

# THE HAND AS A CUP IN ANCIENT TEMPLE WORSHIP

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Paper presented at the Thirtieth Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures, held at BYU on 26 September 1981, by Dr. Lynn M. Hilton.

Also printed as an appendix of Lynn and Hope Hilton, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 1996).

The hand in the shape of a cup was an important part of the ancient temple ceremony in Bible times, as we know from the offering of incense. Frankincense or incense was used in several ways. Some was burned on altars (Ex. 30:1), some in censers (Num. 16:18), and some in "spoons" (Ex. 25:29; Num 7:86). Particular attention is called to the spoon method.

## INCENSE IN A SPOON:

After the children of Israel left Egypt, Moses called for contributions to build the Tabernacle. The Lord had shown Moses on the mount the pattern of the Tabernacle, with its furnishings, vessels, and rituals. One commandment Moses received from the Lord was, "thou shalt make the...spoons...of pure gold" (Ex. 25:29). In due course, each leader of the 12 tribes donated a golden spoon of 10 shekels weight, filled to overflowing with frankincense (Num. 7:84-86).



Fig 1. Egyptian "spoon" dated about 1300 BC.

The spoon was termed kaph in Hebrew, which means literally "hollow of the hand," or the hand in cupping shape.<sup>1</sup> Moses gave these 12 spoons to his priest-brother Aaron and to Aaron's descendants, who used them for centuries in the Tabernacle and later in Solomon's temple for the burning of incense before the Lord (1 Kings 7:50; 2 Chron. 24:14). It is evident from 2 Chron. 4:22 that King Solomon manufactured additional "spoons" of gold, as well as other temple vessels.

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<sup>1</sup> Kapf means "hand" in various Semitic languages (e.g. Arabic) and in Egyptian and Coptic, as it does in Hebrew.

In 587 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, captured Jerusalem, he took the temple furnishings to Babylon. These included the famous golden spoons (2 Kings 25:14; Jer. 52:18-19).

After the captivity, we read that Darius, king of Persia, decreed that the house of God at Jerusalem should be restored. "And also, let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought into Babylon, be restored and brought again into the (newly rebuilt) temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place and place them in the house of God" (Ezra 6:5). We conclude that the spoons were also restored, along with other sacred vessels, since incense burning in the post exilic period was customary and universal practice (Mal. 1:11; Hos. 2:13).

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest of the Aaronic line entered the Holy of Holies of Moses' tabernacle or, later, of Solomon's temple, by passing through the veil. He carried frankincense and the spoon, a hand in cupping shape, as he passed through (Lev. 16:12-13). Later, a controversy arose as to where the incense was to be added to the fire in the spoon. The Sadducees held that the priest must add the incense to the fire before he entered the veil, lest he see the glory of God and die. The Pharisees insisted that he wait until after entering the Holy of Holies before igniting the incense.<sup>2</sup>

It was considered especially difficult for the priest to take up the raw incense in the hollow of his hand, not with his fingers, without dropping one small grain, and to pour it on to the fire (Lev. 16:12; also Yoma 1, 5, 47b). This important ceremony, including the complete incineration of the frankincense, along with the high priest shouting the sacred name "Yahweh" (Jehovah), had to precede immediately the roasting and burning of the flesh of the animal sacrifice outside on the large altar of burnt offerings. On some occasions, an altar of incense was used in the temple in lieu of the spoon to burn the incense.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXAMPLES:**

G. Ernest Wright, reporting in the *Biblical Archaeologist* (May, 1941, Vol. IV, No. 2, p. 30), gives archaeological insight into the subject of Solomon's temple. He includes a drawing (Fig. 2) of what he calls a "spoon," uncovered in the excavation of Megiddo in Palestine. He says that, fortunately, the function and use of "spoons is known...The primary meaning of the Hebrew word for them is 'palm,' and numerous bowls with hands carved on their backs (the bowls thus being the palm of the hand) have been found in Palestine and Syria, dating between about 1000 and 600 B.C. A hollow tube opens into the bowl, which raises the question as to their purpose. The first and best explanation is that they were censers, the hollow tube allowing one to blow on the incense to get it to burn. An Egyptian relief seems to give some support to this theory."

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<sup>2</sup> See J.F. Lauterbach, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 4, pp. 173-205.

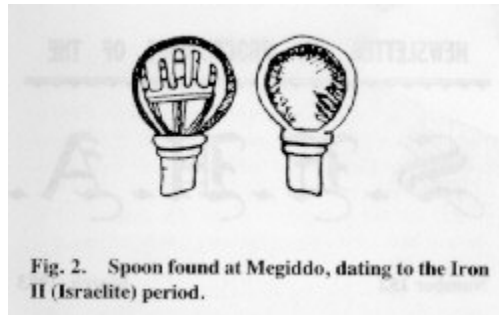


Fig. 2. Spoon found at Megiddo, dating to the Iron II (Israelite) period.

Prof. William F. Albright also speaks of finding ancient carved hands in northern Syria. "At least four of them have a human hand carved in relief on the bottom of the ladle, representing the latter as a bowl held on the outstretched palm...Three more have been published from the Megiddo excavation...one with the hand decoration...at Tell ej-Judeideh and Chatal Huyuk and in the Plain of Antioch. McEwan has found a number of specimens, two or three of which I saw at the expedition camp in 1935."<sup>3</sup> He notes that all were carved from steatite or soapstone, which is refractory to heat, and date between 800 and 600 BC. He continues by stating that the use of these "spoons" is rather obscure, but he quotes Przeworski, who "called the objects censers and supposed that the tube served as a blow pipe to blow air into the bowl in which incense had been placed, in order to keep the incense burning and to diffuse the smoke."<sup>4</sup>

In the Meridian of Time, the Lord fulfilled the requirement of the Law of Moses to offer burnt offerings, undoubtedly including incense burning. To the ancient American Christians he said, "your burnt offerings shall be done away, for I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings. And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and contrite spirit" (3 Ne. 9:19-20). The burning of incense was also discontinued by the early Christians of the Old World but reinstated after the apostasy in many of the churches. A Coptic source reports that burning of frankincense was added to Christian worship in the fourth century AD.

Incense spoons, or hands in cupping shape, are seen not only in the ancient art of Palestine and Syria, but also in Yemen and Mexico. Wendell Phillips, the explorer-archaeologist who was the first to excavate ruins of the ancient city of Timna', in what is now Yemen (1952), reported finding "a plaque covered with inscriptions and containing a small opening through which a hand projected, holding a shallow basin. The inscription made it clear this was a device for burning incense offerings, and the outstretched hand carried out the gesture of making an offering gracefully and vividly."<sup>5</sup> Phillips dated the ruin to 50 BC.

No doubt Lehi and his family were well acquainted with the elaborate ritual of Solomon's temple, including the incense burning in a "spoon." These temple ceremonies were a

<sup>3</sup> William Foxwell Albright, "The Excavations of Tell Beit Mirsim," *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, Vols. 21-22 (1941-43), pp. 70-72.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Phillips, *Qataban and Sheba, Exploring the Ancient Kingdoms on the Biblical Spice Routes of Arabia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1955), p. 176.

frequent occurrence all during the years that Lehi lived in Jerusalem. On his way to the New World, Nephi records that on two separate occasions his father Lehi offered "sacrifices and burnt offerings" (1 Ne. 5:9; 7:22). It is not difficult to believe that these "burnt offerings" included the burning of incense in spoons. It would have been easy for Lehi to obtain frankincense for such ceremonies, because he was traveling along the ancient frankincense caravan trail through what is now Saudi Arabia and Oman.<sup>6</sup> Lehi would have met many camel caravans transporting huge quantities of frankincense from Dofar, Oman, the source of the resin, to consumers in the civilizations surrounding the eastern Mediterranean.

The Nephites continued "burnt offerings" after their arrival in America (Mos. 2:3). We should not be surprised, therefore, to see in the surviving art of ancient Mexico native priests offering incense in spoon-like instruments. (Fig. 3) In addition, many samples of incense burners and effigy pipes have been uncovered in the ruins of Yuc'atan and Chiapas, Mexico. Not having access to the authentic frankincense resin, the ancient Mayans used the sap of the copal tree (protium Copal) for their incense ceremonies, which practice has continued until today among the Lacand'on Mayas in the forests of eastern Chiapas.<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 3. Ancient Mexican worship of the sun. Two men offer burning incense in spoon-like censers. From Father Bernardino de Sahagun's work, preserved in Florence, Italy, (Zelia Nuttall, "A Pentecostal Rite of the Ancient Mexicans," *Papers, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard Univ.*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 1940.)

## EVIDENCE FROM EGYPT:

Perhaps Moses had a vivid memory of the spoon used by his possible contemporary, the Egyptian pharaoh Seti I (Fig. 4), when designing the spoons used by the Israelites. The

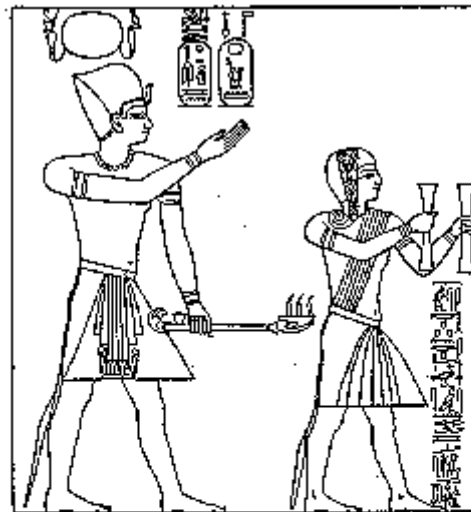
<sup>6</sup> See article by the author and his wife, Hope, "In Search of Lehi's Trail," *Ensign*, Sept. & Oct., 1976; and their book of the same name (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Sylvanus G. Morley, *The American Maya* (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1946), pp. 218-219, 380, 384.

remains of the Palestinian spoons give evidence of having followed the pattern of those used in Egypt. In Egypt literally dozens of reliefs of "spoons" are constructed in the form of a bowl held in the hollow of a carved hand.<sup>8</sup>

In each case studied thus far from Egypt, the person holding the spoon and offering the incense is either a king, queen, prince, or high priest. Never is a spoon held by a person of secondary importance. Also, the "spoon" offering is always directed toward either a god or the king. The Egyptian practice of burning incense in a spoon became very widespread in the New Kingdom era, especially in the 18th and 19th Dynasties (which many scholars hold to be contemporary with Moses).

One of the most impressive of all the reliefs of Egypt is a panel from the Hypostyle Hall of the Temple of Karnak, ca. 1298-1235 BC, showing Rameses II offering incense in a spoon. The spoon, carved in triplicate, gives the illusion that the king is moving it in the ceremony of the sacred boat. This huge portrayal, reproduced in plaster, is the central art object on the large south wall of the Nile Hilton Hotel lobby in Cairo.



**Fig. 4.** Pharaoh Seti I and his son Rameses II offer incense in a spoon to honor the 76 pharaohs who preceded them on the throne of Egypt. Drawing is from a carving found on the wall of the Osiris Temple at Abydos, dating to the 19th Dynasty, ca. 1300 BC, thus preceding the Exodus by only one generation by some accounts. (After Richard Lepsius, in *Zeitschrift für Aegyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, Vol. 2, Oct.-Nov., 1864, p. 96.)

A review of the many exhibits of the New Kingdom era on display in the Egyptian museum in Cairo reveals 15 separate illustrations of kings, priests, princes, gods, and

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. see Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt, *Vie et Mort d'un Pharaon*, p. 279; Francesco Abbate (trans. N.A. Fields), *Egyptian Art*, pp. 133, etc.; and the Papyrus of Queen Maken, Thebes, 21st Dynasty, Cairo Museum.

goddesses, each offering incense to a superior being by the use of a spoon. Some of these spoons are illustrated on coffins or mummy cases. But most are on bas-relief stone carvings or two-dimensional papyrus. Also displayed are actual spoon-like instruments from antiquity, one wooden and one copper, but they are only 17 inches long, too short to be true spoons, with hard flat hands, not cupped, and no hole for blowing. (One has no cup on the flat palm.)

The interesting part of these true spoons is the exact detail shown on the mouthpiece end. The Egyptian spoons drawn or carved in bas-relief fail to show these exact details. What at first seems only a bird's head is later shown to be the head of the hawk-god Horus. The feathers in rows, neatly carved, and a dark blue inset for each eye, are all beautifully wrought. This small spoon is Exhibit No. J30700, found on the second (top) floor of the Museum. It is carved from wood and gilt.

Another large and impressive portrayal of a real spoon is seen on the frontal face of the Temple of Hathor at Denderah, Egypt. Here, Cleopatra stands behind Caesar, who is dressed as an Egyptian pharaoh. He holds out a kaph spoon in his left hand to a god and with his right hand throws small, round balls of frankincense into the firebowl of the spoon.

In addition to the spoons, there are many Egyptian illustrations of incense being offered from hand-held pots as in Fig. 5.

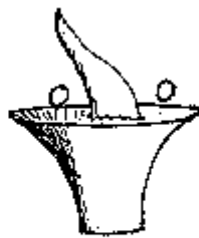


Fig. 5. Egyptian hieroglyph for frankincense.

## THE WORD "CONSECRATE:"

I am indebted to John A. Tvedtnes<sup>9</sup> for pointing out that the Hebrew original of the word "consecrate," referring to the ordination of priests in Old Testament times, literally means

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<sup>9</sup> Personal correspondence from John A. Tvedtnes to Lynn M. Hilton, March 27, 1981. Notes in response from Dr. John Tvedtnes: In the letter mentioned by Dr. Hilton, I also cited the Testament of Levi 3:14-23, which bears repeating here: "And I saw seven men in white raiment saying unto me: Arise, put on the robe of the priesthood, and the crown of righteousness, and the breastplate of understanding, and the garment of truth, and the plate of faith, and the turban of the head, and the ephod of prophecy. And they severally carried these things and put them on me, and said unto me: From henceforth become a priest of the Lord, thou and thy seed for ever. And the first anointed me with holy oil, and gave to me the staff of judgement.

"to fill the hand." Mr. Tvedtnes offers the following list of Old Testament references, with the literal translation followed by the familiar King James Version (KJV) rendering in parentheses:

Exodus 28:41 "fill their hand" (KJV "consecrate them")

Exodus 29:9 "thou shalt fill the hand of Aaron and the hand of his sons" (KJV "thou shalt consecrate Aaron and his sons")

Exodus 29:29 "and to fill in them their hand" (KJV "and to be consecrated in them")

Exodus 29:33 "to fill their hand to sanctify them" (KJV "to consecrate and to sanctify them")

Exodus 32:29 "fill your hand" (KJV "consecrate yourselves")

Leviticus 8:33 "the filling of the days of your filling" (KJV "the days of your consecration be at an end") and "he will fill your hand" (KJV "shall he consecrate you")

Leviticus 16:32 "whose hand he shall fill" (KJV "whom he shall consecrate")

Leviticus 21:10 "and whose hand is filled" (KJV "and that is consecrated")

Numbers 3:3 "whose hand he filled for a priest" (KJV "whom he consecrated to minister in the priest's office")

Judges 17:5 "and he filled the hand of one of his sons" (KJV "and consecrated one of his sons")

Judges 17:12 "and Michah filled the hand of the Levite" (KJV "and Michah consecrated the Levite")

1 Kings 13:33 "he filled his hand" (KJV "he consecrated him")

1 Chronicles 29:5 "to fill his hand" (KJV "to consecrate his service")

2 Chronicles 29:31 "you have filled your hand" (KJV "ye have consecrated yourselves")

Jeremiah 44:25 "and with [OR: in, by, through] your hands you have filled" (KJV "and

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The second washed me with pure water, and fed me with bread and wine even the most holy things, and clad me with a holy and glorious robe. The third clothed me with a linen vestment like an ephod. The fourth put round me a girdle like unto purple. The fifth gave me a branch of rich olive. The sixth placed a crown on my head. The seventh placed on my head a diadem of priesthood, and filled my hands with incense, that I might serve as a priest to the Lord God. And they said to me: Levi, thy seed shall be divided into three offices, for a sign of the glory of the Lord who is to come." [Emphasis added] It is worth noting that incense 'ladles' are mentioned in the Mishnah (Yoma 5:1; 7:4; Tam. 5:4; 6:3) and that the term "handful" is likewise listed in passages concerning incense (Zeb. 4:3; 13:4, Meil. 2:9).

fulfilled with your hand") Note that incense is mentioned in this verse and also in verses 19 & 21

Ezekiel 43:26 "and they shall fill his [OR: its] hand" (KJV "and they shall consecrate themselves"). The translation given is from the ketib or written text; the qere or spoken variant, as read in the synagogues, is "his hands." But both the Greek Septuagint and the [Syriac] Peshitta versions of this passage read "their hand."

In this private communication, Mr. Tvedtnes notes that "there are some hints that the open hand is to be filled with sacrificial items (meat, etc.) E.g., cf. Lev. 8:26-28 and Ex. 29:24. See also 2 Chr. 13:9, which should read 'to fill his hand with a young bullock' (KJV 'to consecrate himself with a young bullock')."

He further draws this enlightening conclusion: "In the Temple, the priest evidently stood with hand in cupping shape, ready to receive something which was given to him. It was probably incense, though, in the last days (see Rev. 2:17; D&C 130:11), it will evidently be the white stone or urim and thummim, with the new name written in it."

It is safe to conclude that the use of the hand in cupping shape in early temple worship was a widespread practice and must have been handed down from the ancients. Lacking an actual Urim and Thummim, ancient priests may have used the next most precious thing available to them--frankincense. I agree with Mr. Tvedtnes that faithful saints should expect their outstretched hand in cupping shape someday to be filled with a sacred object.

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**Incense Dish** [Heb. *kap* (כַּף)]. The common word for the hollow part of the hand is used to indicate a shallow bowl used as a censer, for burning incense. The RSV renders this term "incense dish." Archaeological discovery of shallow stone bowls, with a hand carved on the bottom so that the vessel appears to be a cupped palm, provides artifactual evidence for these cultic objects. Incense dishes are mentioned in various priestly texts in the Pentateuch (e.g., Exod 25:29; Num 4:7) dealing with the tabernacle, and they appear in other parts of the Bible in relationship to temple equipment (see 1 Kgs 7:50; 2 Kgs 25:14). The incense dishes were made of gold and weighed ten shekels (Num 7:14). In the tabernacle, they were placed on the small golden table which held various other receptacles for food as well as the bread of the Presence; there were twelve such dishes according to Num 7:84, 86. Various other English versions render this term as "spoons" or "pans." - Carol Meyers.

Freedman, D. N. (1996, c1992). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday. (Vol. 3, p.410)