

seal, signet ring

חֹתָם / חֲתָמֹת

1. Statistics

Torah: 8. Nebiim: 3 (+1). Ketubim: 6. Total: 17(+1).

2a. Literal Use

A seal (חֹתָם) was engraved (פָּתַח, literally ‘opened’) in (semi-) precious stone (cf. Exod. 28:9) or glass by a specialised jeweller (חָרֵשׁ). Since most people were unable to write, the seal served as a tool for authentication. As such it is one of the most frequently found relics of the cultures of the ancient Near East and it is simply impossible to review all that has been written about seals and sealing in antiquity here.

Documents on papyrus or leather were sealed with a bulla of clay identifying the sender (→ אֲנָרַת, סִפָּר; cf. 1 Kgs 21:8; Job 38:14). Unfortunately the papyrus mostly decayed, but the clay with the seal impression remained. This is what is called a *bulla* (plural *bullae*). Literally thousands of such *bullae* have been found in Israel. The Hebrew word חֹתָם could denote both the instrument with which the impression was made and the *bulla* which carried the impression. A seal could be applied to a scroll to prevent people from reading it prematurely (Isa. 8:16; 29:11; Dan. 12:4, 9, 24). In the Aramaic so-called Proto-Esther 4Q550:5 a scroll of king Darius is mentioned which was presumably sealed with seven seals of his ring. In the Book of Revelation too a scroll with seven seals is mentioned (Rev. 5:1, 5).

But not only documents were authenticated by means of a seal. Jars with oil or wine were sealed to identify their owner. Just as in Mesopotamia and Egypt (cf. *CAD* (K), 548; Arnaud 2007, 157:75-76; Schott 1957, 180-2), a seal could be used to prevent unauthorised entry of a storehouse (Deut. 32:34).

In order to guarantee authenticity, each seal had to have a unique decoration, even though the motifs were often copied from other seals. In many cases the jeweller also added the name and/or title of the owner (cf. Exod. 28:11; 39:6, 14, 30), or his pedigree, and finally enclosed the seal in a gold or silver bezel. One such ring appears to be partially preserved (Deutsch 2003, 72-4), but many seal impressions show a groove around the impression indicating

the presence of a ring. In Jer. 22:24 the חֹתָם stands *pars pro toto* for the signet ring. However, not all seals were stamp seals and even stamp seals were not always embedded in a ring.

Despite Exod. 20:4, many seals and bullae from ancient Israel were adorned with drawings of human beings, mythological animals (e.g. sphinxes), plants and trees, just as in the surrounding countries. Sometimes traditional Egyptian religious symbols are present, even on seals purportedly executed for Judaeen kings (see e.g. Schroer 1987; Keel & Uehlinger 1992; Deutsch 2003). It is unwarranted to play down this evidence as mere symbols of power, without any religious significance (so e.g. R. Deutsch, *BARe* 28/4 (2002), 51). But their presence certainly testifies to Phoenician-Egyptian superiority with regard to the manufacture of jewelry, as does the fact that both Hebrew designations of the seal, חֹתָם and → טַבְעָה, are old Egyptian loan words. Despite the mythological elements there is insufficient reason to assume the meaning ‘seal-amulet’ (Loretz 2004, 257-8).

Since there existed two types of seal, the cylinder seal and the stamp seal, it seemed logical to differentiate between these two words in biblical Hebrew. Moscati, for example, regarded חֹתָם as a general term for seal which might also include the cylinder seal, whereas טַבְעָה would have been the exclusive term for the stamp seal. However, there is no compelling reason to assume a typological difference between the two Hebrew words. Probably both denoted the signet-ring in general, in Palestine mostly the signet-ring or stamp seal which was the common type of seal there. Since טַבְעָה occurs in late texts only, it is possible that this word started to supersede חֹתָם as a general term for the signet-ring in later Biblical Hebrew. The circumstance that חֹתָם still denotes a signet-ring in the late text Hag. 2:23 can be explained by the intended allusion to Jer. 22:24. Exod. 28:11, 21, 36; 39:6, 14, 30 create the impression that by the time of their composition חֹתָם was reserved for the gemstone whereas טַבְעָה that occurs in the same chapters denoted any ring-shaped object.

In Gen. 38:18 Tamar asks for Judah’s חֹתָם and its cord (→ פְּתִיל) as well as his walking stick (→ מַטֵּה). Hallo 1983, 14, takes the ‘staff’ as the pin on which a cylinder seal was mounted, but

this is an unnecessary assumption. Both the seal and the staff were items of a highly personal nature and both were often inscribed with the name of the owner. In v. 25 the same seal is called חֲתָמֹת, evidently nothing but a variant form of the same word (contrast *HALAT*, 288: ‘Siegel’; 350: ‘Siegelring’). The cord suggested to Moscati that חֲתָמֹת/חֹתֶם must have been the cylinder seal here because it was apparently perforated and worn on a cord around the neck (Moscati 1949, 316-7). Indeed it was possible to make an imprint from a cylinder seal holding the ends of a cord tightly drawn through the hole bored lengthwise in the cylinder (Schott 1957, 177). However, Keel 1984, 144-7, followed by Schroer 1987, 408-9, challenges this view and defends the stamp seal because archaeology has shown stamp seals to be far more common in ancient Israel than cylinder seals (ratio 20:1). Stamp seals too could be worn attached to a cord through a perforation or to a knob (see below, section 8). *DCH*, 180, suggests that in Gen. 38:18 the expression בְּיָדָךְ not only relates to the staff, but also to the seal. In that case a cylinder seal worn on the wrist could be meant, but in view of the fact that the combination of מִטָּה and בְּיָד is very common in biblical Hebrew, this is a less likely solution.

Because the flat, scaraboid or tabloid seals were often made of (semi-)precious stones and needed a ring or pendant of silver or gold as a setting, these seals must have been relatively expensive. Consequently, only people in high positions could afford this kind of seal. However, as we have seen, conoid stamp seals and even thick scaraboid seals could be attached to a string too and this type of seal occurs so frequently in Palestine that it must have been within reach of less affluent people (Keel 1984, 117, with n. 440; Schroer 1987, 404-6). Even though in Egyptian the word *htm* originally seems to have designated the cylinder seal (so Schott 1957, 181), in contrast to *db‘t*, (= Hebr. → טַבְעֵת, the signet *ring*), this etymological argument is insufficient to prove that חֲתָמֹת in biblical Hebrew was still the cylinder seal. It seems more likely that חֲתָמֹת developed into a more or less general term for all types of seals (see above on Jer. 22:24).

The use of a חֲתָמֹת is described in 1 Kgs 21:8. Jezebel writes

letters in Ahab's name and seals them with his seal. This text illustrates the power a person acquired through using the seal of someone with higher authority. If Jezebel actually had her own seal, as seems very likely now (see Marsman 2003, 655-65; Korpel 2006; 2008), she intended to assume Ahab's authority. Comparable is Ahiqar 3:18, where Nadan writes a letter to the king of Egypt and seals it with the signet ring (*'izqâ*) of his uncle Ahiqar, pretending that Ahiqar himself had written the letter. Such acts may seem fraudulent to us and probably the writers of these passages intended to create this impression. In actual fact, however, dynastic seals could be used during many generations by different people (Auerbach 1991) and borrowing of seals might occur with the owner's permission (cf. Gen. 41:42; Est. 8:7-10; Singer 1995, 57-64). Nevertheless, it must be assumed that normally nobody could use another person's seal without explicit authorisation.

The passages in which the verb חָתַם Qal or passive Qal occurs show that the seal was used to lend authority not only to letters, but also to a contract (Jer. 32:10) or a covenant (Neh. 9:38; 10:1). Also a scroll (→ סֵפֶר) could be sealed (Isa. 8:16; 29:11; Dan. 12:4, 9, || סָתַם הַדְּבָרִים 'to shut up the words') as well as a vision (חֲזוֹן) in the form of a written text (Dan. 9:24). In these cases sealing was apparently used to prevent people from reading the contents before a predetermined time.

2b. Figurative Use

The seal is used as a prime example of artistic skill in the case of the breastplate of Aaron. When the stones have to be engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel the craftsmen have to do their work just like an experienced stone carver engraving a seal (פְּתוּחֵי הַחָם, Exod. 28:11 || 39:6, 14). It is interesting that the stones have to be enframed (סַבַּב Hof.) in gold filigree (מְשַׁבְּצוֹת), just as was done with seals in signet rings. According to Exod. 28:36 (|| 39:30) a plate of pure gold has to be made for the turban of the priest and has to be inscribed with the words 'Holy to YHWH', again like the engraving of a signet (פְּתוּחֵי הַחָם). Sir. 45:11-12 undoubtedly alludes to these Exodus texts.

A signet ring was a precious and very personal object that was

worn constantly, because it could be used for fraudulent transactions if it was lost or stolen (Hallo 1977 and 1983). This is the reason why seals were always kept in close contact to the skin. This occurs as a metaphor in Song 8:6 where one of the lovers asks the beloved, ‘put me (שִׁים Qal) like a seal upon your heart (עַל־לִבִּי), as a seal upon your arm (עַל־זְרֹעֲךָ)’. In the first line חֹתָם can only be a seal attached to a cord or chain worn directly on the skin. The second seal is positioned עַל־זְרֹעֲךָ ‘on the arm’ which might be interpreted as ‘on the wrist’ (see Hallo 1977, 26; Shubert 2001, 253, and the iconographical evidence in Keel 1984, 116-7; contrast Loretz 2004, 246, 257-60, who pleads for ‘Fingerring’). It seems fairly certain that the simile of the seal was introduced into the song to warn the other party of the fierce jealousy which would be the consequence of infidelity. The unbreakable bond of love may have been expressed by such a formula in which bride and groom promised each other absolute faithfulness and which may have been symbolised by a pair of similar seals or rings (cf. Lemaire 2007, 14-5). In the textual tradition the formula has been transmitted as pronounced by either bride or groom (cf. Korpel 2003, 97-103).

Because the seal was such a precious and intimate object it became also an obvious choice for a personal name, comparable to ‘Ruby’ in modern times (Hotham in 1 Chron. 7:32 and 1 Chron. 11:44).

A royal seal was a symbol of ultimate authority and therefore it is highly suggestive imagery when the prophet Haggai makes Zerubbabel the signet ring on the hand of God, ‘I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, and make (lit. ‘put’, שִׁים Qal, here perhaps preferable in view of Jer. 22:24) you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you’ (Hag. 2:23). This imagery clearly implies that God will make Zerubbabel instrumental in all his decisions with regard to the overthrowing of the kingdoms described in Hag. 2:22. The author of Sir. 49:11 is still awed by this high distinction when he exclaims, ‘How shall we extol Zerubbabel? He was like a signet ring (σφραγίς) on the right hand’, obviously referring back to Haggai’s prophecy. Actually this prophecy was a conscious reversal of the punishment incurred by Zerubba-

bel's grandfather Jehoiachin (Jeconiah, Coniah): 'As surely as I live, even if you . . . were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull (קַחְךָ Qal) you off.' (Jer. 22:24). This text shows that a signet ring was usually worn on the right hand. This is confirmed by an Egyptian picture of a wesir wearing a cylindrical seal ring at his right hand (Keel 1986, 246, Abb. 142a).

Ezek. 28:12-13 (with the emendation adopted by the versions and a host of scholars, e.g. Zimmerli ²1979, 672) seems to compare the King of Tyre to 'a perfect signet (חֹתָם הַתְּכִיֶּתֶת, ὁ ἀποσφραγισμα ὁμοιωσεως, 'a signet of likeness') full of wisdom and perfect in beauty' (for a different solution see Callender 2000). The rare word תְּכִיֶּתֶת is no doubt the same word as Akkadian *taknītu* / *taknû* 'care, solicitude' (*CAD* (T), 84-85), also used of carefully worked gems. So the literal meaning is 'a signet of care'. The next verse enumerates many precious stones (see on the problematic identification of the gems Block 1997, 106-10) which may have been thought to have been set in a pectoral or other ornament, but may also have been intended as material for the signet: 'every precious stone was your covering (תְּכַסֶּךָ), the sardius, topaz, and the diamond (?), the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the craftsmen work of your beauties (תְּכִיֶּתֶת) and your engravings (תְּכִיֶּתֶת) were on you; on the day you were created they were prepared'. The word תְּכִיֶּתֶת does not mean 'tambourine' here, but might be related to Ug. *tp* 'beauty' (cf. KTU 1.96:2), as a parallel of תְּכִיֶּתֶת in v. 12. Signets of kings often not only contained inscriptions, to which the word תְּכִיֶּתֶת refers (derived from the root תְּכַבֵּב 'to perforate, to inscribe with a name', cf. KTU 1.17:V.35), but also iconography (cf. Deutsch 2002). Probably the plural תְּכִיֶּתֶת may describe the manifold engraved pictures on the seal. Because signet rings as well as cylinder seals could be inscribed (*TWAT*, Bd. 3, 283; *LÄ*, Bd. 5, 295) and set in gold (Hallo 1983, 11-2; Schroer 1987, n. 277) both kinds of seals might be meant in this text. Hallo 1983, 14, favours the cylinder seal because it is 'durative', it ends only where the impressed surface ends. Thus, it would be a symbol of perfection. Up till now, however, this metaphorical interpretation is not attested anywhere else in the ancient Near East and cylin-

der seals were more common in Mesopotamia than in Syria and Palestine.

In Job 38:14 God's daily power over the dark is compared to the printing of a seal. There is no reason at all to assume the meaning 'press mold' here (contra Kelso, *CVOT*, 10). The earth molds itself like clay (חֲמֵר) to the seal, when the rays of dawn slowly reveal the contours of the earth: mountains, trees, people, animals; just as a flat surface of clay gets its wonderful shadowlines by the imprint of a seal. The rising sun with its beams creating light and shadow is depicted as a garment over the earth. Keel 1984, 114, with n. 426 (see also Schroer 1987, 409) pays attention to the flow of light in this simile: just as dawn does not illuminate any particular part of the earth at once but in a slow process, so the contours of the earth are revealed gradually. The beams of light 'roll' over the surface of the earth as a cylinder seal rolls over the clay. This text would therefore prove that the cylinder seal and its use were known in ancient Israel.

The image of sealing evoked the image of closing something tightly. In Job 41:17 (tr. 15), the back of the sea monster Leviathan is said to be made of rows of shields, shut (סָגַר Qal.pass.) by a tight (צָרָה) seal. The verb חָתַם Qal often has this meaning of 'to close'. In Job 9:7 YHWH speaks to the sun and it does not shine anymore; he seals off (חָתַם Qal) the light of the stars. Job 24:16 describes evildoers as people who shut themselves up in their dark houses. For comparable use of the verb, see Lev. 15:3; Song 4:12; Job 14:17 ('a sealed bag', צָרוּר). In Deut. 32:34 God's punishment is metaphorically stored up under seal (cf. Sanders 1996:226-8).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

In Arad two orders for a jar of oil end with the instruction חָתַם בְּחַתְמֶךָ 'and seal it with your seal' (Arad [6]13:3 and [6] 17:6-7, see also Arad [6] 4:2; [6] 7:9; [6] 10:4, where only the verb is used). The sealing in this context has the meaning of closing something safely, indicating the legal owner until it was delivered (cf. *HI*, 19). Because bullae on jar handles always represent an imprint of a circular, scaraboid or tabloid seal, the word חָתַם can only refer to the (seal on a) signet ring or stamp here, not to a cylinder seal.

4. Cognates

SEMITIC: Since the root is attested in both Northwest and South Semitic languages (Leslau, *CDG*, 267-8, 297-8, 785) a Semitic origin might be considered, but is unlikely. See below.

EGYPTIAN: Lambdin 1953, 151; Ellenbogen, *FWOT*, 74; Otzen 1982, 282; Hallo 1983, 7; *HALAT*, 288; *HAHAT*, 333; *CEDHL*, 212, and many others regard חֹתֶם as an Egyptian loanword (*htm*, cf. Hannig & Vomberg, *SP*, 135). This is a credible hypothesis because the Egyptian word occurs in texts dating from the Old Kingdom and still denotes the cylinder seal there (Schott 1957, 181), not the stamp seal that became predominant in Canaan. So the Egyptian word dates from a time long before the Semitic influence in Egypt became significant. Moreover, in Akkadian a totally different word (*kunukku*) was used.

AKKADIAN: Hallo 1983, 7, takes the Akkadian term *kunukku* (seal, sealed tablet), as the equivalent of Hebrew חֹתֶם since it is equated with the Eblaite *hu-tà-mu* in a lexical text from Ebla. This *kunukku* mostly designates a cylinder seal. It occurs in a Babylonian passage that renders as follows, ‘My son, if it be the wish of the prince that you are his, if you hang his closely guarded (*na-aš-ra-am-ma*) seal around (your neck), open his treasure house, enter within, for apart from you there is no one else (who may do this).’ (Lambert, *BWL*, 103:82; cf. *CAD* (K), 544a-b). This text illustrates the special privileges of a man wearing the seal of a someone else. The word *kunukku* is provided with the determinative for ‘stone’.

UGARITIC: In broken context *KTU* 2.25 has *htm . rb*. It is unclear whether this means ‘a big seal’ or is a PN followed by *rb* ‘officer’.

PHOENICIAN, PUNIC: *DNSI* vol. 1, 413-4: *htm*, ‘seal’, and as a verb ‘to seal’. A third meaning might be ‘signet officer (?)’, ‘sealer (?)’, or ‘maker of seals (?)’ (cf. Hebr. חֹתֶם).

OLD AND IMPERIAL ARAMAIC: *htm* occurs as a noun ‘seal’ and as a verb ‘to seal’ (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, vol. 1, 414; Porten & Lund, *ADE*, 141).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: See below, Judaic Sources.

JEWISH ARAMAIC: See for Qumran: Judaic Sources. The verb סִגְנָא occurs both in Palestinian and Babylonian Jewish Aramaic in the sense of ‘to seal, sign, validate’. Furthermore are found סִגְנָא ‘signatory, engraver’; סִגְנָא / סִגְנָא ‘seal, sealing, validation’; סִגְנָא ‘sealing, signature’ (Sokoloff, *DJPA*218; *DJBA*, 489-90).

SAMARITAN ARAMAIC: Both the verb and the noun do occur, the former also in the figurative sense of ‘to finish’. סִגְנָא is attested in the metaphorical sense of ‘completion, end’ (cf. Tal, *DSA*, 300-1).

SYRIAC: The root *h̄tm* and many derivatives are attested, not only in the meaning of ‘seal’, but also ‘finish, end’ and in the specialised meaning of ‘making the sign of the cross’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], *CSD*, 164; Brockelmann, *LS*, 264).

OLD ARABIC: The verb *h̄tm* ‘to seal’ occurs in Qatabian (Ricks, *LIQ*, 76).

CLASSICAL ARABIC: Attested as *h̄atm*, *h̄ātam*, possibly borrowed from Aramaic (so S. Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, Leiden 1886, 252; Klein, *CEDHL*, 212).

MODERN SOUTH ARABIC: Mehri, *h̄ōtem* ‘ring’ (Johnstone, *ML*, 451); Soqotri *h̄ātem*, ‘seal’ (Leslau, *LSoq*, 197).

ETHIOPIIC: *hatama* ‘to seal’, *māhtam*, *mahtamt* ‘stamp seal, sign’ and many other derivations (cf. Leslau, *CDG*, 267-8, 297-8).

5. Ancient Versions

Ⲫ and other Greek versions: Ⲫ Gen. 38:18, 25 δακτύλιός – *GELS-L*, 95: ‘ring, signet’; Exod. 28:11, 21, 36; 39:6, 14, 30; 1 Kgs 21:8; Hag. 2:23 σφραγίς – *GELS-L*, 465, ‘seal, signet’; Jer. 22:24; Ezek. 28:12 ἀποσφράγισμα – *GELS-L*, 57, ‘seal, signet, signet ring’; Job 38:14 ζῶον (Hebrew ‘Vorlage’ חַיָּוָה?) – *GELS-L*, 195, ‘living being, animal’. The expression סִגְנוֹת סִגְנוֹת is translated differently, Exod. 28:11 γλύμμα σφραγίδος – *GELS-L*, 91, 465: ‘engraved figure, inscription’; 28:21 γλυφαὶ σφραγίδων – *GELS-L*, 91, 465: ‘carved work, carving, engraving’; 28:36 ἐκτύπωμα σφραγίδος – *GELS-L*, 142: ‘figure in relief’; 39:6 (Ⲫ 36:13) ἐκκόλαμμα σφραγίδος – *GELS-L*, 137: ‘anything engraven’; 39:14 (Ⲫ 36:21) ἐγγεγραμμένα εἰς σφραγίδας – *GELS-L*, 125, ‘to write down, to inscribe’; 39:30

(Ⓞ 36:37) ἐκτετυπωμένα σφραγιῖδος –*GELS-L*, 142: ‘to model or work in relief’.

According to the Greek text of the Wisdom of Ben Sira the most precious kind of a signet was an amber seal (σφραγίς) on a precious stone (Sir. 32:5) and an emerald seal in a golden setting (Sir. 32:5). Sir. 38:27 describes the craftsmen that made the signet ring, he who engraves seals, always thinking of good likeness. A seal was used to lock things up, as it is said in Sir. 42:6, ‘With an evil wife, it is as well to use a seal (σφραγίς), and where there are many hands, lock things up’ (on the Hebrew text, see the section Judaic Sources). A few times the word σφραγίς is used figuratively: Sir. 17:22 compares almsgiving to a signet ring for YHWH, and parallels it with the apple of the eye. In Sir. 22:27 it is asked ‘Who will set a guard on my mouth, and an efficient seal (σφραγίς) on my lips, to keep me from falling, and my tongue from causing my ruin?’

Ⓞ: In Gen. 38:18 Ⓞ^O and the Palestinian Targums specify that a ‘signet ring’ (עֹקְרָא) is intended. The cord becomes a ‘cloak’ (שושיפא). Ⓞ^J opts for סיטומתא ‘seal’. In Exod. 28:11, 21; 39:14 both Ⓞ^O and Ⓞ^J stipulate that the lettering should be clearly readable, like ‘the engraving on a ring’. The same rendering is chosen in 1 Kgs 21:8; Jer. 22:24; Hag. 2:23; Song 8:6, probably to specify that we are dealing with a signet ring. The Ⓞ of Job 38:14; 41:7 maintains חֹתָם (Hebraism).

Ⓢ: The translation of Gen. 38:18 betrays the influence of a Targumic tradition: ‘*zqtk wšwšpk*, ‘your ring and your cloak’. Also in 1 Kgs 21:8 Ⓢ renders חֹתָם by ‘*zqta*, ‘ring’. In Exod. 28:11, 21; 28:36; 39:6, 14, 30; Jer. 22:24; Hag. 2:23; Song 8:6 the translator opted for ‘a seal’ (*htma*). In Job 38:14 the translator interpreted the consonants חֹתָם as ‘their bodies’ and in Job 41:15 he rendered freely ‘sealed’.

Ⓟ: Gen. 38:18, 25; 28:26; 1 Kgs 21:8; Jer. 22:24: *anulus*, ‘ring’; Exod. 28:11 *celatura gemmarii sculpes* ‘the graving of a jeweller’; Exod. 28:36 *sculpes opere celatoris* ‘with engraver’s work’; Exod. 39:6 Hag. 2:23 [24]; Job 38:14; Song 8:6: *signaculus*, ‘seal, signet’. In Exod. 39:14, 30 the word remains untranslated.

6. Judaic Sources

The literal meaning of חֹתָם seems to be attested in Sir. 42:6 על רעה חֹתָם חֹתָם הכֹּס (Do not be ashamed of) an evil (var. foolish) wife (using) the seal of a wise man’.

In Sir. 32 (35):5-6 חֹתָם is used as a simile/metaphor for something very precious: חֹתָם על שִׁיר אֵל על מִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן ‘Like a seal on a bag of gold is a song with a banquet with wine’, מְלֹאֲוֹת, פִּזּוּ וְחֹתָם בְּרִקְתָּ קוֹל מְזֻמּוֹר עַל נֹעֵם תִּירוֹשׁ ‘A setting of pure gold and a signet of carnelian is the sound of music with pleasant wine’.

The noun חֹתָם occurs metaphorically in Qumran 1QH^a XVI:11 כִּי חֹתָם מִכֶּם חֹתָם רִזּוּ ‘the seal of its mystery’ and 4Q300, fr. 1, ii:2 חֹתָם הַחֹזֶן ‘because the seal of the vision is sealed up from you’. In a different metaphorical way it is used in 4Q274:fr. 3, ii:3 וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ לֹ חֹתָם ‘and everything that has a pod’. In the Aramaic so-called Proto-Esther 4Q550:5 a scroll of king Darius is mentioned which was presumably ‘sealed with seven seals of his ring’ (חֶתְמֵיִן) (שְׁבַעֵה בְּעוֹקְתָהּ).

The circumstance that seals were often adorned with all kinds of animals and sometimes even pagan deities is assumed to have been embarrassing to Jews in the Talmudic period (Krauss, *TA*, Bd. 1, 200-1, 661). A kind of seal around the neck served to identify the owner of a slave (Krauss, *TA*, Bd. 2, 89) and sealings on jars were still common (Krauss, *TA*, Bd. 2, 279), as were seals to keep written documents secret and authenticate them (Krauss, *TA*, Bd. 3, 193-4).

7. Illustrations

DBI, 728: nice, reproducible drawing of signet ring. It appears to be a signet ring decorated with the Egyptian scarab motif, the ring is inscribed ‘belonging to Shafat’ (an Iron Age seal from the collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem). See the description with Mazar, 506-7. Keel 1986, 246, Abb. 142a, wesir with a signet ring at his hand. Idem, 24, Abb. 142, Woman with a cylinder seal at her wrist. Keel 1990, 87, Abb. 114: Seal cutter, perforating a cylinder seal. A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10.000-586 B.C.E.*, New York 1990, 506-7. Also nice, if you believe them to be authentic, several seals in Deutsch 2003, 13, 20

seals of Hezekiah with Egyptian religious symbols; 21, 70 human figures on a seal of a king and an officer; 73 the famous ring of 'Ala'. See also the illustrations accompanying Korpel 2006; 2008.

Good illustrations of the use of seals to certify the contents of containers and to prevent unauthorised opening of doors are provided by Otto 2010.

The technique to apply a seal to a papyrus is described by Brandl 2000.

8. Archaeological Remarks

Three main types of seal were used in the ancient Near East, the cylinder seal which made an impression in clay or wax by rolling, a stamp seal, usually in the form of a ring, or a conoid stamp seal. All cylinder seals discovered in Palestine were imported from Syria and Mesopotamia, or were local imitations (Schroer 1987, 405, n. 263). The cylinder seal was pierced lengthwise to pull a cord or wire through and was worn around the neck or a bracelet on the wrist (Shubert 2001, 253). However, also the conoid stamp seal could be worn on a cord. Sometimes even the seal of a signet ring was perforated and worn on a wire. An expensive form of this kind of seal was presented by Deutsch 2003, 72-74. In the reported case the flat seal was set in a silver pendant and fixed with a wire passing through a perforation. Other seals, however, also could be worn on a cord (Keel 1984, 114, with n. 426). Several conic seals found in Palestine/Israel appear to be perforated in the middle, like a button, in other cases the conic handle was pierced crosswise (Keel-Leu 1989, 1-39; Keel 1989, 39-54). According to Kaplony 1984, 291, the cylinder seal was at first predominant in ancient Egypt, and was replaced by the signet ring only later on (in Palestine in the 1st millennium BCE, cf. Schott 1957, 181; Schroer 1987, 405, n. 263).

Although hoards of bullae nowadays often enough are reason to express doubt about their authenticity, it may be assumed that in many cases fire or decay has destroyed archives of papyrus, so that only the bullae remained *in situ* (cf. Stager, *LBI*, 307).

Up till now 22 Hebrew seals and bullae have been discovered which must have belonged to women, and another 8 which might have belonged to women – a dwindling proportion of the thou-

sands of seals and bullae found in Palestine/Israel (Marsman 2003, 643-58). These seals throw light on the social status of Israelite women, indicating that in spite of their prevalent discrimination, they sometimes did have the legal right to sign documents. Of a woman named Shelomit, probably a high official of the governor of Judah, it is likely that she worked as an administrator because her seal (6th cent. BCE) was found in an official archive together with the seal of the province of Yehud (Marsman 2003, 653). A nice ring of a woman with a name seal in it is described by Deutsch 2003, 72-4. The seal was made of glass and set in a silver ring. The signet ring (unfortunately without official finding place) was acquired together with five identical bullae, confirming the use of the signet ring, presumably in antiquity. A big and exceptionally beautiful seal may have belonged to the Israelite queen Jezebel and another one to a hitherto unknown queen Eldalah (Korpel 2006).

Most seals were made of soft stone, enstatite (Magnesium Silicate) for example, which lent itself to easy engraving and was afterwards hardened in fire. More expensive were stones of agate, cornelian, opal and sapphire. Often the choice of stone was related to the imagery engraved in it (Keel 1990, 87-8; Lehmann 2002).

Noteworthy in the seals found in Palestine is the fact that the earliest and oldest ones only present primitive symbols (dots, stars, etc.), and much later pictures of animals and people, but from the 7th and 6th all such iconography on seals seems to have disappeared. From that period on, seals generally have two lines of lettering, often inscriptions with names and titles. It is assumed that this could be related to the reformation of King Hezekiah and his emphasis on the aniconic character of the worship of YHWH (Keel 1977, 44, with n. 74; Schroer 1987, 405), but it is difficult to prove this.

Some signet rings have been found in pairs and may have functioned as wedding rings, in two sizes, both with the same iconography on the seal. Only the larger signet ring of the man was inscribed with his name and pedigree (see above on Song 8:6).

At the beginning of the 20th century Gustav Dalman reports that signet rings were made of silver and gold, and both were worn at the left hand as well as in a small bag, closed with a cord, around the neck (Dalman 1937, 275).

9. Conclusion

Biblical as well as extra-biblical evidence indicate that in Israelite historical times חֲתָמָה / חֹתֶם denoted the seal in general. The Egyptian origin of the word warrants the hypothesis that at least originally it may also have described a cylinder seal, but there is no definite proof for this in the Bible. In any case the verb חָתַם must be regarded as denominative of the noun חֹתֶם. Especially the use of the word in Song 8:6 supposes a general word 'seal', because two different kinds of seal are designated with the same word חֹתֶם. As a personal object it could have been both the cylinder seal as well as the signet ring (Keel 1986, 245).

A seal was mostly worn by people in a position of authority, but had become common enough to be worn by ordinary people too. Because in the quasi-total absence of literacy the seal served as a means to identify its owner, it was jealously guarded. It must have been a token of ultimate trust when a king or officer allowed another person to borrow his seal.

The seal itself was made of stone that could easily be engraved. Many irrefutable examples show that despite the commandment to avoid graven images many people in ancient Israel and Judah did not see any harm in depicting human beings, mythological animals and Egyptian religious symbols on their seals. The engraved sealing stone was often set into a ring of silver or gold, but could also be worn attached to a simple cord threaded through a perforation or tied around a knob. The way in which seals were worn could vary. Three manners are attested in the biblical texts: attached to a cord around the neck (Gen. 38:18, 25), as a signet ring on the hand (Jer. 22:24), or on the wrist (Song 8:6). The seals were used to lend authority to a written text (1 Kgs 21:8) and to identify a person (Gen. 38:25), especially the owner. The use of the verb חָתַם reveals that seals were often used to secure closed objects like jars, bags or other containers, to guarantee the integrity of their contents. They were

also used to seal off storerooms or to protect documents from being read by people who did not have permission to do so. This metaphorical use of the word made it an ideal term to indicate that knowledge of certain mysteries had been ‘sealed off’.

The ancient versions seem to confirm that the translators were aware of the fact that normally the ancient Israelite seal had the shape of a ring. Circular or oval impressions of seals on bullae confirm that the seal itself was usually set in a ring.

Because most seals found in Palestine/Israel are stamp seals and only rarely cylinder seals it must be concluded that in general the stamp seal was most common in the ancient region of Israel and Judah. The archaeological evidence from Palestine, Egypt and Mesopotamia suggests that around the beginning of the first millenium the cylinder seal was replaced by the stamp seal. From the archaeological evidence it can be concluded that despite the gender discrimination in the ancient Orient, both men and women could use signet rings to authorise legal transactions (*pace* Katharine A. MacKay, ‘ring’ in: D.N. Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids 2000, 1130-1, who follows several older exegetes).

10. Bibliography

Arnaud 2007: D. Arnaud, *Corpus des textes de bibliothèque de Ras Shamra-Ougarit (1936-2000) en sumerien, babylonien et assyrien* (Aula Orientalis, Supplements, 23), Sabadell-Barcelona: AUSA, 2007, 157 – Auerbach 1991: E. Auerbach, ‘Heirloom Seals and Political Legitimacy in Late Bronze Age Syria’, *Akkadica* 74-75 (1991), 19-36 – Avigad 1988: N. Avigad, ‘Hebrew Seals and Sealings and Their Significance for Biblical Research’, in: J.A. Emerton, *Congress Volume Jerusalem 1986* (VT.S, 40), Leiden 1988, 7-16 – Avigad & Sass 1997: N. Avigad & B. Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* Jerusalem 1997 – Block 1997: D.L. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48* (NICOT), Grand Rapids 1997 – *BNP*, vol. 5, 730-6 – Brandl 2001 – B. Brandl, ‘Bullae with Figurative Decoration’, in: D.T. Ariel, *Excavations at the City of David, 1978-1985*, vol. 6 (Qedem, 41), Jerusalem 2000, 58-74 – Callender 2000: D.E. Callender Jr., ‘The Primal Human in Ezekiel and the Image of God’, in: M.S. Odell & J.T. Strong

(eds), *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives* (JBL Symposium Series, 9), Atlanta 2000, 175-193 – Colon 2001: D. Colon, 'How Seals Were Worn and Carried: The Archaeological and Iconographic Evidence', in: W.W. Hallo & I.J. Winter (eds), *Proceedings of the XLVe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, Part 2: Yale University Seals and Seal Impressions, Bethesda 2001, 15-30 – Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 5, 275, 277-8 – *BDB*, 368: 'seal, signet-ring' – *BRL*², 299-308 – Kelso, *CVOT*, 10 – *DBHE*, 236: 'sello, timbre, cuño; candado, cerrejo. Por metonimia, el anillo del sello' – *DBI*, 728, 766 – *DCH*, vol. 3, 180: 'seal, signet ring' – Deutsch 2002: R. Deutsch, 'Lasting Impressions: New Bullae Reveal Egyptian-Style Emblems on Judah's Royal Seals', *BARe* 28/4 (2002), 42-51, 60-1 – Deutsch 2003: R. Deutsch, *Biblical Period Hebrew Bullae: The Josef Chaim Kaufman Collection*, Tel Aviv 2003 – Deutsch 2004: R. Deutsch, 'Two Personal Hebrew Seals', in: M. Heltzer & M. Malul (eds), *Teshurot Le-Avishur: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Hebrew and Semitic Languages*, Tel Aviv 2004 – *DNP*, Bd. 11, 530-4 – *EM*, vol. 3, 67-86 – Ellenbogen, *FWOT*, 74 – Gorelick & Williams-Forte 1983: L. Gorelick & E. Williams-Forte (eds), *Ancient Seals and the Bible*, Malibu 1983 – Gwinnett & Gorelick 1983: A.J. Gwinnett & L. Gorelick, 'Seal Manufacture in the Lands of the Bible: Recent Findings', in: Gorelick & Williams-Forte (eds), *Ancient Seals and the Bible*, 44-54 – *HAHAT*, 333: 'Siegel, Siegelring' – *HALAT*, 288: 'Siegel'; 350: 'Siegelring' – Hallo 1977: W.W. Hallo, 'Seals Lost and Found', in: M. Gibson & R.D. Biggs (eds), *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East* (Biblioteca Mesopotamica, 6), Malibu 1977, 55-60 (with a correction in *RA* 75 (1981), 95) – Hallo 1983: W.W. Hallo, '“As the seal upon thine arm”: Glyptic Metaphors in the Biblical World", in: *Ancient Seals and the Bible* (Occasional Papers on the Near East, 2/1), Malibu 1983, 7-17 – *HAWAT*, 102: 'Siegel, ... metaph. unveräusserliches Kleinod' – *HCHAT*, Bd. 1, 386: 'Siegelring' – *IDB*, 254-59 – *ISBE*, 369-75 – *KBL*, 284: 'Siegel, seal' – Keel 1984: O. Keel, *Deine Blicken sind Tauben: Zur Metaphorik des Hohen Liedes* (SBS, 114/115), Stuttgart 1984 – Keel 1986: O. Keel, *Das Hohelied* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare), Zürich

1986 – Keel 1990: O. Keel, ‘Siegel und siegeln in der Bibel’, in: O. Keel & C. Uehlinger (eds), *Altorientalische Miniaturkunst: Die ältesten visuellen Massenkommunikationsmittel*, Mainz am Rhein 1990 – Keel 1995: O. Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina//Israel: Einleitung* (OBO, Ser. Arch. 13), Freiburg 1995 – Keel 1997: O. Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel: Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit, Katalog Band I* (OBO, Ser. Arch. 15), Freiburg 1997 – Keel & Uehlinger 1992: O. Keel & C. Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen* (Quaestiones Disputatae, 134), Freiburg 1992 – Korpel 2003: M.C.A. Korpel, ‘Who is Who? The Structure of Canticles 8:1-7’, in: M.C.A. Korpel & J. Oesch (eds), *Unit Delimitation in Biblical Hebrew and Northwest Semitic Literature*, Assen 2003, 89-120 – Korpel 2006: M.C.A. Korpel, ‘Seals of Israelite Women in Authority’, *Journal for Semitics* 15/2 (2006), 349-71 – Korpel 2008 – M.C.A. Korpel, ‘Queen Jezebel’s Seal’, *UF* 38 (2006) [2008], 379-398 – *LÄ*, Bd. 5, 294-300 – Lambdin 1953: Th.O. Lambdin, ‘Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament’, *JAOS* 73 (1953) 145-155 – Lemaire 2007: A. Lemaire, ‘New Inscribed Hebrew Seals and Seal Impressions’, in: M. Lubetski (ed.), *New Seals and Inscriptions, Hebrew, Idumean, and Cuneiform*, Sheffield 2007, 9-22 – Lehmann 2002: R.G. Lehmann, in: W. Zwickel (ed.), *Edelsteine in der Bibel*, Mainz 2002 – Loretz 2004: O. Loretz, ‘Ägyptisierende, mesopotamisierende und ugaritisierende Interpretationen der Götter Môt und Eros in Canticum 8,6-7: “Die Liebe ist so stark wie Môt”’, *UF* 36 (2004), 235-82 – Stager, *LBI*, 307-8 – *LHA*, 229: ‘sigillum . . . anulus signatorius’ – Marsman 2003: H.J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (OTS, 49), Leiden 2003, 643-59 – *MHH*, 283: מכשיר ששימש לחתימה ונישא על יד ימין או על הצוואר – Millard 1999: A.R. Millard, ‘Owners and Users of Hebrew Seals’, *ErIs* 26 (1999), 9*-15* –] Moorey 1994: P.R.S. Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries: The Archaeological Evidence*, Winona Lake 1994, 74-5 (stones for seals), 103-6 (manufacturers) – Moscati 1949: S. Mo-

scati, 'I sigilli nell'Antico Testamento: Studio esegetico-filologico', *Bibl* 30 (1949), 314-338 – *NIDB*, vol. 5, 141-146 – *NIDOT*, vol. 2, 324-5, 'seal' – Otto 2010: A. Otto, 'Siegelpraxis. B. Archäologisch', *RLA*, Bd. 12, Lief. 5/6, 2010, 469-474 – Sanders 1996: P. Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (OTS, 37), Leiden 1996 – Schott 1957: S. Schott, 'Wörter für Rollsiegel und Ring', *WZKM* 54 (1957), 177-85 – Schroer 1987: S. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament*, Freiburg 1987, 404-13 – Shubert 2001: S.B. Shubert, 'Seals and Sealings', in: D.B. Redford (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 3, Oxford 2001, 252-7 – Singer 1995: I. Singer, 'Borrowing Seals at Emar', in: J.G. Westenholz (ed.), *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East*, Jerusalem 1995, 57-64 – *ThWAT*, Bd. 3, 282-7 – Loewenstamm & Blau, *TLB*, vol. 3, 103: 'Seal, signet ring worn on right hand or upon the neck . . . perhaps connected with thread. Served as sign of individual identification . . . Fig.: symbol of expensive and chosen thing' – Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 538: 'sigillum . . . Quoniam lapis signatorius plerumque annulo inclusus erat, חֶמֶת annulum signatorium significat, et propterea de re, quae in summo pretio habetur' – *TWAT*, Bd. 3, 282-288 (288: 'Siegel, Siegelring') – Weippert 2010 – M. Weippert, *HTAT*, 372-374 – Westenholz 1995: J. G. Westenholz, *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Symposium Held on September 2, 1993, Jerusalem, Israel*, Jerusalem 1995 – Zimmerli 1997: W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 25-48* (BK, 13/2), Neukirchen ²1979.

Last update: 18-11-2010

M.C.A. KORPEL

This article should be cited as:

Marjo Korpel, 'הַחֶמֶת / הַחֶמֶת – seal, signet ring', PDF downloaded from:

<http://www.otw-site.eu/KLY/kly.php>