ritual enacted in the temple, in which a king or prophet impersonates the god in his victory over chaos by smiting enemies who have been captured in battle.³¹ This would be an example of interpretation number 4: the king or prophet represents the god, thus the ritual performance of the smiting gesture (whether or not it is directed at a real human) represents the god in the act of smiting. In the first half of the twentieth century, Heinrich Vorwahl saw this gesture as described in the Bible as a means of exerting supernatural power. In this interpretation (number 7), the raised-hand gesture is a way of channeling divine power against an enemy, thus magically smiting the enemy without the need for physical contact.³² This interpretation, if applied to examples of the “smiting god” motif in art, would fit very well with recent studies on the performative function of Near Eastern art.³³ A third line of interpretation might be to understand the hand and arm as symbols of power or might, so that raising the hand symbolizes the manifestation of divine power (interpretation number 1). This interpretation differs from number 7 in that the purpose of the gesture would be to communicate

1994). Examples of the motif in which a mortal rather than a deity is depicted performing the gesture are rare, but they do occur. Warriors of uncertain rank (perhaps kings?) are depicted in this pose in siege scenes and in the “Ape Hunt” narrative on Phoenician metal bowls; see Glenn Markoe, *Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls from Cyprus and the Mediterranean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), nos. Cy4, Cy7, E2, and G4. A Middle Bronze Age plaque of “Hyksos” type (which is primarily Semitic in motif and style) shows a deity in smiting pose on one side and two “dancing worshippers,” one of whom is “performing the same gesture as the god,” on the other; see Othmar Keel, Hildi Keel-Leu, and Silvia Schroer, *Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästina/Israel*, vol. 2 (Fribourg and Göttingen: Universitätsverlag and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 264, 266 (no. 73); Cornelius, *Iconography of the Canaanite Gods*, 257, fig. 63.

30. See David Calabro, “‘When You Spread Your Palms, I Will Hide My Eyes’: The Symbolism of Body Gestures in Isaiah,” *Studia Antiqua* 9 (2011): 19–20, 22 and the sources cited there.

31. Nicolas Wyatt, “Arms and the King,” in “*Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf*”: *Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient, Festschrift für Oswald Loretz zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres mit Beiträgen von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen* (ed. Manfred Dietrich and Ingo Kottsieper; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 833–82.

32. Heinrich Vorwahl, *Die Gebärdensprache im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Emil Ebering, 1932).

33. Zainab Bahrani, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 50–55.

the notion of the deity manifesting power (a notion which could be realized in a number of ways independent of the gesture itself), while the purpose in number 7 would be to actually exert power.

3.2. *Raising Hand with Palm Outward*

Another gesture commonly found in art is that of raising the hand in front with the palm facing outward and the elbow approximately to the square in the shape of a wide “V.” Most treatments of this gesture belong to interpretation number 3, labeling the pose as a “gesture of greeting or blessing.” In fact, this label has been applied to this gesture so often, and almost always without argumentation, that it has become a cliché. The label may be traceable to a 1941 study of a stela from Byblos by Maurice Dunand, in which he refers to studies by Landsberger and Langdon on a Mesopotamian gesture associated with greeting and blessing; however, Dunand neglects to note that the Mesopotamian gesture referred to in those two studies is actually a different gesture, in which the palm faces inward, not outward.³⁴ Despite this, there are some good reasons for interpreting the Levantine palm-outward gesture referentially as a form of greeting or blessing, at least in some cases. Yet there are other ways to analyze it. Several phrases used in literature that refer to raising or putting forth the hand may be linked with this artistic motif; these phrases occur in a range of ceremonial contexts, including the presentation of offerings, the swearing of oaths, and the pledging of allegiance.³⁵ Each of these concepts could furnish a referential interpretation of the gesture, i.e., as offering, accepting an obligation, or expressing allegiance. Referential interpretations of type 1 are also possible; the hand could be seen as a symbol of authority, for example, and putting it forward could thus be a way of presenting one’s authority.

Because this gesture lacks a distinctive finger articulation and does not resemble any task-oriented gesture from daily life, referential interpretations would tend to be limited to numbers 1 and 3. However, indexical avenues of interpretation for this gesture, especially numbers 8–10, are especially

34. Maurice Dunand, “Encore la stèle de Yahavmilk, roi de Byblos,” *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth* 5 (1941): 72; Stephen Langdon, “Gesture in Sumerian and Babylonian Prayer: A Study in Babylonian and Assyrian Archaeology,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1919: 531–37; Benno Landsberger, “Das ‘Gute Wort,’” *Mitteilungen der Altorientalischen Gesellschaft* 4 (1930): 294–98.

35. See Calabro, “When You Spread Your Palms,” 22; P. R. Ackroyd, “yād,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 5:411.

promising and largely unexplored.³⁶ As this would be a topic for a whole paper, or perhaps even a book, I will simply suggest some questions that could be applied to the contexts in which this palm-out gesture occurs.

- 8a. Who performs this gesture, and to whom? Does the height at which the hand is held, the distance between participants, or some other aspect of the gesture consistently vary according to the relative social status of the participants?
- 8b. What kinds of changes in the status of participants result from the performance of this gesture? What do these changes have in common, and what might this indicate about the core function of the gesture? (Textual sources would be especially helpful in answering these questions.)
- 9a–b. In cases where a sequence of acts is evident, what acts or locations precede and follow the performance of this gesture? Can any patterns be identified?
- 10a. Where is the gesture performed? (Reference could be made to textual sources, iconographic indicators such as stylized borders representing locations, and archaeological context.)
- 10b. How might the gesture serve to demarcate groups in the ritual? Are multiple members of a group shown performing the gesture simultaneously, or does one person do it on behalf of the whole group? When two participants perform the gesture facing each other, is there an object, boundary, or empty space between these participants? Is the object associated with one or the other participant, either symbolically or through physical contact? Does the gesture serve to focus attention on the object?

A full answer to these questions must await further research. It should be apparent by now that much can be done to expand our understanding of this

36. A recent move in the direction of indexical interpretation of ancient Mesopotamian lifted-hand gestures has been made by Christopher Frechette in his book, *Mesopotamian Ritual-Prayers of "Hand-Lifting" (Akkadian Shuillas)* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), 11–106.

palm-out gesture, as well as of other gestures for which previous interpretation has focused on the referential to the exclusion of the indexical.

3.3. *Hand in Horn Shape*

We now move to a gesture that is especially interesting because it involves a special finger articulation. The gesture is made by extending the thumb and little finger and folding the other fingers. It is found in Egyptian art, in which foreigners, including Semites, perform the gesture as they are under attack or about to be smitten.³⁷ Some have linked this gesture to the southern European gesture known as the *mano cornuta* or “horn-shaped hand,” attested from the Middle Ages to the present.³⁸ The modern form of the gesture uses the index and little fingers and has them pointed horizontally, which is slightly different from the ancient form, but this does not rule out the connection, since the form of the gesture may have evolved. The connection would imply that the ancient gesture, like the modern southern European one, is apotropaic (i.e., having the purpose of warding off evil); this would be a type 3 interpretation.

However, the finger articulation suggests other interpretations belonging to types 2a and 2b. In particular, the hand shape resembles the horns and head of a bull (2a), a fact that has not been lost on interpreters of the modern gesture. Whereas some interpretations of the modern gesture link the horns with the devil or with a general notion of strength and fertility, the storm god Adad (also known as Baal) was symbolically associated with horns and with the bull in the ancient Near East, so the gesture could represent the deity himself (2b).³⁹

These connections, in turn, yield yet other interpretations belonging to type 3. Making the gesture could be understood as a symbol or substitute for offering a bull as a sacrifice, which could in turn lead to connotations of peace and reconciliation, directed either toward the deity or toward the attacking enemy. Another option is to interpret the bull’s horns as a sign of victory. This is suggested by several biblical passages that mention “exalting the horn” and “hewing off the horn,” which expressions seem to be symbolic

37. G. A. Wainwright, “The Earliest Use of the *Mano Cornuta*,” *Folklore* 72 (1961): 492–95.

38. Wainwright, “*Mano Cornuta*”; Desmond Morris et al., *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 119–46.

39. This deity was known throughout the ancient Near East. Although he was primarily a Semitic deity, he was also worshipped in Egypt, where he was associated with the Pharaoh, during the New Kingdom. Thus the interpretation of the horned-hand gesture as being associated with Baal does not depend on the gesture being specifically Semitic.

of victory and defeat respectively.⁴⁰ None of these interpretations is mutually exclusive; raising a sign of Baal could, for example, signify that the god is or will be triumphant. By exploring multiple avenues of interpretation, we find the possible significance of the gesture growing ever richer.

These referential interpretations, once again, do not exhaust our understanding of the “horned hand” gesture. Indexical interpretations are also possible, even though they are not as well represented. Particularly suggestive is the tension between facing an attacker while making this gesture and the indications we have from textual sources that it accompanied a prayer to deity. One wonders whether the gesture is directed more toward the deity or toward the attacker (8a), and what exactly it was meant to accomplish (7, 8b). It is also interesting that separating the fingers in this manner renders the hand comparatively brittle and vulnerable in the face of an attacker (6b), which seems to conflict with the symbolism of the powerful bull’s horns. I have also wondered whether slight variations in finger articulation can be detected, and if so, whether they correspond to differences in nationality or to different functions or contexts.

4. Conclusion

It should be evident from this brief foray that ritual hand gestures are incredibly rich in their potential to signify. Diversity of interpretation is not something to be avoided; indeed, collecting and classifying previous interpretations and supplementing these with new possibilities should be the first step in the analysis of a ritual gesture. What I have presented here may be a useful aid in this regard. This schema is by no means exhaustive, but it may serve as a heuristic tool, helping to expose connections and possibilities that may not have been apparent otherwise. Further, it points out some neglected and potentially fruitful areas for future research, such as the indexical functioning of ritual gestures. My purpose has not been to probe these areas in depth, but merely to point them out and chart a more inclusive path for future research.

In summary, ritual hand gestures have both referential and indexical properties. The referential properties can be classified by the particular aspect of the gesture (the hand itself, the shape, or the larger entity of which the gesturing hand is a part) that forms the basis for the referential connection, and the indexical properties can be classified by the aspect of context that the gesture presupposes or creates. A gesture may have multiple referential and

40. See 1 Sam 2:1, 10; 2 Sam 22:3; Jer 48:25; Ps 75:5–6, 11; 89:18, 25; 92:11; 112:9; 148:14; Job 16:15; Lam 2:3; 1 Chr 25:5.

indexical paths of signification, and these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The specific examples that I have discussed show that different parts of my schema may be particularly suitable to a given gesture. They also show that, in these cases (and likely in other cases as well), much work needs to be done to provide an adequate account of the vast complexity of meaning surrounding ritual hand gestures.