

## WHAT IS SO “HOLY” ABOUT THE “HOLY KISS”?

### Abstract

*This article scrutinize the endemic usage of “holy kiss” (φιλήματι ἁγίῳ in 1Co 16:20; 1Th 5:26; 1Pe 5:14) as Paul’s farewell greetings is the point of quandary, whether the kiss is really holy and should be a universal practice or not. The fact is, some Christians are using it as a licence for kissing in today’s churches, thereby attracting the non-Christians to questions our identity as Christians. The researcher used cultural criticism to imaginatively insinuation the usage of the Adjective ἅγιος (holy) to φιλήμα (Kiss). The researcher, prospect and retrospect the expected meaning of the “holy kiss” through the exegetical, cultural and historical view of kiss. The writer scanned through the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural understanding of this kiss. The writer also based his argument on the product of these cultures above (the Old and New Testament) to understand how the kiss was practice. The researcher thus reviews the pros and cons from scholars who have contributed to the understanding of the holy kiss. Therefore, the so call “holy kiss” is more of cultural significance then theological to the original recipients and Christians today.*

**Keywords:** Jewish, Greco-Roman, OT, NT, Kiss, Holy Kiss, Apostolic Church, African.

### Introduction

The Pauline letters consisted of three outstanding marks to show to the contemporary readers that Paul is the author and the three are doxology, greetings, and prayers with benediction. But the writer focuses on the style of greetings that he seems to commanded or suggested to his recipients to practice and among the styles holy Kiss is the issue. The Holy kiss has always been a bone of contention among scholars, most especially in trying to contextualize what Paul really meant. There was an incidence that the Writer will never forget, it was in the church when someone preached about the apostle Paul’s farewell address and, reading the Pauline phraseology “Greet<sup>1</sup> one another with a Holy kiss” he said the following, (1) Kissing is a sign of Christians’ love (2) The disciples kissed one another to show how much they loved themselves (3) Today, because of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Ἀσπάσασθε ἀλλήλους ἐν φιλήματι ἁγίῳ” “all must greet one another in a holy kiss” this verse as a researcher I preferred translating φιλήματι ἁγίῳ not as the dominant translation “holy kiss” but my translation “ in a kiss that is Holy” despite someone may argue that “that and is” is not in the verse but that seems to me to make more sense in translating the greeting style. ἀσπάζομαι in the imperative tense. This verb is a common Hellenistic word which may be used to welcome, to greet or to bid farewell to someone. In the NT, it occurs almost 60 times in which the majority is found in the Pauline epistles such as Rom 16:3-23 with 21 appearances used in the same abovementioned sense. . Lee Hann, “To Kiss or not to kiss? Understanding New Testament Epistolary Imperatives,” *Reformed Theological Seminary*, 2.(2017),1.

corruption and our lack of Holiness, we cannot even practice this holistic model of love which has been set before us by the apostles, and (4) We must try as much as possible to live a holistic Christian life so that this love of kissing one another in Christ will not tarnish in the Christendom. The baffling thing was that the preacher was grieved that Christians have misplaced the real love which is the Holy kiss. The preacher in the story above could also imagine those churches that are kissing one another as the only churches that are showing the genuine love that Christ and Paul kept as a model for all Christians.

Holy kiss, to some Christians, was a way of expressing Christian love both to the apostles and Christian churches but what a fallacious way of imagining Christian love. Is Christian love embedded on kissing or on the character of the Christians toward one another? What did Paul mean with this phraseology “Holy kiss” to the reader? Does Paul really mean the kiss is Holy? as he called it or the kiss had another meaning beyond the phrase “Holy Kiss”. The issue of holy kiss is seriously in need of scholarly cum pastoral attentions in order that our churches may not be turned into immoral kissing men and women quarters.

Therefore, the task at hand is to highlight how holy is the holy kiss by considering both the cultural concept of kissing in the Greco-Roman world and the reasons for which Paul expects this greeting in the form of kissing from fellow Christians. There are other nations that are practicing kiss as part of their culture<sup>2</sup>. In the Middle East like in Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Kuwait, Iran, and Oman, they are involved in the different forms of kisses that look similar to the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures. In this regard, this article only elucidates Jewish and Old Testament and Greco -Roman and New Testament contexts for the purpose of comprehending Pauline perspective of Holy Kiss greetings.

### **Old Testament and Jewish Usages of Kiss**

Old Testament is a product of both human and divine cultures. The writers of the Old Testament did not only give us the message but communicated to us with their culture and philosophy of life. One of which is the notion of kiss. It is a product of a human (Jewish) culture not Divine at all which involved in most of their acts in the Old

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<sup>2</sup> “Since language is an aspect of culture which is not static but dynamic, when a word enters into a culture it may take on a new meaning. This is also true of gestures such as kissing which has acquired sexual connotation than it was in the past. A hermeneutical interpretation of kiss could be “embrace” because it portrays the bond expressed in kissing. In our text under discussion, Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica to “greet one another with a holy kiss.” *Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor*, “Greeting With A Holy Kiss: A Study Of 1 Thessalonians 5:26 In Some Ghanaian Mother-tongue Translations Of The Bible,” *European Scientific Journal* (2014):531. This reality transgressing in every culture not just in Greco-Roman and Jewish Culture but even in Ham, Gbagyi, and kagoro and so many cultures within Africa.

Testament. According to Hamilton, kissing in the Old Testament is a sign of greetings and Blessings.<sup>3</sup> However, not only greetings and Blessing as Hamilton imagines. It is also for respect, well wishes, love, missing of love ones and communion-ship. To the Jewish man, it is cultural and expected from the father to kiss the son he loves (Gen. 27:26-27). Such kissing provides normal and outstanding natural greetings for close relatives such as children.

The kissing is also expressed as a sign of successful journey of a particular relative, especially from a very far distance to express the joy and the happiness of the person's arrival (Gen.33:4).<sup>4</sup> It can also be the expression of greeting and showing of the long awaiting moment of meeting with the relatives that the person had not seen for a long time. The sisters and brothers were allowed to kiss one another culturally as a sign of missing of the love one or greeting of the loved one. It was a common way of greeting among male relatives in Gen. 29:13, 33:4,45:15, Exod. 4:27, 18:7,2 Sam. 14:33). It was also a common greeting for male and female relatives (Gen.29:11; 31:28).<sup>5</sup>Therefore, in the Old Testament and Jewish culture, kiss was meant for greetings, blessings, honour and respect as asserted above. These kisses could come in different styles in the Jewish community either at the hand, mouth, forehead, leg etc. However, the kiss is the issue here not the styles to the writer.

### **The New Testament and Greco-Roman Usages of Kiss**

The concept of kissing is also an expression of love to the fellow family or loved ones in the Greco-Roman world. Kissing is the normal cultural way of showing affection to the loved one demonstrating how much you love him or her. The term φιλέω can mean both kiss and love to some scholars.<sup>6</sup> In the Graeco-Roman world, kisses were often exchanged between family members. About twenty-five percent of pagan references to the kiss relate to familial kissing.<sup>7</sup> In fact, holy Kiss is something one ordinarily did not share with non-family members.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 256.

<sup>4</sup> Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *The Dictionary of New Testament Background* (England: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 629.

<sup>5</sup> Merrill C. Tenny, (G.ed), *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1963), 470.

<sup>6</sup> Evans & Porter, *the Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 628.

<sup>7</sup> Evans & Porter, *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 628.

<sup>8</sup>R Jewett, “1Thessalonians,” In: J. D G Dunn & J.W Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: W.B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 123.

The fact is that to kiss is just like saying to your brother or sister I love you. To really prove to your friends and family in the Greco-Roman culture you love them is by kissing them. Thus, it was a standard way of greetings in the Greco-Roman world that involves complete Love. At this very culture of the Greco-Roman world, women kissed kinsmen or their relations.<sup>9</sup> The family usually kissed one another possibly during gathering as a sign of love and unity. I am imagining that may be during dinner communion, the family usually had first-round kissing before they commence eating after prayer. The parents are expected to kiss their children and the children were also expected to kiss their parents.<sup>10</sup>

Greco-Roman practiced kissing in the time of Jesus and the apostles, primarily for relatives, teachers, rulers, and other loved ones as an expression of love (Luke 15:20; Acts 20:37), reverence (Luke 7:45) and rectitude (Luke 7:38, 45; 22:47). The φιλήμα,<sup>11</sup> as a kiss especially in Luke 7:45; 22:43, was a token of Christian brotherhood, whether by way of welcome or farewell. The concept of the Holy kiss ἅγιος, is the kiss that is free from anything inconsistent of their calling as saints *Hagioi*. In the temple, masters and servants saluted one another without any attitude of condescension on the one part or disrespect on the other.<sup>12</sup> The Holy Kiss<sup>1314</sup> greetings really overshadow many Pauline books except Galatians and Ephesians. This gesture of affection is commanded 5 times in the New Testament (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Pet. 5:14) and refers to the cultural hug and kiss greeting of the first century which for Christians was to be done righteously in recognition that believers are brothers and sisters in the family of God.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Evans & Porter, *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 628.

<sup>10</sup> Evans & Porter, *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 629

<sup>11</sup>In the Greco-Roman sphere, this word φιλέω is more common than ἀγαπάω whereby the former leans more towards “to like” and the latter pointing to strong feelings, devotion, and even passion, i.e., “to love.” However, it is important to note that φιλέω and ἀγαπάω often function as synonyms. Lee Hann, “To Kiss or not to kiss?,” 4.

<sup>12</sup> Merrill F. Ugger & William White, Jr., 345

<sup>13</sup>“In the ancient world one kissed the hand, breast, knee, or foot of a superior, and the cheek of a friend. Herodotus. Mentions kissing the lips as a custom of the Persians. Possibly from them it came to the Jews” proverb 24:26. the only distinct reference to kissing the lips, since Gen. 41:40. James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (New York : C. Scribner's Sons, 1912), 216.

<sup>14</sup>“A kiss of charity/love” (1Pe 5:14). A token of Christian fellowship in those days (compare Lu 7:45; Ac 20:37), as it is a common mode of salutation in many countries. The custom hence arose in the early Church of passing the kiss through the congregation at the holy Communion, “Holy Kiss” but for sure he might said Greet one another with a “Holistic Hospitality”. The men kissing the men, and the women the women, in the Lord. Robert Jamieson, et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Oak Harbor, WA : Scribner's Sons, 1997), 126.

<sup>15</sup> John Jr MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville : Word Pub., 1997), 126.

These greetings at the end of the epistles are personal greetings from the writer to brethren he knows, loves, is thinking about, and praying for.

Holy kiss in the Pauline epistles is cultural understanding of love rather than theological/God understanding of Love. In the context of Thessalonica, for instance, it was cultural to demonstrate their love for one another through kissing. It was common in Paul's culture as in many Eastern cultures today, to greet friends with a kiss on the cheek. The men greeted other men this way, and the women did the same with other women. Such a kiss communicated personal affection, not romantic love. Paul was encouraging an outward physical expression of Christian love in a form that was culturally acceptable in his day. It was, moreover, a seal of Christian affection, the feeling which members of one and the same spiritual household cherish for one another.<sup>16</sup>

Clowney pointed out that, Paul uses Holy kiss but Peter uses the kiss of love not in contrast of course but to emphasize the bond of fervent love that must unite brothers and sister in Christ (1 Peter 1:12; 4:8).<sup>17</sup> In the apostolic constitutions, a writing compiled in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, A.D., there is a reference to the custom where men sat on one side of the room where a meeting was held, and women on the other side of the room (as is frequently the case still in parts of Europe and Asia), and the men are bidding to salute the men, and the women salute the women, with the kiss of the Lord.<sup>18</sup> In the ancient world, a kiss could symbolize a number of sentiments, such as love between family members, honour and respect, or friendship (Mark 14.44–45; Luke 7.36–47; 15.20; Acts 20.37). Kissing on the mouth which expressed erotic love, was not the most common form of kissing to the Pauline scholars. Much more common was the kiss on the forehead, leg, hand or the cheek in greetings and good-byes between family members, friends, and respected people, or on official occasions such as games or when contracts were made. People also kissed when they were reconciled to each other.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Holiness of the Holy Kiss**

Paul gave this cultural way of life a problematic adjective, “Holy”, that calls for scholarly engagement. The adjective Holy which Paul attributed to the kiss is the issue since the kiss was the normal cultural way of expressing love, respect and loyalty. Hence, the

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<sup>16</sup>William Hendriksen & Simon J Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary : Exposition of I-II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids : Baker Book House, 2001), 142.

<sup>17</sup>Edmund P. Clowney, *the Message of 1 Peter* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 225.

<sup>18</sup>W.E. Vine, et al., *Vine complete Expository Dictionary Of Old and New Testament Words* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1961), 345.

<sup>19</sup>Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (England : W.B. Eerdmans Publishers, 2002), 271.

writer is imagining how holy this so call Holy kiss<sup>20</sup> is. What makes the kiss Holy matters a lot, the fact that the verb “kiss” is qualified by “holy”, an adjective, does not in any way makes the act “holy.” Paul was writing this with the cramped understanding that some within the Thessalonica will kiss in the unholy manner that will be abusive to the body of Christ that was why he used “Holy” as an adjectival qualification of the cultural verb “kiss”. The Holy kiss is Holy because it is an imaginative Holistic way of showing love without any wrong motives and disingenuousness from the heart of the person. It was holy because it was a symbol of spiritual oneness in Christ. The kiss is holy because it is the expression not of romantic but of Christian love (ἐνφιλήματι ἀγάπη 1 Pet. 5:14).<sup>21,22</sup> There is evidence to suggest that the kiss was a regular part of Christian worship, incorporated into the observance of the Lord’s Supper, at least as early as the second century and perhaps before. Since “brothers” (generically including “sisters” also) are particularly those to be so greeted, it appears that Paul used the modifier “holy” to indicate that the kiss expresses the mutual relationship of believers as those who belong to God.<sup>23</sup>

At that time, this was the accepted mode of greeting. In some countries, it is still customary for men to kiss men, and women to kiss women. In still other cultures men kiss the women and vice versa. But more often than not, this has led to abuses and has had to be abandoned. The kiss was not instituted by the Lord as a prescribed form of greeting or taught by the apostles as obligatory. The Bible wisely allows for other modes of greetings in cultures where kissing might lead to sexual laxness.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “From a grammatical point of view, Paul modifies his salutation imperative with the act of kissing and further modifies this act with the adjective ἅγιος. So what does Paul mean by “an holy kiss” in his epistles? ἅγιος and its cognates are frequently deployed by Paul which is also the primary word used in LXX to translate ψῆ and its cognates in the Hebrew Old Testament. Therefore, it is almost second nature to think of Paul along the lines of the Hebraic meaning of holiness. Semantically, ψῆ may refer to consecrate and set something apart, to be made clean by contact with sacred things, and to devote. Silva raises two helpful observations, i.e., continuity and a discontinuity, pertaining New Testament use of ἅγιος and its cognates. Firstly, he affirms that many NT passages retain the OT framework of holiness.” Hann, “To Kiss or not to kiss?,” 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 216.

<sup>22</sup> Hann asserted, “Paul clearly guides his listeners with this prepositional phrase, i.e., ἐνφιλήματι ἀγίῳ which is almost identical across these 4 verses except for 2 Cor 13:12a which has ἀγίῳ sandwiched between ἐν and φιλήματι. he suggest that this difference in word order has no significant exegetical value because the emphasis should be placed on the preposition ἐν highlighting that kissing is Paul’s preferred instrument of greeting. Hann, “To Kiss or Not to kiss?” 4.

<sup>23</sup> Jon A. Weatherly, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Joplin, Mo: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), 261.

<sup>24</sup> William MacD’onald, et al., *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997), 126.

Reminisce that Judas kissed Jesus when he wanted to betray him and Jesus said to him why betraying me with a kiss (Luke 22:47-48). The kiss of Judas here is sarcastic in nature, Judas' kiss was to tell Jesus I love you but Jesus knew Judas meant the opposite which means I "hate" you so much. Jesus was aware that kissing was a sign for love ones that was why he could say to Judas are you betraying the son of man with a kiss? To show you that Jesus knew Judas was not supposed to kiss him because kissing is not a sign of betrayal but love. Paul was possibly alluding to Judas' kiss of betrayal and also others that were practising and was passively passing a warning for them not to continue kissing/showing love like hypocrites but should make sure their kiss is Holy and possibly with sincerity. This kiss is described as holy, not necessarily to distinguish it from the erotic kiss but rather to identify it with the common life of those who were "holy ones" or "saints." As such, the adjective holy reinforces the bond between them that the kiss itself symbolizes and separates this symbol of their unity from the kisses they would exchange with others in their world.<sup>25</sup>

Barne asserted that because the kiss was non-erotic that was what makes it holy.<sup>26</sup> Grudem imagines that what makes the kiss Holy as Barne has asserted is because it is free from any form of romantic overtone s, is a close physical expression of friendship and fellowship in Christ. The writers seem to be sceptical to make the kiss an expression of friendship and fellowship in Christ because even in the gods', goddesses' and people's houses this Holy kisses were practised as their cultural way of greetings which plausibly involved in the gathering of the believers. Therefore, Collins made an outstanding statement; to him what made Paul used an adjective Holy is because the kiss is going to be an exchange between God's Holy ones (Christians).<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the kiss is not a Christian doctrine, love, friendship or fellowship but a cultural way of life. Paul was telling Christians who were in this cultural context and involved in this kiss that even non-Christians are practising but they should do it as Christians who have been separated as holy ones in Christ.

### **Apostolic Eccentricity from the Holy Kiss**

The "holy kiss", originally an expression of Christian love and fellowship, later became a liturgical act in the gatherings of the early Christian communities.<sup>28</sup> In the Christian

<sup>25</sup> MacDonald, et al., *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Barne, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians; the New International Commentary on The New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans. No date), 617.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *Second Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2013), 266.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Penn, *Kissing Christians. Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 2.

communities, the most natural and plausible context for exchanging kisses was the believers' assembly for the collective lunchtime. Clement of Alexandria stated, Quoted by Alikin, his heart mourning about the so call holy kiss by Paul:

And if we are called to the Kingdom of God, let us walk worthy of the Kingdom, loving God and our neighbour. But love is not proved by a kiss, but by kind feelings. But there are those that do nothing but make the churches resound with a kiss, not having to love itself within. For this very thing, the shameless use of a kiss, which ought to be mystic, occasions foul suspicions and evil reports. The apostle calls the kiss holy. When the kingdom is worthily tested, we dispense the affection of the soul by a chaste and closed mouth, by which chiefly gentle manners are expressed. But there is another, unholy kiss, full of poison, counterfeiting sanctity. Do you know that spiders, merely by touching the mouth, afflict men with pain? And often kisses inject the poison of licentiousness. It is then very manifest to us, that a kiss is not loved.<sup>29</sup>

The mentality of the Christians has shifted from true love to kiss to Alexandria. Therefore, Alexandria was not against kissing but against the hypocrites who involve such without having the love which they are showing through kissing. The abuse of the so call Holy kiss led Tertullian, Quoted by Alinkin, to claim that a pagan husband would not tolerate his wife "to meet any of the brethren to exchange the kiss."<sup>30</sup> This is clear that in the period, not every person was born again in the family, therefore, to Tertullian, husbands that were not Christians but their wives were, could stop their wives of kissing any Christian brother and plausibly also the wives could stop their husband from kissing any sister. However, the writer does not know how this works since kissing was part of their cultural practices. Plausibly, the culture only allows men to men and women to women in this kissing style.

Alinkin stated that in the third century Christians introduced some rules for the exchange of the "holy kiss", in order to remedy the abuse. The author of the Apostolic Tradition says the women should stand and pray by themselves in another place in the church, both faithful women and women catechumens. When they have prayed they shall not give the

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<sup>29</sup>Alikin ,*The Earliest History Of The Christian Gathering*, 235.

<sup>30</sup>Alikin ,*The Earliest History Of The Christian Gathering*, 236.



kiss of peace for their kiss is not yet holy. The faithful should greet one another, the men with each other and the women with each other. No man should greet a woman.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the so-call holy kiss started causing division in the church, for the sake of the Holy kiss men were separated from the women. Gender discrimination was then begun to develop progressively in the church because of the practice of the Holy kiss especially to the Christians that kissing was not greeting in their culture. Because in the following centuries, the church permitted the liturgical kiss to be exchanged only between persons of the same sex because of the abuses of decorum that had arisen.<sup>32</sup> Collins stated, quite early there was objectives voice against the practice of the suspicions of Non-Christian and the danger of erotic perversion.<sup>33</sup> However, the church began to abuse the holy kiss and by the thirteenth century, the Western church abandoned the custom. Christians in Western culture now generally express affection by shaking hands or embracing one another. An acceptable alternative in Western culture today might be an embrace, a pat on the back, or a handshake. Phillips paraphrased this verse for 20th-century English readers: "Give a handshake all around among the brotherhood."<sup>34</sup> The foundation of the problem and the cause of abuse in some of the developed churches because others viewed "Holy kiss" to be doctrinal activities even if the kiss is not their culture they involved themselves into it because Paul says so and not God. Paul's letters were always culturally sloping, if Paul were to write his letters to Africa he will never mention kiss or talk more of the Holy kiss. Therefore, the practice of Holy kiss was/is not Biblical but cultural, was Holy plausibly because of the Christians that existed at Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural practices of the kiss.

## **Conclusion**

Kiss is a Jewish and Greco-Roman way of greeting and any form of fellowship. Every Christian must know that this kiss is cultural, not a theological worldview. Nothing holy about the kiss but there is something holy about the Christian that involved in the kiss. Paul's letters have always been cultural letters to the writer; in fact, he has always been more of culture than theology if his theology exists. However, this so call Holy kiss is not relevant to those who are not in the Jewish and Greco-Roman culture. Notwithstanding, if

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<sup>31</sup> Alikin, *The Earliest History Of The Christian Gathering: ORIGIN*, 237.

<sup>32</sup> Collins, *Second Corinthians*, 267.

<sup>33</sup> Collins, *Second Corinthians*, 267.

<sup>34</sup> John F Walvoord, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983), 710.

Paul was to write to the African people, he would have nothing to do with the holy kiss rather, the writer imagines him to say to the African Christians greet one another with a holy handshake or to a Christian visitor with a holy warm water, holy conversation, holy handshake, holy hug etc. if we imagine this radical and problematic evangelist (Paul) to use an adjective “Holy”(ἅγιος).

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