

Seals in Ancient Mesopotamia and Seals of God in Revelation*

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Certain aspects of human culture in the ancient Near East from prehistoric and protohistoric times would still be recognized in the modern world even when they no longer would serve a useful purpose — for instance, Upper Paleolithic hand axes. Other specific aspects of the earliest evidence of human culture, on the other hand, we still actively employ — for instance certain geographical names such as those for the city of Aleppo, for the Euphrates or the Tigris Rivers. These names are among our earliest attested geographical designations in the area and appear to go back to prehistoric times, since they stem from a substratum language which long preceded the earliest attested historical languages. The same is also true for a very prominent aspect of late prehistoric and protohistoric material culture, namely the use of seals, both stamp seals

* This article comes partly out of research I conducted while spending a semester at the *Facoltà di Teologia di Lugano* in the Winter semester 1994-95. While the part on ancient Mesopotamian seals comes directly from my own research and excavations in Syria (from which I have derived the illustrative material used in the article, some of which is published here for the first time), my interest in connecting my previous research with the New Testament was stimulated by conversations with the Rector of the *Facoltà*, Fr. Georges Chantraine S.J., and with its Secretary General, Fr. Ernesto William Volonté. I came to spend part of my sabbatical year (1994-95) at the *Facoltà* to be near the bishop of Lugano and founder of the *Facoltà*, Msgr Eugenio Corecco in what, very sadly, turned out to be the last months of his life. While in Lugano I came to greatly admire the *Facoltà* and its students. This small contribution is dedicated to the *Compagnia di Santa Teresa*, whose help and encouragement during the period of its composition made a great deal of difference to me.

and cylinder seals. Writing, and therefore what we call civilization, developed for the first time in the ancient Near East somewhere between 3500 and 3000 B.C. Stamp seals precede the introduction of writing, while cylinder seals are contemporary with it. In this article, I will first look at some of the uses of seals in the ancient Near East before the advent of Christ, especially as connected with recent discoveries we have made in our own excavations in Syria, and then give some thoughts on seal imagery in the New Testament.

1. THE SYRO-MESOPOTAMIAN BACKGROUND

a. Earliest Development of Seals

The earliest seals were stamp seals from sites in Mesopotamia such as Arpachiya in northern Iraq dating to what is known as the Ubaid period, about 4000 B.C.¹ Cylinder seals were first employed around 3500 B.C. and developed at a point when writing was also in its infancy. Writing grew out of an economic need; its evolution is strictly linked with the temple and civil administrations of the independent city states which were prevalent in southern Mesopotamia in this period. The prehistory of writing was a long one, as we now know that its antecedents began around 8000 B.C. through the making and preservation of tokens which carried a numeric as well as a substantive meaning; these tokens came at a later stage to be kept inside clay balls.² Later the tokens were also impressed on the outside of these balls as a more practical method of knowing what was inside without having to break the balls; of course in case of a dispute the balls could be broken to verify the number and type of tokens. The balls were often sealed all over the outside with stamp and cylinder seals.³

The next stage came with the impression of the tokens on flat pieces of clay — the first tablets. From the very beginning of writing, around 3500 B.C., cylinder seals

¹ M. E. L. MALLOWAN and J. CRUIKSHANK ROSE, «Excavations at Tall Arpachiya, 1933», in *Iraq* 2 (1935), 1-178.

² We have about twenty five clay balls sealed with stamp and cylinder seals from excavations in Mesopotamia and Syria. These balls are often referred to as *bullae*, from the Latin term used in the Middle Ages to indicate seal impressions attached to important documents.

³ Evidence of this development came first from the stratigraphy of the city of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia. In Uruk V clay balls are sealed with both stamp and cylinder seals, giving us the earliest evidence for cylinder seals. By the next level, Uruk IVb, stamp seals had gone out of use and cylinder seals were prominent. This is the only stratified site where we have evidence of this transition from stamp to cylinder seals. The development of tokens and their importance for numeration and writing is discussed in detail in D. SCHMANDT-BESSERAT, *Before Writing*, 2 vols, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1992.

were rolled on tablets. Their functional connection with the development of writing is not clear to us as yet, but the following considerations are important for our topic. Writing developed out of a bureaucratic need to keep records — in the beginning «texts» appear to center around numbers of goods (e. g.: «4 sheep»). Cylinder seals may have developed in a parallel mode in order to specify the owner of the goods. In other words during the early stages, the «writing» system was not sufficiently developed to enable the scribe to express personal names (or names of cities or institutions such as the temple). Therefore a parallel system was developed which was strictly iconographic; this system did not «picture» the individual (or indeed refer to an individual in any specific manner) but rather stood for the individual (*i. e.* symbolized the individual). The iconographic motif then came to represent a certain individual in front of the bureaucracy and also became the self-identification of that person. The range of the motifs in this earliest period is intriguing in that they represent animals or people working, for example potters making large jars, or the activities of a bearded man interpreted as a king. The cylinder seal format is also interesting. The original stamp seal format was abandoned for the cylinder probably because the surface of the stamp seal was not sufficiently large to encompass the diversity needed to produce the number of different seal designs needed by individuals — even at this early stage.

Thus from the very beginning seals were employed in a shape and for purposes which then lasted thousands of years. That is, we have evidence even in this early period of seals used to seal doors, jars, boxes and baskets. From our own excavations at the site of Qraya, along the Euphrates River in eastern Syria, we discovered a number of both stamp seal and cylinder seal impressions⁴ (Fig. 1)⁵. To seal a container or a door, the seal was rolled on a lump of clay which had been placed over a portion of the cover of the container or, in the case of a door, over a peg and string used to tie the door closed. This system never envisioned that the clay lump would be strong enough in itself to be used as a lock or other physical device to prevent a person from breaking into the container or room. There was a door lock and a guard for this purpose.⁶

What is even more significant for our present argument is that, from the beginning, seals appear to have belonged to a specific person. That is to say, in most instances a seal did not belong to an administrative entity such as a temple or a bureau in the city administration, to a kinship group such as a tribe or a family, or to any other type of

⁴ G. BUCCELLATI, «Salt at the Dawn of History: The Case of the Bevelled Rim Bowls», in *Resurrecting the Past. A Joint Tribute to Adnan Bounni* (eds. P. Matthiae — M. Van Loon — H. Weiss), Publications de l'Institut historique-archéologique néerlandais de Stamboul 67, Leiden, Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1990, 17-40; K. SIMPSON, «Qraya Modular Reports, N° 1: The Early Soundings», in *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4/4 (1991).

⁵ See, pp. 84-88.

⁶ Just as 3000 years later they were used in the same way to seal Christ's tomb (*Mt 27: 66*); note that here too there was need for a guard. In *Rev 20: 3* a seal is used in this sense also.

group, but belonged instead to an individual person.⁷ The earliest seal designs only have visual representations of figures and no inscriptions, as in *Fig. 1*. From the beginning of the development of cylinder seals two factors are evident: the designs were complicated iconographically and no two seal designs were exactly alike. This is the case whether the seals or sealings are excavated from the southern heartland around the city of Uruk or at great distances from it in northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia. Around 2500 B.C., when the seals themselves begin to be inscribed, the inscriptions contain the name and in many cases the patronymics of the individual seal owner. An individual would ordinarily only have one seal which in many cases was buried with them.⁸

b. Seal Use in the Third Millennium

There is more evidence for seal usage in the third millennium B.C., in connection with administrative practices as known through excavated cylinder seals and sealings. From our own excavations in the ancient Hurrian religious center of Urkesh (modern Mozan), dating to the late third millennium, we have a large corpus of sealings resulting from these practices.⁹ On the southwestern edge of the High Mound, just inside what appears to be the city wall in this area, and possibly near a major gate, we are excavating

⁷ This is very clear from about 2300 B.C. onward. Before this period some seals may have been used as institutional seals. One case in point is a group called «city seals» because they have the names of cities inscribed on them. These seals were in existence only for a short period of time, around 2500 B.C.; this tradition was not continued. See R. J. MATTHEWS, *Cities, Seals and Writing: Archaic Impressions from Jemdet Nasr and Ur*, Materialien zu den Frühen Schriftzeugnissen des Vorderen Orients 2, Berlin, Gerb. Mann Verlag, 1993, and my forthcoming review, «Review of Matthews 1993», in *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 1996. In later times deities could have a seal; for instance the god Assur had a seal in the Old Assyrian period. Kings and queens could possess multiple seals: from our excavations in the ancient Hurrian city of Urkish (Mozan), we have uncovered evidence of seven seals belonging to the queen and five of the king. Research on the use of cylinder seals in an administrative context as evidenced by excavated seal impressions from the fourth and third millennium is very much in the forefront of scholarship in the field of Syro-Mesopotamian studies today.

⁸ For the case of a tomb from Assur with three seals see M. LARSEN, «Seal Use in the Old Assyrian Period», in M. Gibson-R. Biggs, *Seals and Sealing*, Biblioteca Mesopotamica 6, Malibu, Undena Publications, 1977, 89-105. In the Hurrian city of Urkesh the seal cutters went to great lengths to differentiate in small details the various seals of the queen which were used contemporaneously by the various representatives of the queen. In one case from Urkesh, baskets were sealed by the cook of the queen, see G. BUCCELLATI - M. KELLY-BUCCELLATI, *A King and Queen of Urkesh (Mozan): Evidence from the Royal Storehouse AK*, Bibliotheca Mesopotamica, Malibu, Undena Publications (forthcoming in 1996).

⁹ The ongoing excavations at Mozan are directed by G. Buccellati and myself; they are sponsored by IIMAS, The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies. Excavations at Mozan have been funded in part by The National Endowment for the Humanities (grant RO21543-87), The Ambassador International Foundation, The Kress Foundation, and various private donors. The Mozan seal impressions reproduced here were drawn by Cecily J. Hilsdale. See particularly G. BUCCELLATI - M. KELLY-BUCCELLATI, *Mozan I*, Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 20, Malibu, Undena Publications, 1987.

a royal storehouse dating to about 2300 B.C. (the Akkadian period). What we have excavated of this building thus far is characterized by a plan with two major wings, one being the mirror image of the other; such a symmetrical layout is typical for the buildings of this period farther to the south in Akkad itself. A unique feature of this plan is the existence of two small closets or vaults each with an antechamber preceding it. Thus far we have excavated only one of these vaults with its antechamber and a large room connected to it. On the mud floor of the vault, the antechamber and the larger room were about 600 seal impressions. From the reverse of these impressions we have the imprints of the objects these seals were sealing. Some of the impressions were used in conjunction with the sealing of doors (*Fig. 2*), possibly the vault itself. Many had been employed to seal jars (*Fig. 3*), others boxes or baskets (in which case the reeds of the baskets are clearly seen in the reverse of the impression). Two of these seals are inscribed with the name and title of the seal owner while in several others the names of a king and queen of Urkesh appear.¹⁰ The seals had been carved locally and used unique motifs. One seal design which has been found for the first time in the Mozan material is a scene with a small attendant touching the lap of a seated woman (*Fig. 6*). Such intimate human gestures are very rare in the ancient Near East; this one is evocative of a kind of personal connection but the nature of the connection is not clear.¹¹

One interesting aspect of the Mozan designs is that they use some of the same motifs in different ways; that is to say, specific motifs are recombined and reorganized so that some elements are the same but others have been added (*Figs. 4-7* show the scene with and without the table). This also occurs in the seal inscriptions. The knowledge of the proper seal design or designs which could be used to reseal was fundamental to the operation of the administrative system since only a seal owner (or the designated representative of the owner) was authorized to open the seals, and therefore reseal them. All of these details serve to emphasize the fact that seals had come to be seen more and more as an extension of the personal power of their owner: they properly stood for him or her, and authorization to use them implied delegation of this personal power.

¹⁰ Seven from this storehouse can be attributed to the queen and five to the king, named Tupkish. The importance of storehouses and their sealing can be seen in a second millennium Hittite myth which reflects an older Hurrian myth. In the song of Ullikummi, Ea asks the gods to open the primeval storehouses and to get from there a tool not used since creation, after which they will reseal the storehouses: «Open again the old, fatherly, grandfatherly storehouses. Let them bring forth the seal of the primeval fathers and with it reseal them». H. A. HOFFNER, *Hittite Myths* (ed. G. M. Beckman, transl. H. A. Hoffner), Society of Biblical Literature, Writings from the Ancient World 2, Atlanta (Georgia), Scholars Press, 1990.

¹¹ Just as they are rare in the Old Testament, however see *Gen 24:2* and *47:29*; on both occasions a solemn promise is connected with the gesture of putting a hand under the thigh. We have no parallels for the Mozan examples which date to around 2300 B.C.



Fig. 1 Seal impression from Qraya dating to the end of the fourth millennium B.C.

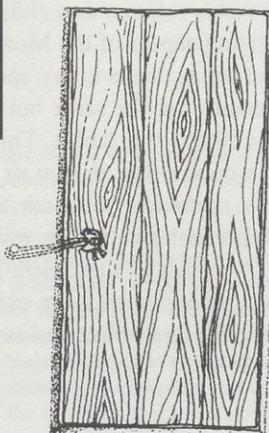
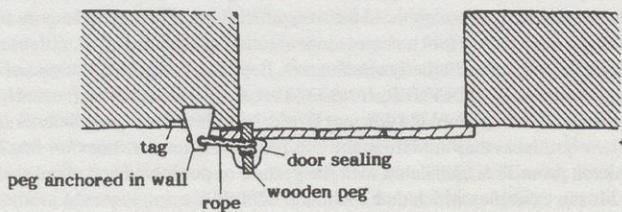


Fig. 2 Reconstruction of the door sealing mechanism from Mozan



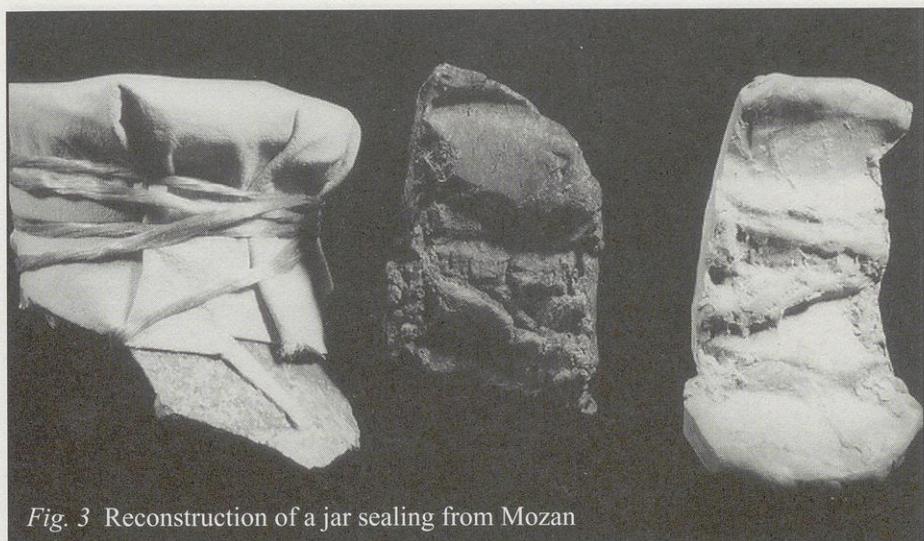


Fig. 3 Reconstruction of a jar sealing from Mozan



Fig. 4 Mozan seal impression showing part of the lyre and table scene
(Photo number VE8b3201)

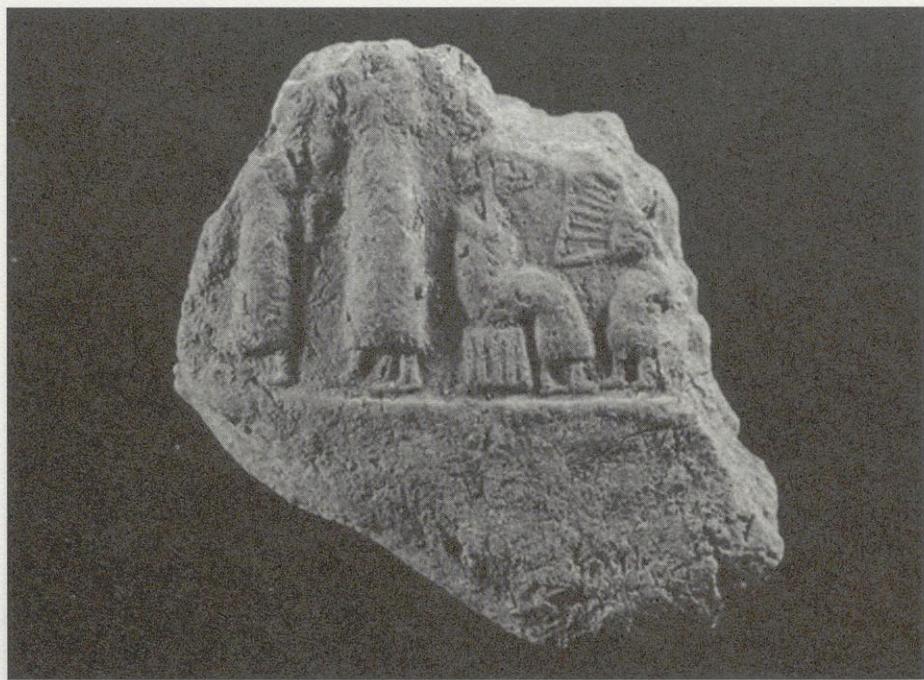


Fig. 5 Mozan seal impression showing part of the lyre and attendant scene
(Photo number VE7-2407)



Fig. 6 Composite drawing of the lyre and table scene from Mozan

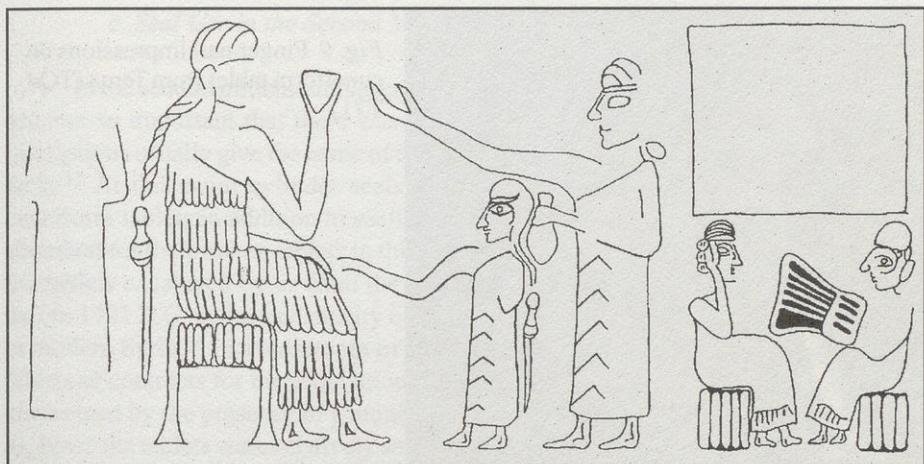


Fig. 7 Composite drawing of the lyre and attendant scene from Mozan



Fig. 8 Terqa contract with seal impressions of the witnesses (TQ4 T63)



Fig. 9 Finger nail impressions on cuneiform tablet from Terqa (TQ4 T71)



Fig. 10 Garment border impression on cuneiform tablet from Terqa (TQ4 T63)

c. Seal Use in the Second Millennium

In the second millennium inscriptions on cylinder seals are standard and at times became so important that there was little room for an iconographic motif. The seal inscriptions usually give the name of the seal owner, his or her patronymics and tutelary deity.¹² At this point cylinder seals were mainly employed by individuals to seal cuneiform tablets in addition to sealing doors and containers¹³; our evidence is more abundant for their use on tablets in this time period. By way of example we can look at the tablets excavated by us from the house of a man named Puzurum who lived just before 1721 B.C. in the ancient city of Terqa located along the middle Euphrates River in modern Syria.¹⁴ In a storeroom of this house we excavated a number of cuneiform tablets of contracts for the acquisition and sale of land and houses. The contracts were guaranteed by the presence of a number of witnesses who also sealed the tablets (*Fig. 8*). Since the tablets were relatively small and since a number of witnesses were needed to seal them (four or five), in effect only a portion of the seal design could be rolled onto the tablet. However the name of each of the witnesses sealing the contract was written next to the impression of their seal. There were times when a person had only a limited need for a cylinder seal. In this case they could have a seal carved out of clay instead of stone; we found several of these cylinder seals made from clay in the excavations at Terqa.

There were, however, two other possibilities of indicating individual affirmation or ownership if the individual did not have a seal. One was to make a series of finger nail impressions in the clay (*Fig. 9*). The other possibility was to impress the hem/border of the garment into the clay (*Fig. 10*). In *Fig. 10*, one of the witnesses, Hazibum, obviously did not have a seal available, so he impressed his garment border (*Akkadian sissiktu*). The scribe wrote next to the garment impression: «Garment border of Hazibum». In all cases however (seal, finger nail, or hem impression) the impression signifies the agreement of that individual to the legal ramifications of the contract, or, in the case of goods or doors, their authority over such. Certainly the impression of a

¹² For details see Henri LIMET, *Les légendes des sceaux cassites*, Brussels, Académie Royale de Belgique, 1971.

¹³ From the Mari archives come a number of cuneiform texts concerned with the opening and resealing of storeroom doors, see especially G. DOSSIN, *Correspondance féminine*, Archives Royales de Mari 10, Paris, Geuthner, 1978, 39, n° 12; J. BOTTÉRO, *Lettres de Mukannishum*, Archives Royales de Mari 13, Paris, Geuthner, 1964, 32-34, n°s 14-15.

¹⁴ The Terqa excavations, directed by Giorgio Buccellati and myself, were conducted between 1976 and 1987. On the seals from Terqa see M. Kelly-Buccellati, «Miniature Art from Terqa, 1700 B.C.: New Sources for Mid-Second Millennium Art in Mesopotamia», in G. BUCCELLATI - Ch. SPERONI, *The Shape of the Past: Studies in Honor of Franklin D. Murphy*, Los Angeles, Institute of Archaeology and Office of the Chancellor, University of California, 1981, 45-54; id., «Sealing Practices at Terqa», in *Insight Through Images: Studies in Honor of Edith Porada* (ed. M. Kelly-Buccellati), *Bibliotheca Mesopotamica* 21, 1986, 133-142, pl. 27.

cloth border or even less finger nail impressions did not have the individuating characteristics that the personalized iconography (with or without a seal inscription naming the seal owner) of a cylinder seal did have, but they were perceived as an important part of an individual and could therefore be used where necessary to symbolize the person. The cases of the use of the garment hem or finger nail impressions are few as most important individuals did own a cylinder seal.

2. SEAL IMAGERY APPLIED TO CHRIST AND TO THE SPIRIT

Against the backdrop of this 4000 year long tradition of seal use, we can now look at two aspects of the New Testament as they are connected with this cultural phenomenon. Throughout the history of Palestine, stamp seals were much more important than cylinder seals, which were for the most part imported.¹⁵ But stamp seals were utilized in the same manner as cylinder seals in Mesopotamia and had the same significance: that of representing personal identity and control. In the time of Christ, signet rings (stamp seals mounted to be worn as rings), in addition to conveying the personal identity of the owner, were a sign of wealth and power (thus probably the Greek *sphragis* mentioned in *1 Cor 9:2; 2 Tim 2:19; Rev 5:1; 6:1; 7:2; 8:1; 9:4*). In Revelation these seals are most important, and in fact central to the events which are depicted.¹⁶ Next to the use of seals, the significance of the hem of the garment as representing personal identity also plays an important role. We will begin with this aspect.

a. The Garment Border of Christ

The New Testament emphasizes the fact that people wanted to touch Christ. They wanted to touch him because, as *Lk 6:19* explains, «power came out of him that cured them all»¹⁷. This explains why there was always the problem of large crowds following him; they were not following him at a distance, but were all surging forward

¹⁵ H. LEU-KEEL, *Vorderasiatische Stempelsiegel: Die Sammlung des Biblischen Instituts der Universität Freiburg Schweiz*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 110, Freiburg, Universitätsverlag, 1991.

¹⁶ In the New Testament the word «seal» (*sphragis*) is used sixteen times, ten in Paul and six in Revelation. Paul uses the term in the sense discussed below under II, 2, p. 66, that is, in connection with the alliance. For a review of Mesopotamian iconographic and literary traditions which may have had some bearing on the imagination of the author of Revelation see J. H. CHARLESWORTH, «Folk Traditions in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature», in *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies Since the Uppsala Colloquium* (eds J. J. Collins and J. H. Charlesworth), *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigraphy*, Supplement Series 9, Sheffield, JSOT Pr., 1991, 91-113.

¹⁷ The citations are extracted from *The Jerusalem Bible*, New York: Doubleday, 1990.

seeking to touch him. He was in constant danger of being physically overwhelmed by the crowds and took strong measures to avoid this. This is the reason for the surprised reaction of his disciples to his question: «Who touched my clothes?» (*Mk 5* : 30-31, see also *Lk 8* : 44-45).

One of the people who succeeded in touching him was a hemorrhaging woman (*Lk 8* : 43-48, *Mk 5* : 25-34 and *Mt 9* : 20-22). In Matthew and Luke she is described specifically as touching the border of his cloak.¹⁸ This was the most important portion of an ancient garment and often was the only part with a design decorating it.¹⁹ Yahweh had ordered the «Jews to put tassels on the hems of their clothes and to work a violet thread into the tassel at the hem. You will have a tassel, and the sight of it will remind you of all Yahweh's orders and how you are to put them into practice» (*Num 15* : 38-39).

These tassels then were a reminder of the special relationship with Yahweh and his law.²⁰ More important than its design, the garment border was another sign which could be used to symbolize personal power and authority.²¹

It would be a mistake to suppose that these two references to the garment border in the texts concerning the hemorrhaging woman are there almost accidentally; the emphasis in the two texts on the fact that she touched this portion of the garment is a calculated articulation of the specific appeal of the garment border as the most significant portion of the robe. The power of this symbol was not a self-conscious allusion to that same contemporary practice attributed to the scribes and Pharisees of wearing particularly decorated garment borders, but rather to the charisma of Christ and specifically, in these texts, to his healing power. The Gospel writers project this importance and also presumably the perception of the woman. In the eyes of the woman the garment border of Christ was equated with the person and power of Christ and therefore was the most significant part to touch.

In order to demonstrate the validity of this argument another text can be quoted. The garment border is again referred to in *Mt 14* : 35-36: «When the local people recognized him they spread the news through the whole neighborhood and took all that

¹⁸ The Greek word used in *Mt 9* : 20 and *Lk 8* : 44 is *kraspedon*, the edge of his cloak. In *Mk 5* : 27 the less specific *himation* indicates only in a general way his cloak.

¹⁹ Christ criticizes the Pharisees for the size of their tassels (*Mt 23* : 5); here the plural of *kraspedon* is used. See also J. MILGROM, «Of Hems and Tassels: Rank, Authority and Holiness Were Expressed in Antiquity by Fringes on Garments», in *Biblical Archaeological Review* 9/3 (1983), 61-65.

²⁰ See also *Deut* 22 : 12.

²¹ For a study of garment borders in the second millennium see S. SCHROER, «Der Mann im Wulstsaummantel. Ein Motiv der Mittelbronze Zeit II B», in O. Keel-S. Schroer, *Studien zu Den Stempelsiegeln aus Palaestina / Israel*, I, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 67, Freiburg Schweiz, Universitätsverlag, 1985, 49-115.

were sick to him, begging him just to let them touch the fringe of his cloak. And all those who touched it were saved».²²

Again, the border (*kraspedon*) is referred to specifically as being the object most appropriate to touch in order to receive the saving grace of Christ. The symbol of the garment border in the time of Christ as viewed through these texts is analogous then to the expression of personal identity and power in the second millennium Terqa example just discussed.²³

The garment border in antiquity was always the most decorated portion, and in many cases the only decorated part of the garment. Because of this it was seen as appropriate to consider it as a symbol of personal authority and power.²⁴ The cultural possibility of impressing it into clay tablets was no longer alive in the time of Christ but here we have a case of the transformation of an ancestral model whereby the garment border still had a similar significance if not a similar physical use. We do not have here a mere case of a formal similarity, but a more substantive parallel, whereby a physical object intimately connected to an individual person had come to characterize that person and his power.

b. The Servants Sealed and the Concept of Alliance

Seals were used on objects, not persons, in the ancient Near East.²⁵ An extension of the concept of sealing and a restructuring of ancient and contemporary ideas and forms can be seen in the conceptualization of seals as visual expressions of the divine link.

The sealing of God's servants is used in *Rev 7* to highlight the bond between God and his people and therefore unites this portion of the text to the Old and New Testament concepts of the relationship to Yahweh and Christ.

²² See also *Mk 6:56*.

²³ There is of course no historical connection between the two and the use of cylinder seals even in Mesopotamia had ceased by this time. My point is only that a perceived importance of the garment hem continued to exist in the time of Christ. This is most striking in the second and third century funerary statues from Palmyra with their depiction of kaftans decorated with elaborate borders.

²⁴ In one ancient Near Eastern text touching the god's garment hem is a gesture of confidence and allegiance: «when Marduk entrusted the rule of Assyria to me I grasped the hem of his divine majesty», cited in *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, Vol. S, Chicago, The Oriental Institute – J. J. Augustin Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1984, 324, *s. v. sissiktu*.

²⁵ We are not referring here to tattooing or other methods of marking the human body nor to the branding of animals. For a discussion of this see J. MASSYNGBERDE FORD, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1975, 116-117; still of current interest is F. J. DÖLGER, *Sphragis*, Paderborn, Druck und Verlag von Ferdinand Schöningh, 1911. See also G. W. H. LAMPE, *The Seal of the Spirit*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1951, who reviews the evidence drawn from the classical world, but mainly discusses the image of the seal in connection with Baptism and Confirmation from a theological point of view.

In *Rev 7:2*, an angel rises in the east «carrying the seal of the living God». The angel calls to the angels of destruction and tells them to wait «until we have put the seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God».

That is, the seal of God will indicate who out of the totality are the «servants of our God». The seals on the foreheads of the faithful protect them because the seals signify that they are «owned» by God who has given no creature authority to touch them.²⁶ That this seal is a sign of the absolute protection by God is made clear in *Rev 9:4*: «they were forbidden to harm any fields or crops or trees and told to attack only those people who were without God's seal on their foreheads».²⁷

The sealing of these persons is a public expression of an alliance between God and the individual.²⁸ An analogous public expression of this alliance is constituted by the image of the blood of the lamb in *Ex 12:1-7*.

The Old Testament alliance between Yahweh and the people of Israel is conceived in a manner articulated in ancient Near Eastern terms. From the historical point of view, alliances were developed in Syria and Palestine in the second half of the second millennium as a political relationship between one of the larger, powerful states (Egypt or the Hittites) and minor local states. These alliances are actualized in the form of a treaty (Akkadian *rikistu*) written on clay tablets and sealed by the kings involved.²⁹ In one instance we have both a letter of the Hittite king Suppiluliuma to his vassal Niqmadu, king of Ugarit, referring to a future treaty, and also the treaty itself written later. The earlier letter states the terms for the granting of the future alliance in very specific language: «When in the future the great king [Suppiluliuma] will have gotten the better of this king [a minor king revolting against Hittite authority], the great king will give you an alliance treaty *sealed with his grand seal*».³⁰

The same concept may well be present in *Ex 31:18*: «When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, *written by the finger of God*».

In both of these situations, the alliances are confirmed personally by the greater power involved, by God on the one hand and the king on the other. This direct, personal involvement is signaled in one case by the description of the tablets as having been personally written by God, and in the other by the explicit promise that the treaty will

²⁶ See J. MASSYNGBERDE FORD, (cited n. 25), 94, for a discussion of the people owned by God.

²⁷ This is also the meaning of the use of seal in *2 Cor 1:22* discussed below.

²⁸ This connection is also made by Paul in *Eph 4:30*, but especially *Eph 1:13-14*, discussed below.

²⁹ See the classical treatment by G. E. MENDENHALL, «Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition», in *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954) 50-76; and more recently id. – G. A. HERION, «Covenant», in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I, New York, Doubleday, 1992, 1179-1202.

³⁰ J. NOUGAYROL, *Textes accadiens des Archives Sud*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1956, 35; Palais Royal d'Ugarit 4; G. BUCCELLATI, *Primer of Mesopotamian History*, Los Angeles, UCLA, 1991, 180.

be sealed with the personal seal of the king. The «finger of God» and the «seal of the king» are analogous then in this type of relationship. The overarching message in both instances is that the highest authority is personally guaranteeing the alliance. In an analogous sense, the sealing of the foreheads of the servants of God in Revelation is the reflection of a long vigorous cultural and religious tradition in Syria and Palestine. The sealed forehead is an emblematic expression of the personal involvement of God in dealing with his people.

St Paul represents a similar type of seal imagery when he connects the sealing of the servants with the Holy Spirit.

«It is God who gives us, with you, a sure place in Christ and has both anointed us and *marked us with his seal*, giving us as pledge the Spirit in our hearts» (2 Cor 1 : 21-22). «You have been *stamped with the seal* of the Holy Spirit of the Promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance» (Eph 1 : 14). «Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God who has *marked you with his seal*» (Eph 4 : 30).

These three examples have a particular pertinence to our discussion since in these three passages the Holy Spirit is encountered in two ways: 1) as the One who impresses his seal to seal the servants of God thereby symbolizing the alliance of God with the Church (Eph), and 2) as being himself symbolized by the seal and its use (2 Cor). In every meaningful sense the Holy Spirit is characterized here in St Paul with the traditional and fundamental particularities of a seal: it, in itself, symbolizes the individual (2 Cor) and can be used to demonstrate possession, ownership, or control over persons (Eph) or objects. The Trinitarian implications of these passages will be discussed below.

c. The Seven Seals

In Rev 5 the visionary sees the Father («the one who is sitting on the throne») who has in his hand a scroll which is described in 5 : 1: «a scroll that was written on back and front and was sealed with seven seals»; or in 5 : 5: «so he will open the scroll and its seven seals».

The seals must be «opened»³¹ before the scroll can be read. The breaking of the

³¹ The term used in connection with the seals is literally «to loosen» (*luō*) and «to open» (*anoigō*), not «to break». It has been noted in the literature on the Book of Revelation that the sequence of actions in the text refers to the scroll first and then to the seals: «open the scroll and loosen its seals» (Rev 5 : 2) or «he will open the scroll and its seven seals» (5 : 5). This does not seem like a logical order of events since scrolls were normally sealed in such a way that opening the scroll would entail first breaking the seal or seals. This may be relevant for our argument because it implies that the action of opening is important in itself, more so than the subsequent reading of the scroll. There is the possibility that the document could be written on a folded text, see J. MASSYNGBERDE FORD, (cited n. 25), 92-95; she also refers to a scroll found by Yadin in the Judean desert which had seven threads sealed with seven seals, see *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness* (ed. Y. Yadin), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962, 92.

seals and the reading of the scroll is so important that «I saw a powerful angel who called with a loud voice : "Who is worthy to open the scroll and loosen its seals?"» (5 : 2). The response is at first negative: «there was no one in heaven, or on the earth or under the earth who was able to open the scroll and read it» (5 : 3). That is, there was no created being, whether living or dead, who could open the seals.

To rephrase the question in ancient Near Eastern terms we could ask whose seals had been used to seal the scroll³² : it is not a question concerning the physical ability to break a lock, but about the authority to undo a sealing. In other words, opening a seal is not an isolated act, but a moment in an interactive and dynamic sequence of events.³³

«Then I saw, in the middle of the throne with its four living creatures and the circle of the elders, a Lamb standing» (*Rev 5 : 6*).³⁴ When the Lamb first appears, nothing happens immediately; it is not even clear what relation the Lamb has to the drama being enacted. But when «the Lamb came forward to take the scroll from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne, and when he took it» (5 : 7-8) only then does it become clear to the other figures present (the four living creatures and to the twenty four elders) that the Lamb has the power to open the seals. That is, it is clear to them that the Lamb is equal to «the One sitting on the throne», and has equal jurisdiction. Immediately on realizing this the four living creatures and the twenty four elders prostrate themselves in adoration before the Lamb. They have recognized him through the power of the seals. «And when he took it [the sealed scroll] the four living creatures prostrated themselves before him and with them the twenty four elders» (*Rev 5 : 7*).

At this point the scene becomes greatly enlarged. The saints are introduced («a golden bowl of incense which are the prayers of the saints»). Added to these, the heavenly hosts are congregating: «I heard the sound of an immense number of angels gathered round the throne and the living creatures and the elders; there were ten thousand times ten thousand of them and thousands upon thousands» (5 : 11).

Not only the saints and the heavenly hosts are suddenly present but also «all the

³² In New Testament times seals of witnesses were also used to seal as we have seen was the case in the second millennium.

³³ This authorization entailed the giving of the seal to the person being authorized so that they could reseal the scroll. In ancient Near Eastern contexts, functionaries with their own seals often had authority over a certain aspect of the bureaucracy and therefore could break seals and reseal the doors or containers in question on their own authority.

³⁴ Note that the throne is conceived here as a large platform similar to the one Solomon built to address Yahweh in *2 Chron 6 : 12*: «for Solomon had made a bronze platform, five cubits long, five cubits wide, and five cubits high, which he had placed in the middle of the court and on which he was standing». A depiction of this type of platform is rendered on the façade of the tomb of Darius II at Naqsh-i-Rustam. In the forefront of this field of iconographic research is the work of O. Keel, see O. KEEL – C. UEHLINGER, *Altorientalische Miniaturkunst. Die ältesten visuellen Massenkommunikationsmittel. Ein Blick in die Sammlungen des Biblischen Instituts der Universität Freiburg Schweiz, Mainz*, Verlag Philip von Zabern, 1990.

living things in creation — everything that lives in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and in the sea» (5 : 13).

Why is it then that not only the church but all the angels immediately enter this scene? Why, in striking contrast to the earlier atmosphere in the scene, a sense of joy is now pervasive?³⁵ In my opinion this may result from the recognition that present here with the Father and the Son is also the Spirit; that we have, in other words, a *Trinitarian drama being enacted*. In this drama, the seals are a primary factor: their role is to be the personal link between the Father and the sacrificed Lamb, His Son; as such, they are a symbolic representation of the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way we can read this scene as a metaphor of the Trinitarian relationship; a metaphor set in cultural terms which are well understood by the writer and his audience. Through this metaphor, the Trinitarian relationship can be viewed as equally shared personal power which is individual and distinct but which cannot be separated. In this scene, the Father and the Son are bound together through the Holy Spirit as symbolized by the power of the seals. The link through the seals is, by the very nature of a seal as known cultural phenomenon, a personal one and one of self identification.

The next portion of the drama centers around the opening of the seals and the eschatological events unleashed by the opening of each successive seal. The text directly links these events with the individual opening of each seal. In other words the events are not called forth specifically from the book itself (although they may well be linked with its contents), but rather they are called forth by the opening of the seals. It is the power of the seals and the power to open them which calls forth these events, not the reading of the book!³⁶ This can also be seen from the fact that the book is not mentioned again in this context.

If my interpretation is correct, the image of the seal as a way of symbolizing the Holy Spirit is one of the few representations of the Trinity we have in the New Testament. Specifically in this scene, the opening of the seals unleashes the power of the Spirit. One may consider the possibility that this refers not just to an eschatological moment, but to the very first outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, as the event made possible by the Lamb, slain for our redemption. The coming of the Spirit on the occasion of Pentecost was heralded by extraordinary cosmic events: «when suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of a violent wind which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and there appeared to them tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them» (*Acts 2 : 2-3*).

³⁵ This earlier atmosphere, that is the emptiness of heaven, is stressed in the Geez Commentary, *Tørgwame Qälämsis*; on this book, R. W. COWLEY, *The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of St John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

³⁶ It is also interesting to note that the first four seals have a very specific iconographic design; this connection will not be discussed here.

In this case the effect of the coming of the Spirit was a positive one, e. g. the gift of speaking languages previously unknown to them and the power to convince through their preaching. But the coming of the Spirit does not always convey such positive effects. In Jn 15 : 26 Christ says: «when the Paraclete comes... he will be my witness».

And in addition what will he do? «And when he comes he will show the world how wrong it was about sin (*hamartia*), and about who was in the right (*dikaiosunes*), and about judgment (*kriseos*)» (Jn 16 : 8). «About judgment, in that the prince of this world is already condemned» (Jn 16 : 11).

The emphasis here is on negative judgment. In the same way the breaking of the seals and the consequent unleashing the power of the Spirit has many destructive aspects, though at the same time the faithful are upheld (*Rev 7*). The articulation of the details of the destruction and the marking of the servants of God from destruction are contained in the text within the context of the opening of all seven seals. Thus the most dramatic moment of all comes at the end: «When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour» (*Rev 8 : 1*).

A coherent picture emerges of the coming of the Spirit for the judgment of the world and the marking of the servants with the seal of God. In both contexts, the Church is signaled out for divine protection.

From the texts both of Revelation and St Paul I have discussed, it seems reasonable to suggest that the seal of God is the Holy Spirit³⁷. It would be a mistake to suppose that this image is either casual or accidental in these texts. There are few Trinitarian images in the New Testament and this particular one is interwoven throughout these texts. The seal and the power of the seal with respect to the Father and the Son is a very precise image of the Holy Spirit, which was understood in the context of the particular cultural milieu of the earliest Church. The force of the specific attraction existing among the three Persons³⁸ through this image has an unequalled dimension, one for which the study of ancient Near Eastern practices can help to develop a finer sensibility.

³⁷ It goes without saying that the image, and expression, of the Seal of God should not be taken to refer exclusively to the Holy Spirit. In *Rev 7 : 2* the «seal of the living God» is being carried by an angel, and so it refers presumably to an actual seal. The multiple type of reference is common to all metaphors. For instance, the dove refers both to the Holy Spirit (*Mt 3 : 16*; *Mk 1 : 10*; *Lk 3 : 12*; *Jn 1 : 32*) and to a symbol of simplicity (*Mt 10 : 16*). On the other hand it must be stressed that the dove is explicitly identified with the Holy Spirit in the Baptism of Jesus (*Mt 3 : 16*) as is the fire in the event of Pentecost (*Acts 2 : 3*). Such an explicit identification is obviously not present in relationship to the image of the seal in Revelation.

³⁸ It is worth noting that the concept and term of «person» goes back to an image, that of the actor's mask (*prosópon, persona*) which is very similar, as to derivation from a secular context, to that of the seal proposed here. However, the imagery of the «mask» begins only in Patristic times (see J. S. GRABOWSKI, «Person: Substance and relation», in *Communio. International Catholic Review* 22 (1995) 139-143), whereas the imagery of the seal proposed here goes back to the New Testament itself.

CONCLUSION

In the modern context, the more apparent impersonal aspect of ancient cylinder seals as objects, which elicit our delight for their iconography and style, can overwhelm our sensitivity for them as the most intimate symbols of the individuality of the ancient person. This individuality should not be viewed only on a superficial level; from our scant ancient evidence it appears that few scenes were cut from the beginning for a specific individual. From the second millennium on, seals were produced for sale with some additions specific to that seal (whether the inscription or a specific symbol, perhaps relating to the personal god of the buyer) to individualize the design. But ever after the seal was acquired it retained its identification with that person and indeed stood for that person wherever the seal or its impression were present. As a personal expression of individuality it was the most powerful symbol the ancients had; its authority was pervasive and absolute. From the second millennium a less specific symbol, the garment border, also came to be viewed as a symbol of the individual person, though it remained less common in practice.

But the importance of the seal image in Revelation is not so much the survival of an ancient cultural feature, to be noted as a matter of erudite curiosity. It is rather the role that it serves in expressing through human language and human signs the great mystery to which Christian sensitivity was just then beginning to be exposed. The seal image evokes a spiritual connection which is profoundly dynamic and all encompassing. It is the image of our personal relationship to God (through the alliance) and also of the relationship of the persons of the Trinity to each other (through the interconnection of authority). The seal metaphor in Revelation is a manner of self-revelation through the use of the oldest image humanity knew to symbolize the individual³⁹.

The seal archetype embodying the relationship of the people of God in the Old and New Testaments is viewed in Revelation through the sacrificed Lamb and the sealing of the servants. St Paul also emphasizes these two aspects in very similar terms. The importance of the seal metaphor in Revelation goes even beyond the specifics discussed here. The image of the seal and its power to symbolize the connection between God and His People is seen in Revelation as both the Old Alliance and the New one. That is, this link between the two, which was conceived via an image as old as the earliest epoch of civilization, is both old and new. New because the seal metaphor is used here in connection with the establishment of the church and with some future eschatological event. The images then which were used in the past, even from the very

³⁹ It is presumably older than the image of the mask, and certainly more linked with the notion of personal identification: for the mask identifies a fictitious character originally at home in the «profane» setting of the theater, whereas the seal identifies to the fullest extent possible the human subject as such, originally at home in the legal setting.

distant past, will still evoke those same realities in the future. This aspect of «sameness» throughout all recorded history, the use for some 6000 years (starting from around 4000 B.C.) of seals to indicate an individual and the power of that individual and the projection of this image into an eschatological future is fundamental for our understanding of the text.

Seals are the oldest affirmation in existence from the realm of human material culture of the individual and personal power and authority. Seals as a reality and as a metaphor are one of the few defining images which link the culture of both the Old and New Testaments with the millennial relationships existing before and after. The fact that seals are not only known but still used in our own culture is part of that continuum. As human culture develops further and further away from that cultural expression found in the Old and New Testaments, it is going to be more difficult for us to understand particular aspects of the Biblical texts. Even today only 2000 years after Christ there are many details of both Testaments we only vaguely understand. I am not talking here about revelation or the essence of the Biblical message, but rather the cultural matrix within which it developed and was understood at the time. One help we have for understanding the cultural environment of the Bible is through archaeological research; through it we are finding evidence of this ancient past which does help us to understand the Biblical texts. It is even true to say that we know much more today about the long history of seals and their ancient importance as a direct expression of personal will than anyone in the ancient world.

Riassunto. Sigilli di vario tipo entrarono in uso in Mesopotamia dal 3500 a. C. L'articolo adduce esempi del quarto, terzo e secondo millennio a.C., frutto degli scavi condotti dall'Autrice, e discute il loro significato tuttora attuale. I sigilli servivano a garantire l'identità di una persona quando venivano usati su lettere o transazioni legali o commerciali. Con una migliore comprensione di ciò che i sigilli significavano nell'antichità si può arrivare a capire meglio perché nel libro dell'Apocalisse i sigilli rappresentano, secondo l'Autrice, lo Spirito Santo.

Résumé. On connaît l'usage de sceaux de types variés en Mésopotamie depuis 3500 av. J.-C. L'article en présente des spécimens datant du quatrième, troisième et second millénaire av. J.-C., extraits des fouilles menées par l'Auteur, et discute de leur signification toujours actuelle. Dans les lettres ou les transactions légales et commerciales, les sceaux servaient à garantir l'identité de la personne. Une meilleure compréhension de ce que les sceaux signifiaient dans l'Antiquité nous permet de mieux comprendre pourquoi, dans le livre de l'Apocalypse, les sceaux, selon l'Auteur, représentaient l'Esprit-Saint.

Summary. Stamp and cylinder seals were used in Mesopotamia beginning about 3500 B.C. From the Author's excavations, examples from the fourth, third and second millennia are illustrated, and use of seals and their significance in the contemporary culture discussed. Seals were a personal identification used on letters, legal and economic transactions. A proper understanding of what seals and their use meant in Antiquity lends a new appreciation of why in the Book of Revelation the seals, according to the Author, represent the Holy Spirit.

Inhaltsangabe. Verschiedene Arten von Siegeln sind in Mesopotamien in Gebrauch seit etwa 3500 v. Chr. Der Artikel bringt Beispiele aus dem vierten, dritten und zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr., Frucht der Ausgrabungen unter der Leitung der Verfasserin, und diskutiert die Bedeutung der Funde. Die Siegel dienten dazu, die Identität einer Person zu gewährleisten, wenn sie auf Briefen für juristische oder kommerzielle Transaktionen benutzt wurden. Mit einem besseren Verständnis der Siegel in der Antike erklärt sich leichter, wieso in der Offenbarung des Johannes die Siegel den Heiligen Geist vertreten.