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Title *Dexiosis and Dextrarum Iunctio: The Sacred Handclasp in the Classical and Early Christian World*

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Abstract This article discusses the significance of the handclasp as depicted in Roman and early Christian artwork. The historical use of the sacred handclasp demonstrates the importance of the marriage covenant.

DEXIOSIS AND DEXTRARUM IUNCTIO:
THE SACRED HANDCLASP IN THE CLASSICAL
AND EARLY CHRISTIAN WORLD

Stephen D. Ricks

On a recent trip to California to prowl through its exquisitely tasty academic libraries, my wife and I were told by friends that the Getty Museum, just a few miles up Interstate 405 from UCLA, had free admission, so we decided to visit it before returning home. The museum itself contains an embarrassment of art riches from antiquity to the modern era. In the antiquities collection, my attention was caught by a gravestone dating to the end of the fifth century BC from Attica in Greece. In it, the husband, Philoxenos (whose name, as well as that of his wife, is carved in the register above his head), is grasping the right hand of his wife, Philoumene, in a solemn and ceremonial handclasp (fig. 1). This handclasp, the description informs us, “was a symbolic and popular gesture on gravestones of the Classical period,” which could represent “a simple farewell, a reunion in the afterlife, or a continuing connection between the deceased and the



Figure 1. Grave stele of Philoxenos with his wife, Philoumene, about 400 BC. Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

living.”¹ After returning home, I did some further study on this hand-clasp (known in Greek as *dexiosis* and in Latin as *dextrarum iunctio*, meaning “giving, joining of right hands”) and discovered that it was to be found in classical Greek art on grave *stelai*, but especially in Roman art, where it is to be seen on coins and sarcophagi reliefs, as well as in Christian art in mosaics and on sarcophagi reliefs.

***Dextrarum Iunctio* in the Classical World**

The depiction of the *dextrarum iunctio* was highly popular in Roman art. In the Roman world, the right hand was sacred to Fides, the deity of fidelity.² The clasping of the right hand was a solemn gesture of mutual fidelity and loyalty at the conclusion of an agreement or contract,³ the taking of an oath of allegiance,⁴ or reception in the mysteries, whose initiates were referred to as *syndexioi* (“joined by the right hand”).⁵

On a second-century coin Antoninus Pius (AD 86–161) and Faustina are shown clasping each other’s right hand in the *dextrarum iunctio*. Antoninus is holding in his left hand a small statue of Fortuna or Pax (fig. 2). In another coin Commodus (AD 161–92) and his wife, Bruttia Crispina, are shown performing the *dextrarum iunctio*. Juno Pronuba, the divine patron of marriage,⁶ taller than either of the bridal pair, stands behind them, with an outstretched arm on the shoulder of each (fig. 3). In a relief on the sarcophagus of Flavius Arabianus, prefect of Annona, dating to the last quarter of the third century AD, bride and groom are

1. J. Paul Getty Museum Handbook of the Antiquities Collection (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002), 22.

2. Livy, 23.9.3; Walter Otto, “Fides,” in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. Georg Wissowa (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1909), 6:2283–84; Axel Hägerström, *Der römische Obligationsbegriff im Lichte der allgemeinen römischen Rechtsanschauung* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1941), 157–60.

3. Tacitus, *Annales* 2.58.

4. Per G. Hamberg, *Studies in Roman Imperial Art, with Special Reference to the State Reliefs of the Second Century* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1945), 26 fig. 2.

5. Michael Rostovtzeff, “Das Mithraeum von Dura,” *Römische Mitteilungen* 49 (1934): 205.

6. Werner Eisenhut, “Juno,” in *Der Kleine Pauly: Lexikon der Antike*, ed. Konrat Ziegler and Walther Sontheimer (Stuttgart: Druckenmüller Verlag, 1967), 2:1563.



Figure 2 (top left). Antoninus Pius and Faustina. Figure 3 (bottom left). Commodus and his wife, Bruttia Crispina, before Juno Pronuba. Figure 4 (right). Sarcophagus of Flavius Arabianus. Courtesy of SASKIA Ltd. Cultural Documentation.

both clothed in togas. Between them is Juno Pronuba or Concordia. They are flanked on either side by men and women or deities who act as witnesses or onlookers (fig. 4).⁷

Dextrarum Iunctio in Early Christian Art

Though mostly restricted to sarcophagi, scenes of *dextrarum iunctio* are also found in early Christian mosaics. In the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome is a mosaic depiction of the marriage of Moses and Zipporah. The marriage scene takes place in front of the tent of Jethro, whose position behind the bridal pair recalls that of Juno Pronuba or Concordia. Again, like Juno Pronuba or Concordia, Jethro towers over the other figures in the scene—bystanders and witnesses—and is depicted laying his hands on the shoulders of his daughter and his son-in-law (fig. 5).⁸ An additional mosaic scene of *dextrarum iunctio* in Santa Maria Maggiore is of the wedding of Rachel and Jacob, which is

7. Giovanni Uggeri, "Sul sarcofago di Flavio Arabiano prefetto dell'Annona," *Atti della pontificia accademia romana di archeologia. Rendiconti* 40 (1967–68): 114.

8. Fernand Cabrol and Henri LeClercq, ed., *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne e de liturgie* (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1933), 11:1653–54 fig. 8249; Josef Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1916), 1:449; 3: plate 17; Beat Brenk, *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in Santa Maria Maggiore zu Rom* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1975), 80–82.



Figure 5. The marriage of Moses and Zipporah. Image from Brink, *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken*, plate 50. Used by permission.

in a very poor state of preservation (for which reason no illustration is provided and this description is more comprehensive than for other figures).⁹ In this scene, Laban performs the marriage and, like Juno Pronuba or Concordia, stands behind the bridal pair and with his arm leads Rachel to Jacob. He wears an orange-red pallium pulled over his shoulder and is looking at Rachel. Rachel herself is dressed in a golden gown with her neck decked with precious stones. Above her brow two diamonds are shining, while a transparent veil surrounds her head in the form of a halo. Rachel is shyly stretching out her right hand to Jacob in the *dextrarum iunctio*, while she holds her left hand to her mouth as a sign of diffident reflection. For his part, Jacob is dressed as a shepherd and solemnly looks directly in front of himself. Behind Jacob a person who seems to be a witness to the wedding is standing. Rachel's sister Leah gently urges her forward with a gesture of encouragement and lightly grasps her upper arm. For her part, Rachel, aware of the significance of the event, is looking toward her father, Laban.

9. I have been greatly assisted in preparing this description by a careful reading of Brenk's *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in Santa Maria Maggiore*, 69.

In the sarcophagus relief of Gorgonius in the Cathedral of Ancona, dating to the late fourth or early fifth century AD, the bride and groom are clasping each other's right hand; the left hand of the bride is draped over the shoulder of the groom. The bridal pair is flanked by two columns (fig. 6). In a large sarcophagus from Tolentino the hand of God is holding a crown—a symbol of future blessedness¹⁰—over the head of the bridal pair, Catervus and Settimia. In the panel to the right and left and above the pair are the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*, an abbreviation for “Christos,” or Christ (fig. 7).¹¹



Figure 6 (top). Sarcophagus of Gorgonius.

Figure 7 (bottom). Back side of the sarcophagus of Catervus and Settimia. Alinari/Art Resource, NY. S. Nicola, Tolentino, Italy.

Conclusion

Why were early Christians in the Roman world depicted performing the *dextrarum iunctio*? They did so in part because they agreed with the non-Christian Romans that “fidelity and harmony are demanded in the longest-lasting and most intimate human relationship, marriage.”¹² But they also did so because they accepted, perhaps, the ancient Israelite view that marriage was a

10. For a discussion of the symbolism of crowns and wreaths in classical and Christian antiquity, see Karl Baus, *Der Kranz in Antike und Christentum, eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Tertullians* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1940); Michael Blech, *Studien zum Kranz bei den Griechen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982).

11. For these scenes of *dextrarum iunctio* in Christian art, see Giuseppe Bovini, “La scene della ‘dextrarum iunctio’ nell’arte cristiana,” *Bullettino della commissione archeologica comunale di Roma* 72 (1946–48): 113–14; Bernhard Kötting, “Dextrarum iunctio,” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Theodor Klauser (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1957), 3:885–86; Louis Reekmans, “La ‘dextrarum iunctio’ dans l’iconographie romaine et paleochretienne,” *Bulletin de l’Institut historique belge de Rome* 31 (1958): 69–73, 90 fig. 32, plate 12.

12. “Fides und Concordia sind im besonderen Masse gefordert bei der intimsten menschlichen Dauerverbindung, der Ehe.” Kötting, “Dextrarum iunctio,” 883.

sacred covenant¹³ and, further, because they understood “marriage,” in the words of the Protestant scholar Philip Schaff, “as a spiritual union of two souls for time and eternity.”¹⁴ A sacred handclasp—the *dextrarum iunctio*—was a fitting symbol for the most sacred act and moment in human life.

13. Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage, Developed from the Perspective of Malachi* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), has argued persuasively that marriage was a covenant, using sources ranging throughout the entire Hebrew Bible.

14. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5th ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 2:367. Further, see John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 196–97, who observes that “as a sacrament, or *mysterion*, marriage reflects the union between Christ and the Church, between Yahweh and Israel, and as such can be only *one*—an eternal bond, which death itself does not destroy. In its sacramental nature, marriage transfigures and transcends both fleshly union and contractual legal association: human love is being projected into the eternal Kingdom of God.” Later (pp. 198–99) Meyendorff notes that “the most striking difference between the Byzantine theology of marriage and its medieval Latin counterpart is that the Byzantines strongly emphasized the *unicity* of Christian marriage and the *eternity* of the marriage bond; . . . the West seemed to ignore the idea that marriage, if it is a sacrament, has to be projected as an eternal bond into the Kingdom of God.”