ring, signet ring

1. Statistics

2a. Literal Use
In Gen. 41:42 Pharaoh takes his מְזוֹן from his own hand and puts it on Joseph’s hand. In the parallel line he clothes Joseph in ‘fine linen’ (בִּטְרָקָה) and puts a gold chain (רָם) around his neck. Apparently, this was an official ritual, a legal act belonging to an inauguration. It symbolised the transfer of power from a higher to a lower authority. A similar enactment ritual is described in 1 Macc. 6:15: the Syrian Philip is entrusted with the king’s diadem, robe and signet ring [םדְּשַׁלֹּם], and made a ‘king maker’. See also ANET, 295, where Assurbanipal appoints Necho as Egyptian viceroy by giving him a special garment, a golden chain and rings on his hands. With the king’s signet ring Joseph was able to sign in the name of the king. Another bestowal with a signet ring is described in Est. 3:10 where king Ahasuerus gives his ring to Haman, after the latter has requested permission to kill all Jews in the country. In Est. 3:12 a decree is written against the Jews and signed (מִלּות Nif.) by Haman with the king’s signet ring מְזוֹן. Such a privilege was granted conditionally, however. When Ahasuerus realised how wicked Haman’s plan was, he had the ring removed from Haman (חֶסֶף Hif.) and started to wear it himself again until he gave it to Mordecai (Est. 8:2). According to Est. 8:8, 10 Esther and Mordecai write a decree concerning the Jews and seal it with the king’s signet ring. A decree, sealed with the signet ring of the king, was irrevocable (לֹא מַעַל, Est. 8:8).

This background of the transfer of power by means of a ring lends special meaning to Luke 15:22: the father not merely clothes the prodigal son well after his return, but transfers his authority to the youngest instead of the oldest son.

Because the same transfer of power by means of a signet ring is attested for → מֶזוֹן, there cannot have existed a major difference between the two types of seals. The Egyptian word ḏwb’wt from which מְזוֹן seems to be derived (see below, section 4) can also denote a cylinder seal (Schott 1957, 180; Kaplony 1984, with nn.)
5, 6). Because most of the texts in which תֶּפֶן occurs are generally dated rather late (see on Isa. 3:21 e.g. Wildberger 1972, 136-7) and does not occur in epigraphical Hebrew from the time of the monarchy, it is possible that תֶּפֶן started to supersede תֹּבֶן as a general term for the signet ring in later Biblical Hebrew. The circumstance that חַסֶּה 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 חַסֶּה was reserved for the gemstone whereas תֶּפֶן that occurs in the same chapters denoted any ring-shaped object.

Just as in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Schott 1957; Hallo 1983, 9) rings were suitable as votive gifts to the deity. In Exod. 35:22 all people volunteer to bring ‘all their gold objects’ (כָּל־כַּלֵּל אִזְנֶה) as a tribute for the building and the service of the tabernacle. Among the jewelry were rings (תֶּפֶן). Here, in one colon, brooches, earrings, signet rings and armlets are listed. The conjunctive accents show that signet rings and armlets form a word pair (מָשְׁרָה חַסֶּה). After a siege the people thank God by offering him articles of gold (כָּל־כַּלֵּל), Num. 31:50). In this text in one colon armlets, bracelets and signet rings (מָשְׁרָה חַסֶּה וֹכָּל־כַּלֵּל) are mentioned. Apparently all three kinds of jewelry were worn on the arm and/or hand. Only in the next colon earrings and beads are listed.

Schroer doubts whether it is correct to designate this jewelry as votive gifts, because the rings would be melted to reuse them for the building of the tabernacle (Schroer 1987, 404, n. 260). However, Num. 31:54 creates the definite impression that at least some of the precious objects remained unmelted in the tabernacle, as a memorial. If also signet rings were among the precious articles, as seems natural to suppose, the author appears to assume that also ordinary people could own seals set in gold, silver or bronze (Exod. 35:4-5), but he may have thought of the gold and silver the Egyptians gave them according to Ex. 3:22; 11:2; 12:35-36.

The word תֶּפֶן occurs most frequently in the tabernacle texts as metal rings, circular fittings used as holders for poles or bars (Exod. 25:12, 14, 15, 26, 27; 25:27; 26:24, 29; 27:4, 7; 30:4; 36:29,
The context shows that fairly large rings were intended which were always attached to something, presumably by a circular base, so that their outer shape resembled that of a big signet ring. The word is used also in texts describing the garment of the chief priest. In Exod. 28:23-24 and Exod. 39:16, 17, 19, rings are made for the breastpiece of the ephod. Two cords of gold were threaded through the two rings (Exod. 28:24; 39:17). Two other rings were made of gold for the shoulder pieces of the ephod (Exod. 28:26, 27; Exod. 39:20). The rings of the breastpiece were to be tied to the rings of the ephod with blue cord, connecting it to the waistband (Exod. 28:28; 39:21). Since the breastpiece with all its precious stones and gold was a very heavy object, the rings must have been imagined as rather sturdy objects.

2b. Figurative Use

Not attested, unless one regards the rings on the ark, the breastpiece and the ephod as metaphors derived from the shape of a signet ring. Just as a personal name was derived from the precious object → קֶסֶן, so קֶסֶן inspired the PN קֶסֶן ‘Ringlets’, possibly because of the person’s curls.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

**Egyptian**: Lambdin 1953, 151; Schott 1957, 178-81; Ellenbogen, *FWOT*, 75; Boochs 1982, 107-124; Keel 1990, 87, all see קֵסֶן as a loan word from Egyptian ḫkn ‘signet ring, seal’ (cf. Hannig & Vomberg, *SP*, 574), which in turn is derived from Egyptian ḫkn ‘finger’ (*SP*, 172, 320). Since this word is already attested during the Old Kingdom, a borrowing in the reverse direction is highly unlikely. The Hebrew verb מַטָּב Qal ‘to sink into’, Pi./Hi. ‘immerse’, must therefore be seen as an early denominative of מַטָּב, just like the verb מַטָּב from → מַטָּב/וֹתֵב.

**Coptic**: Sahidic ṭebbe, ‘seal’ (Lambdin 1953, 151; Westendorf, *KH*, 221).

**Akkadian**: Some authors (e.g. Lambdin 1953, 151; Klein, *CEDHL*,
240) refer to Akkad. \( \text{timbu}'u, \text{timbu}(t)tu \) which would also occur in some inventories of precious items in the El Amarna letters. However, nowadays the word is transcribed as \( \text{tibbuttu} / \text{timbuttu} \), and is thought to mean ‘cricket’, even if it is made of some kind of gemstone (cf. Von Soden, \( AHw, 1354; UF \) 13 (1981), 162).

**Phoenician, Punic:** In the Phoenician KAI 51:9-10 the word \( \text{th} \text{t} \) is used in broken context: \( \text{wbt} \text{mm th} \text{t} \text{t} \) ‘and seal with the signet ring’. Comparable Hebrew texts from Arad show that it was the custom to seal jars of oil or wine with a seal so that the contents were guaranteed and the owner known (→ \( \text{th} \text{t} \text{m} \text{t} \text{t} \text{r} \)).

**Postbiblical Hebrew:** See below, Judaic sources.

**Samaritan Aramaic:** Tal, DSA, 302, mentions some etymological cognates, but no exact equivalent.

**Syriac:** Payne Smith (Margoliouth), CSD, 167: \( \text{th} \text{t} \) ‘a seal, a signet, the gem of a signet, the print of a seal, a sealing, being sealed, and a signature’.

**Classical Arabic:** \( \text{t} \text{ba/}i \) ‘signet ring’ (cf. Freytag, \( LAL, \) t. 3, 38).

**Ethiopic:** Cf. Geez with metathesis: ‘\( \text{at} \text{a} \text{b} \text{a} \text{a} \) ‘to seal, make the sign of the cross’ (Leslau, \( CDG, \) 75-6).

5. Ancient Versions

\( \varnothing \) and other Greek versions: If translated, it was rendered as \( \delta \)\( \varkappa \text{-} \tau \upsilon \lambda \upsilon \omega \zeta \) – GELS-L, 95: ‘ring, signet ring’.

\( \text{w}^T \): Renders invariably by ‘\( \text{sqh} \) ‘ring’ (Tal, DSA, 649).

\( \text{z} \): The rabbinic Targumim always translate \( \text{besho} \) by \( \text{sh} \text{b} \text{h} \) ‘ring’.

\( \text{s} \): The Peshitta does not make use of the obvious Syriac cognate \( \text{th} \text{t} \) (see above). It distinguishes between ‘\( \text{zq} \) ‘ring, signet-ring’ (Gen. 41:42; Exod. 35:22; Num. 31:50; CSD, 409) worn on a finger, \( \text{gzq} \text{t} \) ‘a ring to hold a bar or staff for carrying’ (Exod. 25:12, etc.; cf. CSD, 119) or to link the breast-piece of the chief priest to the ephod (Exod. 39:16, etc.), but for the latter also \( \text{qwrq} \text{s} \) ‘ring, clasp, buckle’ (CSD, 499) could be used (Exod. 28:23, 24, 27, etc.)
In the texts were a real (signet) ring is meant it is translated *anulus*, in the texts about the tabernacle it is rendered as *circulus*.

6. Judaic Sources

According to 11Q19* [11QTemple] XXXIV.6 young bulls are tied to apparently sturdy rings. In rabbinic Hebrew the word מטבש keeps the same meaning as in Biblical Hebrew, but could also metaphorically designate the anus (Levy, WTM, Bd. 2, 139).

In mSoṭ. 1:6 a woman is described as wearing ornaments of gold and chains of gold and nose rings and finger rings (*tabba’at*). In mKel. 11:8, the word is used in an enumeration, and explained as a ring ‘with a seal or without a seal’. mKel. 13:6 suggests that a signet ring could consist of a ring of metal and a seal of coral but also the other way round, a ring of coral and a signet of metal (in the latter case it is not susceptible to uncleanness). In mShab. 6:1, 3 it is declared that a woman may not go out bearing a ring, whether with or whithout a seal (*tabba’at še’ēn ‘alehā*).

7. Illustrations

Nice example of a woman’s signet ring: Deutsch 2003, 73, fig. 44f.

8. Archaeological Remarks

→ תומכ/אנה.

9. Conclusion

In contrast to the more general term → תומכ/אנה the word מטבש specifically refers to a ring, either the signet ring, or a more sturdy type which could hold carrying poles or restrain young bulls. Only the Peshiṭta tries to differentiate between these types. Even though it may be an old loan word from Egyptian, it is attested only in late Biblical Hebrew.

Several times מטבש is used to designate a king’s signet ring (Gen 41:42; Est. 3:12; 8:2, 8, 10), but also ordinary people, men and women, could wear a מטבש (Exod. 35:22; Num. 31:40) though the context gives no clue as to its use, both a simple ring to enhance one’s beauty (so possibly Isa. 3:21) as well as a signet ring might be meant. These rings were made of gold, silver or bronze (Exod. 34:5). The transfer of power in connection with
the investiture of a king or a high officer was often represented symbolically by handing over a signet ring.

10. Bibliography

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