

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CUPPED HAND IN ANCIENT EGYPT AND ISRAEL: ICONOGRAPHY, TEXT, AND ARTIFACT

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In a 1983 study, Lynn M. Hilton explored the concept of the hand as a cup in ancient temple worship.¹ Hilton's analysis of the imagery of the cupped hand as a ritual gesture offered some useful initial exploratory insight. This article builds on Hilton's analysis and points to additional iconographic, textual, and artifactual forms of evidence for the cupped hand as a ritual gesture in ancient Egypt and Israel. As this evidence makes clear, in both ancient Egypt and ancient Israel, an important ritual action was to fill the cupped hand with offerings for the deity. These offerings could be made by either directly filling the palms of the hands or through the use of cultic vessels shaped as a cupped hand. Furthermore, in ancient Egypt, the outstretched cupped hand could also represent the petitioner receiving blessings from the deity as opposed to making an offering, while in ancient Israel, the action of filling the (cupped) hand was directly linked with being consecrated in a priestly capacity.

Evidence for the Cupped Hand in Ancient Egypt

"Hieroglyphs had very specific purposes in Egypt," notes Penelope Wilson. "They were used for writing texts which were written for the gods, for an élite in the context of their relationship with the gods, and for the afterlife. Though hieroglyphs were used to write a recognizable language of Egypt, it was an exalted mode of communication within a formal ritual setting and within an architectural framework defining spatial and temporal zones. . . . The guiding principles for writing in hieroglyphs come from Egyptian art and

ceremonial ideology rather than language.”² It should therefore come as no surprise that the hieroglyph (D37) for the verb “to give, place” (*rdi*) is an outstretched arm holding a loaf of bread, or that the determinative (D39) used for “offering, presenting” is an outstretched arm holding a bowl or water pot.³

Since “the pictorial nature of [hieroglyphic] writing allows it to blend with pictorial scenes on temple and tomb walls,”⁴ there can be little doubt that the hieroglyphic representation of the actions of *offering* and *giving* or *placing* converges purposefully with the canonical Egyptian iconographic or artistic depiction of the same. For example, a subject may be present with one hand stretched out and raised in the typical gesture of greeting or hailing, while the other hand presents an offering in an outstretched and cupped palm. This imagery of “both arms extended forward with an object held in one or both palms” was “developed [from an] ideal form” in Egyptian artistic consciousness as “the standard, or conventional, way of expressing desired meaning”—in this case, “presenting, offering” (fig. 1).⁵

The surviving evidence for this artistic convention is extensive, ranging from the Old Kingdom to well into the Roman Period. A limited sampling of offering scenes from the New Kingdom onward, at least, reveals that the items offered to the deity, by the king himself as well as by members of the priesthood, could include,



Figure 1. The “canonical” Egyptian iconography for “presenting, offering.” Image from Watts, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (1998).

among other things, incense (fig. 2), libations (fig. 3), *ma’at* (fig. 4), *ankh*, *djed*, *was* (fig. 5), and *wadjet* (fig. 6). Each of these items had close associations with kingship, so it is often the king who is shown making the offering directly to the deity. These items are most often offered directly in the hands, while incense is frequently (though not exclusively) represented as being presented in hand-shaped utensils in addition to being offered directly in the hand (fig. 7).⁶ In the mortuary realm, examples of funerary papyri and tomb art featuring incensing and libating scenes with the prominent display of



Figure 2. *Ramesses II offering incense at Abu Simbel.*



Figure 3. *Ramesses II offering liquid libations at Abu Simbel.*



Figure 4. *Augustus offering ma'at at the temple of Dendur.*



Figure 5. *Augustus offering was, djed, and ankh at the temple of Dendur.*

Photos by Steve Densley.



Figure 6. Augustus offering wadjet at the temple of Dendur.
Photo by Steve Densley.



Figures 7–8. *Ramesses I offering incense in a hand-shaped censer at Abydos. Photo by Steve Densley; Libating and incensing scene from the Book of the Dead of Ani. Image from Budge, The Book of the Dead (1894).*

hand-shaped incense spoons are abundant. The celebrated Book of the Dead of Ani features such (fig. 8),⁷ as does the Kerasher Book of Breathings.⁸ The New Kingdom tomb of Ameneminet (TT277) contains a representative scene of the deceased incensing and libating the deified king Mentuhotep II and his queen Ahmose-Nefertari (fig. 9).

“The most common verbs in the titles of the scenes for both static and dynamic offering are ‘doing’ (*jrj*), ‘giving’ (*rdj*), and ‘presenting’ (*hnk*),” thereby erasing any doubt as to what ritual action these scenes intended to convey. “In addition to doing incense and/or



Figure 9. Incensing scene from the tomb of Ameneminet (TT277).
Image from wikipedia.com.

libation, the king can [also] be labeled as doing *h̄tp-dj-nsw*, doing purification, encircling, or seeing the god,” thus linking the ritual action of offering to some sense of deification.⁹ Indeed, “what is depicted [in offering scenes] could be the making of a covenant between the king and the god, and the incense could serve a symbolic function in the ritual (it may be noteworthy that the word for ‘incense’ in Egyptian, *sn̄tr*, also means ‘make divine, sanctify’).”¹⁰

It is also in the mortuary realm where depictions of the outstretched, cupped hand make an appearance as a gesture of *receiving* a boon from the deity. Utterance 153 of the Book of the Dead “insure[s] that the deceased has sufficient food and drink in the afterlife so as not to be reduced to eating excrement and drinking urine.”¹¹ The vignette frequently accompanying this utterance, as it does in the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, features the deceased before an offering table with outstretched hands receiving a supply of food on an offering table (fig. 10). The text reads, “I loathe excrement. I will not [drink urine. I will not walk upside down.] I am a possessor of bread in Heliopolis. My bread is in the sky with [Re, and my bread is on the earth with Geb.] . . . May I eat of [what they eat, and may I live on what they live on. I have eaten] bread in the chamber of the possessor of offerings.”¹²

Utterance 106 of the Book of the Dead—“a chapter for giving gifts in Memphis”—finds the deceased beseeching: “O great one,



Figures 10–11. Vignette from Utterance 153 from the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin; Vignette from Utterance 106 from the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin. Licensed from the Joseph Smith Papers Project, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

old one, possessor of offerings. O you great one who is over the upper houses. May both of you give me bread and beer.” Once again, “the purpose of this chapter is to ensure that the deceased receives offerings of bread and beer in the afterlife.”¹³ The vignette accompanying this utterance in the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin depicts the deceased “standing with the hieroglyphic word for gift (*ʒw*) in her upraised hands” (fig. 11).¹⁴ A visual hieroglyphic pun on the Egyptian word for “joyful, happy” (*ʒwt-ib*; “long of heart”) is easily detectable in the vignette in the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, as



Figures 12–13. Vignette from Utterance 57 from the Book of the Dead of Horsaisis;
 Vignette from Utterance 57 from the Book of the Dead of Iwefankh.
 Images by Felicitas Weber, <http://totenbuch.awk.nrw.de>. Used with permission.

well as others,¹⁵ reinforcing the beatified state of the deceased upon receiving perpetual refreshment in the afterlife.

Finally, Utterance 57 from the Book of the Dead serves as a chapter “for breathing air and having power over water in the realm of the dead.” This utterance invokes the deified Nile god “Hapi, Great One of the sky in this your name of ‘The sky is safe,’” and implores him to “grant that [the deceased] have power over water like Sakhmet who saved Osiris on that night of storm.”¹⁶ The customary vignette accompanying this utterance depicts, with some variation, the deceased “holding a sail and enveloped by streams of water, thus guaranteeing he will breathe air and have power over water”¹⁷ or standing before an anthropomorphized tree goddess that pours out liquid (presumably water) into his or her cupped hands (figs. 12–13).

“Rituals are those activities that address the gods or other supernatural forces.” At its most basic definition, “ritual is action.” If “art provides ‘representations of [ritual] acts’” and “texts provide ‘descriptions of [ritual] acts,’” then it is “archaeology [that] provides the ‘material remains of [ritual] acts.’”¹⁸ The recovery of actual specimens of Egyptian hand-shaped censers illustrates this convergence between text, iconography, and artifact. A number of hand-shaped censers have been recovered, such as those currently housed in the British Museum and the Louvre (figs. 14–15).¹⁹ Examples such as the Late Period or Ptolemaic incense burner from Saqqara (British Museum EA67189), which features a “cartouche-shaped receptacle supported by the figure of a kneeling king halfway along the main shaft,”²⁰ are particularly noteworthy. The burners demonstrate the



Figures 14–15. Bronze incense burner in the British Museum. Image from www.britishmuseum.org. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved; Bronze incense burner in the Louvre. Image from wikipedia.org.

artifactual reality of the sort of specially stylized incense burner seen depicted in later temple reliefs (figs. 16–17).

In addition to hand-shaped censers, multiple specimens of three-dimensional statuary from the Old Kingdom onward have been recovered that depict the monarch offering *nw*-vessels to the deity (typically while kneeling, but sometimes in the classical striding pose) with outstretched, cupped-hands (fig. 18).²¹ The ritual nature of the action depicted in this statuary, as well as the ritual context of the statues themselves, has not gone unnoticed by scholars.²² This, combined with other evidence, further indicates “that these scenes are not just emblematic, but represent rituals which were performed.”²³



Figures 16–17. Augustus offering incense in an incense burner at the temple of Dendur; Detail showing the image of a kneeling figure on the incense burner.

Photos by Steve Densley.

Evidence for the Cupped Hand in Ancient Israel

Turning to the biblical record, the concept of filling the (cupped) hand was intricately linked with priestly consecration in service to Yahweh. Rendered as “consecrate” throughout the King James Version (KJV), the Hebrew idiom מלא את-יד (mala' et-yad) describes the action Aaron was to perform in inaugurating his male descendants into the priesthood. The phrase means literally “fill the hand” and is coupled with the verb קדש (qadosh, “sanctify”) in passages such as Exodus 29:33 KJV: “And they [the Aaronic priests] shall eat those things



Figure 18. Statue of Hatshepsut (Eighteenth Dynasty) kneeling with nw-vessels in the Cairo Museum. Photo by Stephen O. Smoot.

wherewith the atonement was made, to consecrate [מלא את-יד] and to sanctify [קדש] them: but a stranger shall not eat thereof, because they are holy.” Additional passages from the Pentateuch providing instruction on the consecration of Aaronic priests interchange the verbs מלא (את-יד) and קדש, thus reinforcing the unmistakable relation the ritual action of filling the hand had with priestly service.

“fill the hand” // מלא את-יד	“sanctify” // קדש
Exodus 28:41	Exodus 19:22–23
Exodus 29:9, 29, 33	Exodus 28:3
Exodus 32:29	Exodus 29:33
Leviticus 8:33	Exodus 30:30
Leviticus 16:32	Exodus 40:13
Leviticus 21:10	Leviticus 8:11–12
Numbers 3:3	Leviticus 21:8

Besides the “hand” (יד), the Pentateuch also describes the “palm” (כף) being filled with cultic offerings for Yahweh. Among the offerings listed throughout Numbers 7 (verses 14, 20, 26, 32, 38, 44, 50, 56, 62, 68, 74, 80), for instance, is the כף “filled with incense” (מלאה קטרת). Rendered “spoon” in the KJV or “dish” in contemporary translations, כף is, in fact, “the common word for the hollow part of the hand” and is “used to indicate a shallow bowl used as a censer, for burning incense.” Such dishes are “mentioned in various priestly texts in the Pentateuch (e.g., Exodus 25:29; Numbers 4:7) dealing with the tabernacle, and they appear in other parts of the Bible in relationship to temple equipment (see 1 Kings 7:50; 2 Kings 25:14).”²⁴

The parallels with the Egyptian material reviewed above are unmistakable, especially in light of “archaeological discovery of shallow stone bowls, with a hand carved on the bottom so that the vessel appears to be a cupped palm” (figs. 19–20). As with the recovered Egyptian specimens, the recovery of these utensils in Syria-Canaan and Anatolia “provides artifactual evidence for these cultic objects” as described in the Pentateuch.²⁵ Debate still exists as to where these cultic objects originated, however, with some scholars placing their origin in Syria-Anatolia and others “locat[ing] the origin of these objects in Egypt, emphasizing the similarities with the metal hand-shaped bowls represented in several Egyptian paintings as containers in which to burn essences.”²⁶ An Egyptian origin for these ritual vessels is enticing on account of the strong similarities between the vessels and the Egyptian evidence seen above, as well as on account of the overall “Egypticity” of the Exodus and

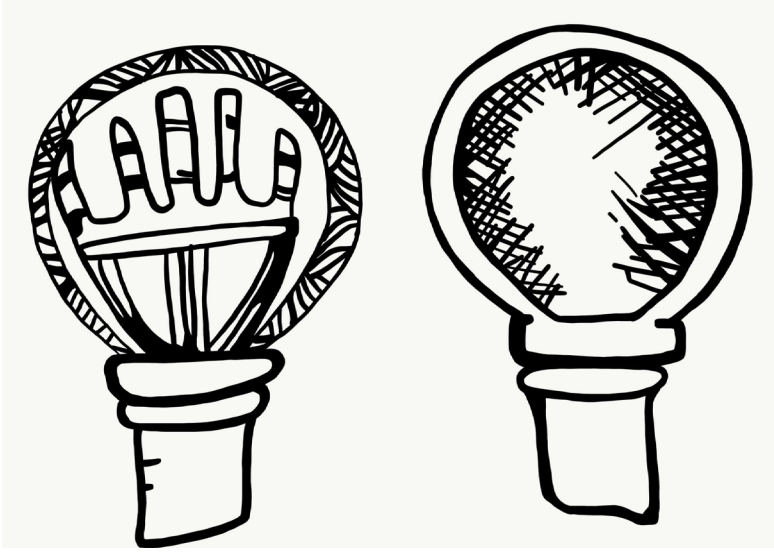


Figure 19. Stone incense bowl in shape of carved hand. Image from Wright, *Solomon's Temple Resurrected* (1941). Redrawn by Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye.

Wilderness narratives describing the origin of these and other ritual objects in the nascent Yahweh cult.²⁷ Whether ultimately originating from Egypt or Syria-Anatolia, their cultic function cannot be doubted given the prevalence of these vessels in ritual contexts in “Syria, Anatolia, Cyprus, and the Levant” as early as the second millennium BC.²⁸

Besides being filled with incense, the כַּף could likewise contain a grain offering, oil, or any number of potentially consecrated items. Whatever the offering may have entailed, “the filling of the *kap* with material to be offered is a common ritual action” amongst the Aaronic priests and others brought into a ritual setting.²⁹

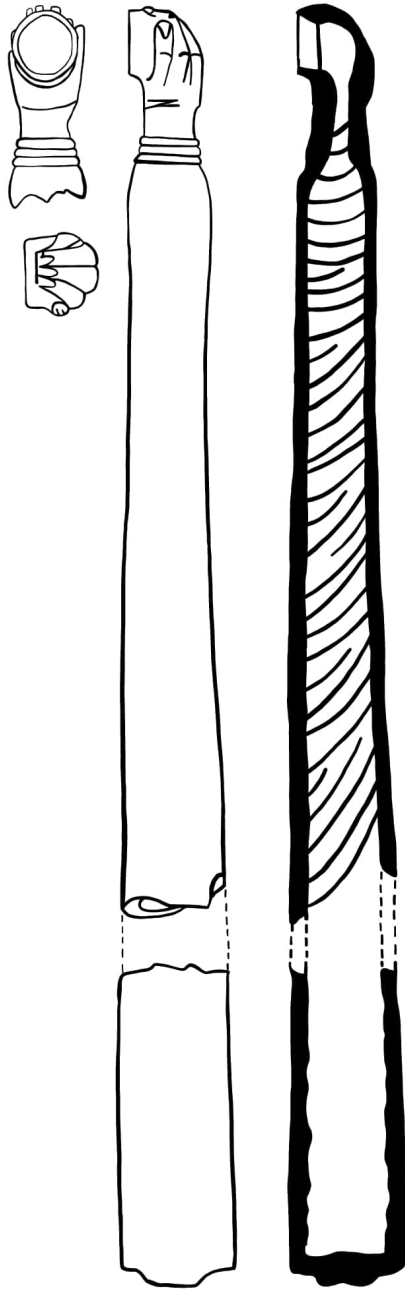


Figure 20. Long incense burner in the shape of a cupped palm. Image from Amiran, *The "Arm-Shaped" Vessel and Its Family* (1962). Redrawn by Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye.

Type of Action ³⁰	Word Used	Reference
Aaron fills his palm with grain for the grain offering	כף	Leviticus 9:17
Priest pours oil into own left palm for guilt and burnt offering	כף	Leviticus 14:15
Oil poured into the palm to be used for trespass, guilt, and burnt offerings	כף	Leviticus 14:16, 17, 18, 26–29
Priest to place the consecrated item in the palm of the Nazarite	כף	Numbers 6:19
Priest places the jealousy offering in the woman's hand	כף	Numbers 5:8

The evidence from the biblical text, buttressed with surviving artifactual sources, demonstrates that part of the process of becoming a set apart (שדק) member of the Israelite priesthood involved literally “filling the hand” (יד) or “palm” (כף) with incense and other offerings. Sometimes these offerings were placed directly in the hand or palm, sometimes in special censers shaped as a cupped hand not unlike those recovered from ancient Egypt and Syria-Anatolia. This ritual action, in turn, authorized the priest to approach Yahweh in his residence (משכן) and present offerings.

Conclusion

This paper's investigation yielded findings that complement Hilton's earlier work. In both ancient Egypt and ancient Israel, an important ritual action was to fill the cupped hand with offerings for the deity. This could be accomplished by either directly filling the palms of the hands with the offering or by filling special cultic vessels resembling a cupped hand. Based on the archaeological context of surviving artifactual remains, iconographic evidence, and textual sources, this exercise was undeniably carried out in a temple or ritual setting. What's more, in ancient Egypt, in the mortuary realm, the outstretched, cupped hand could also represent a gesture

of the beatified deceased receiving blessings. In ancient Israel, the action of filling the cupped hand or palm was directly associated with being sanctified and consecrated in a priestly setting.

Notes

1. Lynn M. Hilton, "The Hand as a Cup in Ancient Temple Worship," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.* 152 (March 1983): 1–5; reprinted in *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996), 171–77.
2. Penelope Wilson, *Hieroglyphs: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 38.
3. Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), 454; James Hoch, *Middle Egyptian Grammar* (Mississauga: Benben Publications, 1997), 269.
4. Wilson, *Hieroglyphs*, 40.
5. Edith W. Watts, *The Art of Ancient Egypt: A Resource for Educators* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 37.
6. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus Ani in the British Museum* (London: The British Museum, 1894), Pls. V, VI.
7. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: Facsimiles of the Papyri of Hunefer, Anhai, Kerāsher and Netchemet* (London: The British Museum, 1899), PL. III.
8. Katherine Eaton, *Ancient Egyptian Temple Ritual: Performance, Pattern, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013), 139–40.
9. David Calabro, *Ritual Gestures of Lifting, Extending, and Claspings the Hand(s) in Northwest Semitic Literature and Iconography* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014), 478.
10. Michael D. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 36.
11. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 36
12. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 56.
13. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 56.
14. E.g., the Books of the Dead of Djeser (Ptolemaic; circa 250 BC) and Iwefankh (Ptolemaic; unknown), to name just two immediate examples. See <http://totenbuch.awk.nrw.de/spruch/106>.
15. Raymond O. Faulkner, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London: The British Museum Press, 2010), 67.
16. Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 91.
17. Eaton, *Ancient Egyptian Temple Ritual*, 125–26.

18. The antiquity of these instruments reaches as far back as the Old Kingdom. Henry G. Fischer, "Varia Aegyptiaca," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 2 (1963): 28–34.
19. See "incense-burner," online at https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=140809&partId=1.
20. James P. Allen et al., eds., *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 435–37; Marsha Hill, ed., *Gifts for the Gods: Images From Egyptian Temples* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 3, 55, 82, 121.
21. Hill, *Gifts for the Gods*, 3, 24, 82; David P. Silverman, ed., *Searching for Ancient Egypt: Art, Architecture, and Artifacts* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1997), 101; Adela Oppenheim et al., eds., *Ancient Egypt Transformed: The Middle Kingdom* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 74.
22. Eaton, *Ancient Egyptian Temple Ritual*, 127.
23. Carol Meyers, "Incense Dish," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:410.
24. Meyers, "Incense Dish," 3:410; cf. G. Ernest Wright, "Solomon's Temple Resurrected," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 4, no. 2 (1941): 30; Ruth Amiran, "The 'Arm-Shaped' Vessel and Its Family," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 3 (1962): 161–74.
25. Marina Pucci, "The Iron Age II 'Spoon Stoppers/Censers' Production in the Amuq: An Example from Chatal Höyük," in *Overtuning Certainties in Near Eastern Archaeology: A Festschrift in Honor of K. Aslihan Yener*, ed. Çiğdem Maner, Mara T. Horowitz, and Allan S. Gilbert (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 561.
26. James K. Hoffmeier, "The Exodus and Wilderness Narratives," in *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to the Issues and Sources*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 46–90; "Egyptian Religious Influence on the Early Hebrews," in "Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt?" *Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier, Alan R. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 3–35.
27. Beatrice Teissier, *Ancient Near Eastern Cylinder Seals from the Marcopoli Collection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 83.
28. Kerry M. Muhlestein, *The Use of the Palm of the Hand in the Rituals of the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon* (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1997), 43.
29. Adapted from Muhlestein, *Use of the Palm of the Hand*, 101.