Sealing Terminology in the Alexandrian Judaism and the Graeco Roman World

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Resumo:

A ideia de selamento teve uma variedade de conotações na Antiguidade. Nos escritos de Filo, por exemplo, σφραγίς -semento- era usado num sentido figurado e indicativo. No mundo greco-romano, existem pelo menos seis vocábulos gregos relacionados ao selamento e dois outros da mesma língua que conectam este conceito de marcação com o comportamento e as ações de uma pessoa. O propósito deste artigo é estabelecer a importância histórica que o selamento condensou para as audiências originais no judaísmo alexandrino e para a população greco-romana. Este objetivo é descrito através de um breve estudo de diferentes termos a fim de facilitar uma plataforma de compreensão sobre como os judeus alexandrinos e greco-romanos viam o significado do selamento ou marcação.

Palavras-chave: Terminologia do Selamento. Judaísmo Alexandrino. Mundo Greco-Romano.

Abstract:

The idea of sealing had a variety of connotations in antiquity. In Philo's writings, for instance, σφραγίς -sealing- was used in a figurative and indicative sense. In the Graeco Roman world there are at least six Greek vocables related to sealing and two other words from the same language that inclusive connect this "marking" concept with person's behavior and actions. The purpose of this paper is to establish the historical importance that sealing compressed for the original audiences in Alexandrian Judaism and for the Greco Roman population. This goal is described through a summary study of different terms in order to facilitate a platform of understanding in how Alexandrian Jews and Greco Romans viewed the sealing or marking meaning.

Keywords: Sealing Terminology. Alexandrian Judaism. Graeco Roman World.

In Alexandrian Judaism

The concept of sealing in Alexandrian Judaism was influenced by the metaphorical vocabulary of religious philosophy introduced by Philo (Mickelsen 1970:29). This Alexandrian thinker combined Judaism and Platonic philosophy that especially influenced the thought of Ibn-Gabriol and Maimonides who lived among the Arabs and influenced western Europe in the beginning of the twelfth

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century CE (González 1971:236). Philo, because of his Hebrew heritage, considered the Old Testament as superior to Greek philosophy (Froehlich 1984:7; Mickelsen 1970:29; E. Treiyer 1996:12). However, having a great admiration for Hellenistic thought, he tried to reconcile Greek philosophy (especially the thoughts of Plato) with reflection produced by the Hebrew world. Like Aristobulus, Philo used the allegorical method of interpretation to defend the Jewish faith against the pagan criticism by demonstrating that Moses had possessed all the talents of the Greeks. This line of thought is present in many of Philo's works (Martinez 1984:69-70). In his work titled *On the creation of the world,* Philo describes the way in which God created the world in Platonic terms (*Plato's Timaeus*).

Plato used the concept of sealing to characterize his doctrine of ideas (Kittel 1971:946). Philo, on the other hand, used the term σφραγίς as a signature at the end of his letters, especially to justify his allegorical approach, vis-à-vis the typological form of interpretation. Alexandria was the intellectual center of the allegoric method in antiquity (Martinez 1984:69-72). Clement of Alexandria and Origen used this technique to defend themselves against the intellectual attacks of pagan writers like Celsius and Porphyrius who mocked the Scriptures as being trivial, absurd, and immoral. For Philo the term σφραγίς meant "under lock and key" (Kittel 1971:947), and at the same time, the seal was a symbol for the power of God: the impression of a tiny seal can reproduce copies of very large things, and similarly a tiny representation with tiny letters reveals the ineffable beauties of the creation of the world written in the laws. As the seal makes innumerable copies while remaining unaltered, so is the power of God who gives form to the formless and shape to the indistinct without losing anything of their own eternal essence. The presence of sealing in Alexandrian Judaism is also seen in the Greek word σημεῖον -sign, advertence, omen. Philo uses this word to denote the mark of Cain in Genesis 4:15 (Kittel 1971:221-22), the processes which lead to insight or knowledge by way of perception (the stars in Gn 1:14). The word, however, is also used by Philo to denote laughing – γέλως – a – σημεῖον

τῆς χαρᾶ, mathematical calculations, mental operations in the sense of "indication," "argument," and "proof, " as well as the introduction of evidence (Kittel 1971:222). In relation to allegorizing, shmeion is used by Philo to indicate that fundamentally all Scripture is an inexhaustible reservoir of shmeia -signs. He also uses the word to refer to the divine or "wonders" (Kittel 1971:222), especially when he refers to God's signs in Egypt (e.g., the miracle of the Red Sea crossing is denoted as σημεῖον τερατωδέστατον – wondrous prodigies.

In the Graeco-Roman World

Rome's conquests brought to its capital not only Greek art and culture, but also many new gods and creeds, a situation that resulted in a variety of new cults. These new gods also brought with them their worshippers, marks, and seals.

> The official beliefs and worship of the Greco-Roman world were more a part of civic stability and loyalty than of inner religious devotion. There was the worship of the Emperor, whose *Tychè,* good luck, was the cement that held the whole empire together. There were the superb Olympian deities, whom Homer had made a picturesque though not always admirable reality for the whole Hellenic world; and also those strange rustic deities still venerated at Rome, whose priesthoods were held as a mark of honor by members of the noblest families in the city. The papyri have now revealed to us the underworld of religion, the popular ideas and forms of worship, of which we knew a certain amount, but never so much until these pathetic evidences reaches us from the hands of very ordinary men. (Neill 1964:152)

This can be confirmed by the enormous papyri amount from Oxyrhynchus (Bowman et al 2007). As an interesting Greco Roman data reference, a papyrus from Oxyhrynchus (Poxy 1149) reads about a question addressed to oracle of Zeus –Helios- Serapis concerning the purchase of a slave (Hunt:1911). From an unknown provenance, there is an early Christian text from the IV or V C.E describing a fever amulet (Kase: 1936). In the Graeco-Roman world sealing was used in various contexts such as the military, religion, slavery, and in the protection of the inviolability of documents. Sealing was used lavishly for different magic purposes: to block a spell, to represent a god, to replace or alter the power of a seal that blocked a spell, to fake enchantments, and to link a personal seal with the seals of gods (Ankarloo 1999:21, 76, 154, 190, 235, 299). Guthrie (1951:270-274) has also noted the prevalence of magic in the Graeco-Roman world linked to the inscriptions of bindings in magic formulas: the terms καταδέσμο and καταδέσει, (literally "bindings") refer to curses, which were scribbled on tablets (often, though not always, of lead). These curses were left in tombs or buried in the ground where the spirits of the underworld, to whom they were commonly addressed, would be able to find and act on them. Sealing in religious activities and witchcraft in the Graeco-Roman world provided the elements needed for ritual activities. The authentication of the animals chosen for rituals needed to be sealed before they were sacrificed. Roman religion was very strict on ritual details. In matters of witchcraft the Romans, as well as many other people, believed that seals protected them against spells and bewitching warnings. In a world considered full of demons and evil powers, sealing was a constant protection possibility.

Cultic motifs in Graeco-Roman Jewelry

There is jewelry evidence from the Graeco-Roman period with relation to magic and cultic protection. This evidence is depicted in sealing rings that show interest in cultic shelter (King 2003:99, 379). The ring pictured below (most probably an Roman Intaglio ring from the Roman Republic period, i e, first to second CE) depicts the god Attis, often seen as representing the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The three faces on the ring are looking in different directions, a depiction often associated with the earth mother, the goddess Cybele. In the background it is

possible to distinguish two handled urns with fluted tops. The ring most probably was one of the ritual objects used in the secret practices of the Phrygian cult.

Republic period depicting the god of vegetation called Attis (London).
The ring is set in a modern setting
(Stockhammer 2009, see www.georgianjewelry.com/items/show/10382.jpg)

Below is another interesting photo of a Roman ring from the Museum of Britain depicting the temple of Aphrodite at Palaepaphos, indicating a connection between magic and veneration in the cult of this goddess. The ring is dated between 150-250 CE. In this regard we also have bronze and silver coins issued between the emperors Augustus (27-14 BCE) and Phillip I (244-249 CE).

Gold Roman ring (dated between 150-250 CE) showing the temple of Aphrodite at the sanctuary of Palaepaphos, Cyprus
(www.bristishmuseum.org.ps337280-m.jpg)

Terms for sealing in the Graeco-Roman world In the Graeco-Roman world six terms can be identified that were used in connection with sealing practices: εἰκὼν, μώλωψ σημεῖον, σκοπός στίγμα and σφραγίς. Ξάραγμα, and χαρακτήρ are very akin to the concept of sealing and therefore are briefly studied in this paper. These eight terms are also present in the New Testament epistles where some of them are used in an interchangeable manner.

Εἰκὼν

The term is defined as "to be similar," "to be like" or "to appear." In the strict sense it is defined as "an artistic representation" (e.g., a painting, statue, or impression on a coin) and in Euripides it has the notion of "a reflection" or "apparition" (see Kittel 1964:388). In a metaphorical sense it means "mental image" (τῆς ψυχῆς); (Kittel 1964:388). The term is used by Philo to describe the images of the emperor that was set up, for example, in Alexandria from 38 CE. The term is also used by Josephus (Kittel 1964:388) in his description of the events surrounding the military standards in the temple that were resisted so passionately by the Jews that Pilate finally removed them from the temple.

Μώλωψ

According to Schneider (in Kittel 1967:829) there is an etymologic connection between μώλωψ and μολύνω –stain, contaminate. This connection is especially common in the Graeco-Roman world among physicians for "weal" or "welt." In the LXX (see Gn 4:23; Ex 21:25) and Judith 9:13 the term is used in a figurative sense describing the overthrowing of enemies (Schneider, in Kittel 1967:829). The concept of contamination or stain applied deliberately to Jesus is observed in the literal Greek version of the Bible by Aquila in Daniel 9:26. Here, the author of this version uses the word ἠλειμμένος and not χριστός which is the proper translation (Danker 1970:68).

Σημεῖον

This word does not occur in the earlier Greek epic. In Homer the word denotes optical impressions, which suggest or make certain insights possible (Kittel 1971:202). In *Homeric Hymns* II, 2.353, the lightning of Zeus seen at the beginning of the expedition against Troy is described as a faithful sign, ἐναίσιμα σήματα, and in *Homeric Hymns* II, 9.236 the word is used to describe a happy omen making known the favor of the god. The word is sometimes also used in connection with disaster. In all these instances of σῆμα (always plural), the fact that the sign brings knowledge is underlined by its use with the active φαίνω – to appear- to be seen. The word thus is clearly used in connection with revelation (Kittel 1971:202).

Σκοπός

In Graeco-Roman literature σκοπός is attested as early as in the works of Homerus, and denotes one who directs a watchful glance on something, for example an overseer (Kittel 1971:413-414).

Στίγμα

The vocable στίγμα is derived from στίξω, which means "to prick," "tattoo,"

or "mark" with an instrument. The mark was burned on the body with a hot iron. It was also customary to burn cattle with the owner's mark to make theft more difficult (in Kittel 1971:658). The term στίγμα was also used to brand malefactors. A man with such a brand was regarded as dishonored. Robbers of temples, slaves and aliens carried the στίγμα on their foreheads and hands. According to Suetonius (The Twelve Caesars IV, 27, 3), Caligula even had these shameful marks branded on the foreheads of honorable citizens condemned to forced labor in the construction of buildings and roads. Petronius links στίγμα to the marks carried by wrongdoers (Kittel 1971:658). Only in 315 CE Constantine forbade the custom of marking a person on his or her face (Kittel 1971:658).

Σφραγίς

In Graeco-Roman culture the term had important legal significance. When stamped on possessions the seal indicated ownership and protected possessions against theft. When used for the sealing of a document, the seal authenticated the message and conveyed the authority of the person that sealed the document. The seal normally was a kind of signature that could be recognized by anyone. A sealed document was only to be opened by the addressee. For those in power, such as kings or governors, the seal served as a symbol of authority (Kittel 1971:661).

In the Graeco-Roman world there is a combination of the cultic and the legal when the word is used for the marking of sacrifices declared suitable by the priest. The priest commissioned to seal sacrifices in the temple state was called ἱερομοσφραγίτῆς. The one that sent the sacrificing priest a written authentication of the cleanness of the beast was known as θεμοσχοφραγίτης, normally put a strip of papyrus around the horns of an animal, put sealing clay on it, and set the impress of his signet ring on it. For sealing a stamp a duty had to be paid later to the state. The seal was guarantee of inviolability In the cultic sphere. The chapel with a statue of the god was secured by a clay seal. When the chapel is cultically opened for worship of the god, the seal was broken during prayers explaining the action, and it is put on again latter. (Kittel 1971:943).

Ξάραγμα

This term is defined as an engraved, etched, branded or inscribed mark or sign. In Philo it denotes the bite of a snake (Kittel 1974:658). In the genitive, the term can mean money (Kittel 1974: 416).

Ξαράκτηρ

In the Graeco-Roman world this word is used as a technical term, that is, "to inscribe" an image or impression. The word is derived from the noun χάραξ that means "to cut to a point" or "to sharpen." The term was used for branding marks on camels around 147 CE (Kittel 1974: 418), or to describe the appearance of an embryo (Kittel 1974:419). Likewise, during the second century CE the word was

used to refer to a "feature" on an inscription (Kittel 1974:419). The term χαρακτήρ does not occur in the works of the pre-Socratics (Thucydides and Xenophon) and the Attic orators. It is found once in Aristophanes and twice in Plato. From very early the word also denoted the "distinctiveness" of a language or manner of speaking (Kittel 1974:418-419).

Branding and Sealing in the Roman Army

The Roman army often branded (στίγμα) convicted soldiers by marking them on the hand (Kittel 1971:659). Military recruits were also branded, usually with a tattooed abbreviation of the name of the reigning emperor (Wiedeman 1981:193-194). Within the Roman legions the cult of Mithra gained support among soldiers (Clauss 2000:100-131). The first literary evidence of this cult appears in the first century CE (*Carnutum in Penonia Superior*; see Clauss 2000:20-34). The soldiers that worshipped Mithra normally wore a seal ring or other emblems like an eagle standing or an arrow with a mark (Clauss 2000:100-115). Sometimes soldiers were initiated into the cult of Mithra by being sealed on their foreheads (Griffith 2009: http://eawc.evansville.edu/essays/Mithraism.htm).

Slavery and Sealing in the Graeco-Roman World

The sealing of slaves is well attested in the Graeco-Roman world.[2] The Romans often branded slaves (Kittel 1971:659). The many slaves throughout the Roman Empire required rigorous marking – documents that indicated the ownership of slaves were sealed, as well as slaves themselves (by being branded in their flesh).[3] The owners of slaves sometimes branded persistent runaway slaves on their foreheads, often with the letters FUG for fugitivus or fugitive (Kittel 1971:659; Wiedemann

[2] All ancient societies were based on slavery (Stuart 2007:37-77). None, however, exploited slaves more thoroughly, squandered them so wantonly or depended on them as completely as the Romans did. The economy of Rome was sustained by slavery. During the first century E, the Roman fleet was captained by the emperor's slaves. Slaves also constituted the professional class of doctors, teachers, musicians, and artists (Barker, Lane & Ramsey 1969:211). The more trained and skilled slaves were, the better the price that could be ob tained for them in the market. As an example we have a slave teacher being sold for 700 000 sesterces (Bouquet 1953:159). The sestertius or sesterce was an ancient Roman coin. During the Roman Republic it was a small silver coin, very rare, and issued only very occasionally. During the Roman Empire it was a large brass coin, with the value of one-quarter of a denarius.

[3] Even though the Roman Empire lasted five centuries, only two hundred years can be considered the golden age of Rome (Horn 1995:1003). This golden age included Paul's time. By then, Rome had a population of about 800 000 to 1 600 000 inhabitants. Many of those were slaves. Vila (et al 1985:186), commenting on the social class order and population in Corinth, argues for a population of 700 000 to 800,000 in Corinth during the time of Paul. Of these population numbers, approximately 400 000 were slaves. The estimate of slave numbers in the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries varies among authors. Scheidel, for example, estimates the number of slaves in the Roman Empire before the mid-second century plague between 2 and 3 million in Italy alone (Scheidel; Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics: 1-32). Corcoran (2006:4), in following Harris, Scheidel and Brunt, estimates that in Augustan Italy the total population was 7 million, including 3 million slaves.

1981:193-194). Bouquet (1953:140-141) describes the different kinds of punishment for slaves (branding) as follows:

> [F]or slaves who offended there were a number of barbarous punishments. They might be obliged to work in chains, they were frequently beaten with sticks or scourged with a whip; sometimes they were hung up by their hands with weights tied to their feet, or suspended so that their toes only just touched the ground, with the result that they common mode of punishment was to make them carry a forked structure of wood around the neck while working. This was rather like the Chinese board punishment, or the pillory, of which we hear as late as the time of Charles II. It was called a furca, and slaves were often flogged while bearing it. Crucifixion was specially an extreme punishment for slaves. A runway slave, and also a thief, might be branded on the forehead with indelible mark (στίγμα). Another punishment was to be sent to grind at the mill, which would be somewhat the equivalent of the old treadmill in convict prisons. (Bouquet 1953:140-41)

Besides the branding or marking of slaves, other forms of sealing included collars that were used to identify slaves (Glancy 2002:88). Sometimes slaves wore thick metal collars inscribed with mottos, marking the wearer as a slave. These metal collars are among the most startling artifacts surviving from the ancient world. Most slavery collars we have are post-Constantinian. Many of these collars bore Christian iconography written in κοινή, such as the A, Ω and P. Some have suggested that most known slave collars so far are probably those of Christian owners (Shawn 2001:51-78, 167-177; see also the compilation of Porter in http://homepage.usask.ca/~jrp638/CourseNotes/slavery.html)

Slaves were often forced to wear bronze slave collars or bronze slave tablets bearing the name and address of the slave's owner, as well as instructions on how to return the slaves if they ran away, much like the dog tags of today (Ehrman 2007:317, 344-347). One such a collar discovered around the neck of a skeleton in Rome reads "if captured, return me to Apronicanus, minister in the imperial palace, for I am a fugitive slave" (see Ehrman 2007:316-318).

Glancy (2006:8) describes these engraved collars as mute reminders of the brutality of ancient slavery. Nonetheless, these collars ironically may have originated as an effort to humanize somewhat one of the most inhumane aspects of the institution of slavery, that is, the practice of tattooing or branding runaway slaves on the face, a practice that Constantine forbade.

Sealing of letters in ancient Rome

It was a common practice in the Roman Empire to authenticate letters by sealing and stamp procedures. According to Richards (2004:174), letters were authentication in three possible ways:

- the use of a seal (signet) pressed in clay;
- a summary of the letter's content in the author's own handwriting at the end

of the letter; or

• a word of farewell in the author's own handwriting at the end of the letter.

The author normally did not sign a letter until the carrier was actually ready to depart for the very reason that some new news could arrive and necessitate changes in the letter (Richards 2004: 174-180). Forgeries of letters to damage someone's reputation or cause were common in ancient Rome.[4] In antiquity, the authenticity of a letter went hand in hand with its handwriting and the letter's seal (in the case of the upper class). An autographed signature was the customary means of avoiding the problem of forgeries, if the recipient knew the writer's handwriting (Richards 2004:146). Proof of this custom In a correspondence between a father and his son in the Alexandrian navy, the son wrote his father (in Latin) the following: "And if you are going to send anything, put an address on everything and describe the seal to me by letter, lest any exchange be made in route." Evidently it was not unheard of for a ship's crew to open packages, pilfer some contents, and then reseal the package and place another seal on it. Cicero and Quintus were to inherit a portion of the state of a man named Felix. The filed copy of the will did not include them. Carelessly, Felix sealed (and thereby authenticated) an incorrect copy. Although apparently his slave (secretary) was to blame, Felix was responsible, and thus the older will stood uncontested (Richards 2004:183). Since most papyrus letters consisted of a single page (leaf), the page was folded accordion-style in a strip about an inch wide (much as children make a paper fan from a sheet of paper). Opening a sealed letter compromised it and made its contents suspect.

When ancients traveled to new places, they sought someone of status in the new location to facilitate the visit. Ideally, they asked an acquaintance of status from their hometown to write a recommendation letter. Travelers carried such letters with them as a way to introduce themselves and to gain assistance in their new location.[5]

The forgery of letters and seals was so common in ancient Rome that many of the wealthy used trustworthy slaves to deliver letters on their behalf. The Epicurean Papirus Paetus, for example, had set two slaves aside solely for carrying his letters (Richards 2004:176-181). Many examples attest to the existence of imperial letter carriers called the Roman Imperial Postal System (cursus publicus). There is also literary evidence of happenstance letter carriers (family members, employees, friends, soldiers, businessmen and travelers). In most cases private letter- carriers were used by the wealthy elite (Richards 2004:176-181).[6]

[4] Richards (2004:174-180) suggests such a forgery most probably was done to Paul, as can be deducted from 2 Thessalonians 2:2.

[5] Richards (2004:183-187) notes the following example: A Roman citizen by the name of Cicero sent a sealed letter or recommendation to be carried by the recommended person, Caecina, to be given to Furfanius. Cicero also provided Caecina with a copy of the recommendation letter so he would know what Cicero had written.

[6] The people from Chloe (1 Cor 1:11) most probably were slaves sent to carry a letter from Corinth to Paul.

Summary

The usage of sealing in the Alexandrian Judaism and the Greco Roman world helps to understand the concept of sealing within the N.T. writings. Paul describes the kind of integrity by which Christ followers must to live by. It is not just an appearance or theoretical formulation of ideas. Sealing is related to the Christian character: a transforming Christ image process produced by the Spirit of God. The concept of authenticity and property in ancient Roman in sealed letters is transposed by the apostle Paul when he is writing to the Corinthians: "you are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and red by all men…you are….an epistle of Christ…written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God….on tablets of flesh, that is of the heart" (1 Cor 3:1-3). This is reinforced by the same apostle in 2 Timothy 2:19.

In terms of following the order for the Roman sacrificial rites certification of the offering, we don't know exactly if John, as he was also trying to reach his original or first audience, is describing such a figurative Roman sacrificial imagery order in describing the slain Lamb of Revelation 5, to "certify" that Christ was the one and only immolated Lamb because of His sinless "certified" life. The order in the N.T. about Christ and His "certified" life of purity is attested (Jn 8:46;1 Pt 1:19,20; 2:22; 1 Jn 3:5) sacrificial offering is attested in Revelation 1:5,8,17,18; 5:1-9). The Gk phrases from 1:8 and 17 that denotes "first and the last" can also be applied to Nahum 1:9 where the prophet emphasis that "affliction will not rise up a second" that is, the Plan of Redemption will not be repeated for second time, it is "first and last." There will be no other Golgotha Hill. Following the Roman certification hypothesis for Revelation 5, the fact is that through Christ vicarious sacrifice, Jesus has all the heavenly legal requirements and with his perfect life and death. He is the only sacrifice that is worthy, complete, and excellent, to save the world and bring hope to the οἰχουμένη of all ages.

The letters A and Ω engraved on the collars of the slaves remind us thequalitative ministry possession and its quantitative extent of the Sacrificial Lamb in Revelation. These two letters compressed the beginning and the end, that is to say, the past the present and the future. Also, the depiction that Jesus is the Lord and Ruler of history: He has anticipated writing the world's history using the whole alphabet from A to Ω, therefore He is able to seal and unseal the mysteries of prophecy and history and protect his people. Another Homiletic approach on this respect is the fact that as A and Ω also figuratively comprises the whole alphabet, so Jesus is not only able to rule and lead history in a macro cosmic way but also in micro - cosmic tense. He is able to write in us a new history of life when accept Him and follow His teachings.

Another aspect to discuss is the fact that A and Ω could also be a grotesque reality of Christian owners possessing Christian slaves. In Revelation, these two words also reflect the idea that no matter Christian or heathen slave owners possessed the soul of men to certain extent, Jesus says I'm the real servant that brings peace

and comfort if you take my joke upon you. The other Homiletic application on this regard is the fact that evil said to humanity: you don't have beginning and no end either. I'm your owner. I determine when you die and when you born, but the immolate Lamb changed that whole perspective. In Christ we have a beginning and the promise of happy ending. At the same time A and Ω figurate the fact there will be no other plan of salvation to redeem humanity: Jesus is the beginning and the end of it….

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