

Clapping Hands as a Gesture of Anguish and Anger in Mesopotamia and in Israel

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Clapping hands in contemporary Western cultures is generally perceived as a gesture of joy and approval. In the ancient Near East it appears that clapping hands expressed negative as well as positive feelings. A number of instances in the Hebrew Bible and in a Neo-Assyrian text, the Prism of Esarhaddon, seem to portray clapping as a gesture of anger and anguish. Other examples in the Bible and in Sumerian literature suggest that clapping is symbolic of applause. In addition, two Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs depict scenes in which figures appear to be clapping.

The goal of this essay is to distinguish the terminology that communicates these gestures and to examine the specific contexts of clapping in Mesopotamian sources and in the Bible.¹ We will focus primarily on Mesopotamian material not considered previously in conjunction with these gestures and on implications of the biblical references that continue to be the subject of scholarly debate. Subsequently, we will attempt to elucidate certain aspects of ancient Near Eastern rituals associated with clapping hands.

Mesopotamian Sources

In Akkadian, *rittī rapāsu*, “to beat/clap hands,” is attested in the Prism Inscription of Esarhaddon. The verb *rapāsu* is defined as, “to thresh, strike or beat.”² Primarily, *rapāsu* is used in actions where corporal punishment is inflicted on humans or animals and where inanimate objects are hit or struck one against the other. In Esarhaddon’s text *rapāsu* indicates clapping, the striking together of hands, *zusammenschlagen*.³ The gesture is preceded by acts of anguish and expressions of anger uttered by Esarhaddon whose accession to the throne is threatened by his brothers.

ep-še-e-ti-šú-nu lim-ni-e-ti ur-ru-ḫi-iš áš-me-e-ma
ú-a aq-bi-ma šu-bat ru-bu-ti-ia ú-šar-riṭ-ma
ú-šá-aṣ-ri-ḫa si-pit-tu lab-biš an-na-dir—ma iṣ-ša-ri-iḫ

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1. Other hand gestures are dealt with in a comprehensive study by M. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome, 1980).

2. *AH.*, 954–55.

3. *AH.*, 955:3. In this instance, and in cases where weapons are struck together, *rapāsu* is found in the ventive.

ka-bat-ti

āš-šú e-peš šarru-u-ti bit abi-ia ar-pi-sa rit-ti-ia
a-na ᵀAš-šur ᵀSin ᵀŠamaš ᵀBēl ᵀNabū u ᵀNergal ᵀIštar šá Ninuaᵀ^{ki} bit Ištar
šá ᵀⁱⁿArba-ili
qa-ti āš-ši-ma im-gu-ru qí-bi-ti ina an-ni-šú-nú ki-nim
šēr ta-kil-ti iš-tap-pa-ru-nim-ma a-lik la ka-la-a-ta
i-da-a-ka ni-it-tal-lak-ma ni-na-a-ra ga-ri-e-ka
 (col. 1, ll. 55–62)

I heard of their wicked deeds soon and
 I said woe! and I ripped my princely garment and
 I uttered a lament, I raged like a lion and my
 mood became angry.

*I beat together/clapped my hands*⁴ on account of the doings
 of the kingship of my father's house.

I raised my hands to Aššur, Sin, Šamaš, Bel, Nabu and
 Nergal, Ištar of Ninveh, Ištar of Arbela
 and they accepted my prayer. With their true approval
 they sent me a helpful omen: "Go, do not delay, we will
 march at your side and we will slay your foes."

In this episode, clapping hands is the finale of a series of emotional manifestations of rage and grief.⁵ After clapping his hands, Esarhaddon raises them in prayer to the gods; they respond by sending him an auspicious omen that spurs him on to battle the conspirators.

4. R. Borger posits that Esarhaddon not only clapped his hands but also stamped his feet, as *ritti* can apply to both hands and feet (Borger, *Esarh.*, 43). Contra A. L. Oppenheim's translation of this line, "I (called up the gods by) clapping my hands" (*ANET*, 289:b), there is no evidence that clapping hands was a means of summoning the gods. A similar interpretation in the Hittite myth, the Song of Ullikummi, "He clapped his hands three times and up [to the gods he shouted and] they heard (him)" (*ANET*, 125:a), should be abandoned. The verb in question, *palwai*, appears to indicate a vocal act, probably "to cry out" (personal communication from Prof. H. Hoffner); see the forthcoming *CHD* volume, and see Gütterbock's explanation in his updated version, *The Song of Ullikummi: Revised Text of the Hittite Version of a Human Myth* (New Haven, 1952), 49, 60.

5. Related gestures that express anger and anguish include beating the chest and striking the thigh. An example of the former is recorded in Sargon's annals (*TCL* 3, 411–12).

¹Ur-sa-a qaq-qa-riš ip-pal-si-iḫ na-aḫ-lap-a-te-šu
 ú-šar-riṭ-ma uš-še-ra i-di-e-šú
 iš-ḫu-uṭ ku-bu-us-su pi-rat-su iḫ-si-ip-ma ú-rep-pi-is
 lib-ba-šú i-na ki-lal-le-šu

He (King Ursa) threw himself on the ground, he tore his
 garments and bared his arms.
 he pulled off his cap, tore out his hair and pounded his
 heart (chest) with both of them (his fists/hands).

Striking the thigh, *pēma/šapra maḫāšu*, is always expressed by *maḫāšu*, a verb synonymous to *rapāsu* but more widely attested. This gesture is found in a few Sumerian and Akkadian texts. In the Descent of Ištar (Borger, *BAL*, ll. 100–101), Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld slaps her thigh when her sister Ištar intrudes into her domain. In *Enuma Elish* (II, ll. 49–50), Anshar smites his thigh when he hears of Tiamat's plans to battle the gods. In Sargon's Annals, the subjects of King Ursa cry "woe!" and strike their thighs when they hear of Ursa's defeat by Sargon (*TCL* 3:213). In one case, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, smiting the thigh seems to be a gesture of admiration. "May a man one league away (in honor of Samhat) slap his thigh, *lim[ḫaš] šaparšu*" (C. J. Gadd, "Some Contributions to the Gilgamesh Epic" *Iraq* 28 [1966], 112, 115). Gruber's reconstruction (*Aspects of Non-verbal Communication*, 382), "[*manma a*

Presently, as far as can be adduced from published material, neither *maḥāṣu* nor *rapāsu* is attested in Akkadian texts in a context where clapping hands is a gesture of joy or approval. This is somewhat surprising considering that an expression of applause, *šū sîg* (= Akkadian *qātī maḥāṣu* or *rittī rapāsu*), is found in two Sumerian royal hymns dated to the second millennium.

a-ār-ni níg šū sîg-sîg-gé-dam⁶

His (Enlil's) fame/glory is something to applaud.

níg nam-mu-u₈ šū ḥa-ba-sîg-sîg-ge me-téš ḥu-mu-i-i⁷

May he (the person preserving Šulgi's achievements) applaud everything of mine and praise me.

But *šū sîg* may not always signal applause. In another Sumerian text, the Myth of Dumuzi and Gestinanna, the demons who try to catch Dumuzi clap their hands as they begin their pursuit.⁸ The purpose of their clapping is unclear; it could symbolize malicious glee or perhaps function as a battle cry.

In addition to the above textual evidence, two Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs from Nimrud depict figures that appear to be clapping.⁹ One relief belongs to the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (fig. A) and the other to Tiglath-pileser III (fig. B). The reliefs are not accompanied by explanatory inscriptions but each belongs to a series of scenes illustrating military ventures. Possible interpretations of these visual representations in conjunction with the written material will be discussed below.

Biblical Sources

Clapping hands is a gesture attested numerous times in the Hebrew Bible. It is conveyed by one of four verbal roots whose primary definition is to strike, *נכח*, *מחא*, *נכח*, *תקע*, *תקע*. Upon close examination of the contexts of these terms it appears that clapping hands can symbolize varying sentiments.¹⁰ Two of the verbs, *תקע* and *מחא*, are used in expressions of triumph and approval. The other two, *נכח* and *הכה* (the hiphil of *נכח*), bespeak anger and other emotions of distress.¹¹

in}ḥaṣ šaparšū, may no one strike his thigh (because of you),” does not take into account the new text (no. 394) discussed by Gadd which fills in the gaps.

At present, I have been unable to find other examples of clapping hands in Akkadian literature. Interestingly, *qātī maḥāṣu*, to strike the hand(s), does not mean to clap. It is idiomatic for “to refuse a deal” and is attested often with negation, “to comply” (*CAD M/1*, 81)

6. Išme-Dagan A 38 (ms. University Museum).

7. Šulgi B 295 (ms. G. Haayer).

8. L. 56. W. Sladek, *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* (Diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1974), 235.

9. The hands of the figures seem to be in a closed clap pose that differs from depictions of figures clasping their hands in gestures of prayer or reverence, such as those from the temples of Ishtar at Mari and Nabu at Nimrud. See E. Strommenger, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London, 1964), figs. 131–39, 215.

10. In a 17th century study devoted to hand gestures, modes of clapping are differentiated and correlated to specific emotions (i.e., striking the right fist on the left palm expresses anger). The biblical examples do not clearly delineate the manner of clapping, although the verb varies. See J. Bulwer, *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand and Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*, rev. 1654 ed. J. Cleary (Carbondale, Illinois, 1974), 35–36.

11. The one possible exception, *כף ויכו* in 2 Kgs. 11:12, will be examined below.

The Hebrew verb הכה, like Akkadian *rapāsu* and *maḥāṣu*, means “to strike, beat or smite.”¹² It is action directed upon animate and inanimate objects. Four times in the Book of Ezekiel (6:11; 21:19, 22; 22:13) the verb is combined with the noun כף, “hand,” to signify the striking of hands, presumably clapping. In the first verse God instructs the prophet Ezekiel to precede his message of reproof with certain gestures and an exclamatory utterance.

כה אמר אדני יהוה הכה בכפך ורקע ברגלך
ואמר אח אל כל תועבות רעות בית ישראל

Thus says the Lord, “Strike with your hand(s) and stamp with your foot and say, ‘Ah! over all the abominations of the house of Israel.’” (6:11)

When Ezekiel prophesies Israel’s impending doom by God’s sword, clapping accompanies the verbal message. God joins the prophet in performing this gesture as he assuages his anger over Israel’s sins.

ואתה בן אדם הנבא והך כף אל כף
ותכפל חרב שלישה חרב חללים היא

And you son of man prophesy and strike hand to hand, let the sword be doubled the third time, the sword of those to be slain . . . (21:19)

וגם אני אכה כפי אל כפי והנחתי חמתי אני יהוה דברתי

And I will also strike my hand to my hand and I will rest my fury, I the Lord have spoken (21:22)

Ezekiel strikes his hand(s) as a reaction to the sins of Israel.

והנה הכיתי כפי אל בצעך אשר עשית

Therefore I have struck my hand(s) at your unjust gain which you have made (22:13)¹³

All four examples from Ezekiel suggest that הכה כף denotes a gesture evoked by anger and anguish similar to *rittī rapāsu* in the Prism of Esarhaddon. God’s and Ezekiel’s distress over Israel’s fate is further demonstrated in the prophecy of the smiting sword by wailing and striking the thigh (21:17). Contrary proposals, holding that the prophet and God express glee and triumph at the prospect of Israel’s fall,¹⁴ cannot be supported by Ezekiel’s behavior and are not in keeping with the role of the Israelite prophet, to admonish so that repentance can follow.

12. For example, both *rapāsu* and הכה are used in expressions meaning to beat with or without a weapon and to exact punishment by beating (i.e., in Nuzi texts, 8:32; 72:7; 3:32, 60 [AASOR 16]; in the Bible, Exod. 21:18; Num. 22:23; Deut. 25:1–3). The Hebrew and Aramaic cognate of *rapāsu*, רפט, means “to stamp or tread,” but it is not used to denote smiting (BDB, 952, 1113). Hebrew מוחך, like Akkadian *maḥāṣu*, can mean “to smite” (BDB, 563), but neither verb is found signifying to clap hands.

13. In 6:11 and 22:13 it is not absolutely clear whether Ezekiel is to strike both hands together, whether a specific mode of striking is intended, or, whether another object is involved.

14. R. Klein, *Ezekiel: The Prophet and His Message* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1988), 10; W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I* trans. R. Clements (Philadelphia, 1979), 184, 434; M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel I–20* (Garden City, NY, 1983), 135. Greenberg and Zimmerli compare Ezekiel’s gesture of clapping hands with

As noted, **הכה כף** in Ezekiel is a gesture denoting anguish and anger. In its other biblical attestations, the root **נכה** carries negative connotations as well, usually signifying some act of violence.¹⁵ One possible exception is the usage of **הכה כף** in 2 Kgs. 11:12. In that episode, the account of the coup against Athaliah and the crowning of Joash, the phrase **ויכרו כף**, “they clapped hands,” is traditionally interpreted as applause of approval.

ויוצא את בן המלך ויתן עליו את הנזר ואת העדות
וימלכו אתו וימשחורו ויכו כף ויאמרו יחי המלך

He brought out the son of the king and placed the diadem and ornaments upon him. They made him King and anointed him; they clapped their hands and proclaimed, “Long live the King” (11:12).

In order to explicate **הכה כף** in this verse, several problems concerning this account must be noted. Although we can assume that the priest Jehoiada brought Joash to the Temple to be crowned, the identity of “they” in verse 12 is uncertain. Did the populace play a role in the coup and coronation or only the guard? The guard is mentioned in previous verses but the people are not. Therefore, it is unclear who clapped their hands and shouted **יחי המלך**, “long live the king!”

M. Cogan and H. Tadmor think it is unlikely that the guard applauded with weapons in hand; consequently, the people of the land, who are mentioned in subsequent verses, must have been present.¹⁶ Their argument presents a number of difficulties. First, the events leading up to the anointing of Joash (vv. 4–11), including the organization of the plot by Jehoiada, bespeak a clandestine operation, not a popular revolt.¹⁷ Second, it is conceivable that the guards clapped after laying their weapons aside, or, perhaps they struck their fists together while holding their weapons, thereby striking them concurrently and creating the clamor that alerted Athaliah (v. 13). In addition, the unity of this narrative is questionable and our text may reflect the harmonization of two accounts, one with the people of the land and one without.¹⁸ Finally, while the proclamation **יחי המלך** is attested elsewhere (1 Sam. 10:24; 2 Sam. 16:16; 1 Kgs. 1:25, 31, 34, 39), applauding the king is not—not even in the Chronicler’s parallel account.

If indeed Joash’s crowning precipitated applause then one would expect the action to be termed by **מחא** or **תקע**, expressions of approval, instead of **הכה**, an expression of distress. The 18th century commentator David Altschuler (*Mešudat David*) was apparently bothered by the usage of **הכה** in this episode. He notes that

(Ezek. 25:6). However, as will be shown, the verb for striking hands in the latter case is different and probably signifies a distinct sentiment. Although Greenberg is correct in his observation that in the curse in Deut. 28:63 God warns that He will delight in punishing Israel, that lone example should be viewed in its context—warnings for future transgressions—and does not necessarily reflect God’s or the prophet’s reactions to Israel’s sins in Ezekiel.

15. *BDB*, 645–47.

16. M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (Garden City, NY, 1988), 129.

17. G. Ahlström believes that the people were organized by Jehoiada and participated in the revolt; *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Paleolithic Period to Alexander’s Conquest* (Sheffield, 1993), 601.

18. For details on the two-account theory, see J. Gray, *I and II Kings* (Philadelphia, 1976), 572–81 and M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings*, 131–32.

in this particular case **כף** **הכה** is to be understood in a positive sense.¹⁹ Perhaps he is correct, or perhaps **כף** **ויכו** does not refer to applause at all. Conceivably, the guards, who were about to arrest Athaliah and kill her, struck their fists together and consequently their weapons, as a war cry, a gesture of anger comparable to others previously discussed. A present there is not enough evidence to resolve this issue one way or another.

The second verb, **ספק**, like **הכה**, is used when clapping signals some form of distress, although the precise sentiment is not always clear.²⁰ In the Book of Lamentations passers-by clap their hands and hiss at Jerusalem in ruins.

ספקו עליך כפים כל עברי דרך שרקו וינעו ראשם על בת ירושלים

They clap their hands at you, all who pass by
They hiss and wag their heads at Jerusalem (2:15).

It is uncertain whether these onlookers hiss and clap in derision, as do Israel's enemies (v. 16),²¹ or in astonishment over the city laid waste (cf. Jer. 19:8). Job, in contempt of the wicked, says:

ישפק עלימו כפימו וישרק עליו ממקומו

One will clap hands at him, and will hiss him
out of his place (27:23).

Similarly, Job's friend Elihu charges him with clapping his hands in contempt of God.

בינינו יספק וירב אמריו לאל

He claps his hands among us and multiplies his
word against God (34:37).

In the Book of Numbers, Balak, in anger, claps his hands as he denounces Balaam for blessing Israel instead of cursing them.

ויחר אף בלק אל בלעם ויספק את כפיו

Balak burned with anger at Balaam and he clapped his hands (24:10).

In contrast to **הכה** and **ספק**, the term **כף** **תקע** is found in contexts where clapping is a gesture of triumph or approval.²² In Psalm 47 all nations are summoned to clap their hands in celebration of God's kingship.

כל העמים תקעו כף הריעו לאלהים בקול רנה

All the nations clap your hands, shout to God with joy (47:2).

19. *Mira'ot Gedolot*, ad loc.

20. **ספק על ירך**, striking the thigh as a gesture of distress (Jer. 31:19; Ezek. 21:17) is semantically equivalent to Akkadian *pēma/šapra maḥāṣu*.

21. W. Eichrodt regards the clapping of the passers-by in v. 15 as a sign of hostility; *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 5:414.

22. In the Book of Proverbs (6:1; 17:18; 22:26), however, **כף** **תקע** is a symbolic gesture for ratifying an agreement. Probably, two individuals strike hands with each other in a manner comparable to a

The prophet Nahum predicts that when Assyria is destroyed the peoples who were under her yoke will clap their hands in exultation.

כל שמעי שמעך תקעו כף עליך

All who hear the report of you clap hands over you (3:19).

כף, *מחא*, the fourth term for clapping hands, is analogous to תקע כף. The psalmist calls upon nature to clap hands in praise of God.

נהרות ימחאו כף יחד הרים ירננו לפני יהוה

Rivers will clap hands, together mountains will rejoice before the Lord . . . (Ps. 98:8).

Similarly, Isaiah declares that nature will clap hands when those exiled return to Zion.

ההרים והגבעות יפצחו לפניכם רנה וכל עצי השדה ימחאו כף

Mountains and valleys will burst forth with joyous shout before you, and all the trees of the field will clap hands (Isa. 55:12).

In Ezekiel's oracle against Ammon, that nation is condemned for clapping hands and stamping feet in exultation over the destruction of Judah.

יען מחאך יד ורקעך ברגל והשמח בכל שאטך בנפש אל ארמת ישראל

Because you clapped hands and stamped feet and rejoiced over the land of Israel with all your disdain . . . (25:6).

Although in this context *מחא* כף can be interpreted as mockery, the gesture is performed in conjunction with rejoicing and can be understood as malicious glee.

As outlined above, the four Hebrew terms for clapping hands reflect a range of meanings. This distinction is apparent especially in Ezekiel, where the same term, *הכה*, is used four times but where, in the fifth case, *מחא* is used. The verbs *מחא* and *תקע* both seem to signal clapping as a gesture of triumph and joy. The terms *הכה* and *ספק* appear in gestures of anger, anguish, or some type of distress. Only in one problematic case, 2 Kgs. 11:12, can *הכה* כף possibly symbolize approval. Further differentiation between these four terms based on the evidence cannot be made.

Clapping Hands as an Aspect of Ritual

As a component of language, gesture refers to those bodily movements that accompany audible articulate utterance. Its role is to augment, elaborate, and intensify what is being said.²³ Clapping hands in the texts cited above most often fits this definition. M. Greenberg, in his comments on Ezek. 6:11, observes that the present sequence—a set of instructions for certain gestures, clapping the hands and

handshake. In Prov. 17:18 *תקע* כף is parallel to *ערב ערבה*. Both terms seem to signify suretyship; see L. R. Freedman, "Biblical Hebrew 'rb, 'to go surety' and Its Nominal Forms," *JANES* 19 (1989), 25–29. Note that in Akkadian to assume guarantee is expressed by *qaqqada mahāṣu*, lit., "to strike the head" (*CAD* M/1, 80).

23. M. Critchley, *Silent Language* (London, 1975), 4.

stamping the feet—is surprising. Usually, the message of the prophet is simply introduced by “He (God) said to me.”²⁴ But we should not be too surprised. Although gestures are not consistently recorded in concert with Ezekiel’s words, vivid visual elements are important components of his prophecies in general. The gestures that he performs, like his fantastic visions, speak to the eye and give action to his speech.

W. Eichrodt suggests that clapping hands in Ezekiel should be seen as an originally magical gesture that imbued words with extra power.²⁵ He states that God’s smiting sword (21:8–17) probably contains a magical element and that clapping is to be regarded as an effective action that adds a terrifying intensity to the destructive power of the sword. The hand clapping sets the spell in motion and is the means through which destruction is magically produced. God repeats the prophet’s gestures to give them validity and to ensure that they will take effect.²⁶

In actuality it is impossible to tell whether the gestures performed by Ezekiel, like his other symbolic actions (i.e., eating the scroll containing the message of doom [3:1–3], sketching a picture of Jerusalem besieged on a brick [4:1–3]), functioned in any magical capacity. The other examples of hand clapping in the Bible mentioned above do not seem to serve that purpose.²⁷ In most of the biblical occurrences, both in positive and negative contexts, clapping hands can simply express intense emotions that call attention to the actor and set the appropriate mood for the occasion for those present.

Despite the lack of proof that in Israel clapping hands was an aspect of ritual, its ceremonial role in Mesopotamia deserves consideration in light of two Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs from Nimrud. One relief, (see fig. A), from the throne-room of the royal palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.E.), is of a scene in the Assyrian army camp. Several activities are illustrated: the preparation of food, horses feeding, an Assyrian grooming a horse, an official noting the arrival of prisoners and an attendant standing by two figures disguised in lion skins, one holds a whip and the other seems to clap his hands. Directly below this relief is another that portrays the returning triumphant Assyrian army.²⁸

The second relief (see fig. B) is found among those in the central palace of Tiglath-Pileser III that depict the king’s Babylonian campaign of 745 B.C.E. In the relief are pictured four Assyrian courtiers in procession followed by a figure garbed in a lion skin. The four courtiers, two of whom appear to be eunuchs, are clapping their hands. The disguised figure has a whip hanging from his hands and is either snapping his fingers²⁹ or clasping his hands while clapping. The group approaches

24. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 135.

25. W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (Philadelphia, 1970), 96–97.

26. *Ibid.*, 293–96.

27. An exception may be the gesture of striking hands as a surety in Proverbs (6:1; 17:18; 22:26). At least at some period, the gesture may have magically ensured the pledge.

28. E. A. Budge, *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum: Reign of Ashur-nasir-pal, 885–860 B.C.* (London, 1914), pl. XVI, #1, #2.

29. R. Ellis, “‘Lion-Men’ in Assyria,” in M. Ellis, ed., *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of J. J. Finkelstein* (Hamden, Conn., 1977), 68. In this context, snapping the fingers may be a gesture comparable to clapping.

an uncertain object, which has been tentatively identified as the wall of a fortified camp.³⁰

It is certainly within the realm of possibility that the aforementioned scenes depict rituals associated with battle. R. D. Barnett and M. Falkner suggest that the procession of courtiers represents either a dance celebrating victory or some magical ritual.³¹ R. Ellis thinks that the ceremony encompasses exorcism.³² H. Frankfort proposes that the figures are clapping to music.³³ The fact that in each scene at least one figure is disguised is a strong indication that a magical ritual is portrayed.

Disguise is a common component in rites assumed to represent sympathetic magic dating back to prehistory.³⁴ The costumed individual is believed to take on the characteristics of the person or animal he is impersonating.³⁵ In Mesopotamia, such a rite may be depicted in a scene of fish-garbed figures flanking a sick man in bed. The persons costumed as fish very likely represent *apkallu*-sages, fish monsters possessing apotropaic powers.³⁶ In the Epic of Gilgamesh (VIII:3) the hero roams the steppe clad in a lion-skin mourning for his friend Enkidu. Although the purpose of the disguise is not revealed, it could be a means for Gilgamesh to express his feelings of hostility at the death of Enkidu or a way for him to fit in with the other animals of the steppe as Enkidu had before his taming.

The lion disguises in the two Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs are especially significant in a context of war. Lions are ferocious creatures admired for their strength and the fear they instill in those around them. Ishtar in one of her aspects a warlike goddess, is often pictured with a lion.³⁷ Lions, *labbu/nēšu*, are frequently found in Akkadian texts in metaphors and similes for warrior-kings. Sargon II boasts, "I marched (through Urartu) proudly, like a raging, terror-laden lion."³⁸ Similarly, Ashurnasirpal claims, "I am a lion and a warrior."³⁹ In the Epic of Erra, the third of the Sibitti, of the seven wicked gods, is told to take on the appearance of a lion, *zīm labbi*, to frighten mankind. The warrior-god Erra does likewise when he enters the palace of Babylon in his quest to destroy the city.⁴⁰

Perhaps the lion-garbed figures in the relief from the palace of Ashurnasirpal are performing a ritual, either before or during the battle, to empower the king and army with the strength of lions to ensure victory over the enemy. The procession

30. R. D. Barnett and M. Falkner, *The Sculptures of Aššur-Našir-apli II, Tiglath-Pileser III, Esarhaddon from the Central and South-West Palaces at Nimrud* (London, 1962), 9, pl. I, II.

31. Barnett and Falkner, *The Sculptures of Tiglath-Pileser III*, 9–10.

32. Ellis, "'Lion-Men' in Assyria," 75–76.

33. H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Harmondsworth, 1954), 92.

34. O. Riley, *Masks and Magic* (New York, 1955), 6; J. Black and A. Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London, 1992), 33.

35. J. Crocker, "Ceremonial Masks," in V. Turner, ed., *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Rituals* (Washington D. C., 1982), 80; V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, 1969), 174.

36. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, fig. 151; E. Reiner, "The Etiological Myth of the 'Seven Sages,'" *Or.* 30 (1961), 1–11.

37. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 108–9.

38. *TCL*, 420.

39. E. A. W. Budge, *L. W. King, AKA*, 265, i:33.

40. I 34, IV 21; P. Gossman, *Das Era-Epos* (Wursburg: Augustinus, 1955); L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (Mailbu, 1977), 16–21. It is uncertain if these figures actually don lion skins.

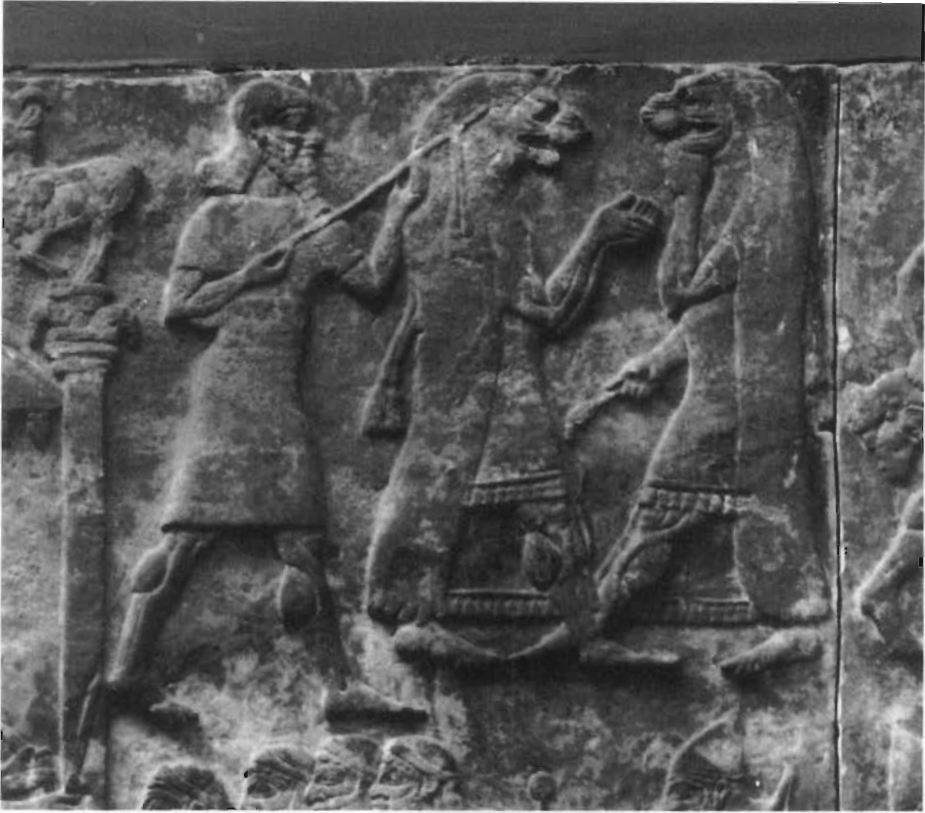


Fig. A. From a relief in Ashurnasirpal II's palace

scene in the relief from the palace of Tiglath-pileser III can be interpreted likewise.⁴¹ Clapping, as a gesture of anger and hostility, may be another aspect of the ritual. It mirrors the mood of the participants and effectuates the magical element of their action.

Esarhaddon's gestures, described in his annals quoted above—including clapping hands—cannot be understood in a ritualistic context. There is no evidence from the text that Esarhaddon donned a lion skin or performed a ritual. However, he apparently considered it important to enumerate his gestures as well as the words that preceded the battle against his brothers. He reacted with gestures of anger and anguish at their traitorous activities, exclaiming “woe,” ripping his garment, uttering a lament, raging like a lion, and finally clapping his hands. Esarhaddon's public display, while not a ritual in itself, may reflect certain aspects of warlike behavior that were enacted before battle as suggested by the reliefs.

41. The possibility that the lion-garbed figures represent the lion genius La-tarak, is considered unlikely (Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 33–34). Connections of these lion-men to others are discussed by Ellis, “‘Lion-Men’ in Assyria,” 73–78.



Fig. B. From a relief in Tiglath-pileser III's palace.

Conclusions

A few observations concerning the significance of clapping hands in the ancient Near East can be made based on this brief study. By examining the terminology and context of several examples of clapping hands it becomes obvious that the action has diverse implications. In Mesopotamia as well as in biblical Israel, clapping hands could express positive and negative feelings. Biblical Hebrew most often distinguishes these meanings by employing different verbs, *הכה*, *ספק*, *תקע* or *מחא*. The verb *הכה* is found primarily in expressions of anger and anguish as exemplified by its usage in Ezekiel. In Akkadian, *rittī rapāsu* expresses this sentiment. However, in Sumerian, its equivalent, *šū sīg* can signify approval. Although clapping hands as a gesture of applause is as yet unattested in Akkadian texts, we cannot presume that in Mesopotamia it was confined to Sumerian culture.

Clapping hands as a gesture of anger and anguish is demonstrated in the Book of Ezekiel and in the Prism of Esarhaddon. The examples from these texts illustrate the function of the gesture within a particular context. Clapping hands in concert with other gestures apparently serves to intensify the accompanying words and

perhaps even to effectuate the action. Although it is doubtful that a magical component exists in any of the biblical instances, Mesopotamian cultural influences cannot be entirely discounted, especially in the case of Ezekiel, who wrote in that milieu.

However, the Mesopotamian sources, in particular the reliefs, may hint at a magical ritualistic aspect to clapping hands, primarily when it is found in conjunction with disguise. We may speculate, albeit cautiously, that the figures pictured in the two Nimrud palace reliefs are clapping as part of a ritual associated with battle. The individual costumed as a lion could magically take on the attributes of the beast he was impersonating. He could roar and clap to enhance his and the warriors' powers and to placate his own anger and anguish. As shown, Esarhaddon appears to have reacted to his brothers' treachery with similar gestures as he prepared for the confrontation with them.