

ring, signet ring

טבעת

1. Statistics

Torah: 43. Nebiim: 1. Ketubim: 6. Total: 50.

2a. Literal Use

In Gen. 41:42 Pharaoh takes his טבעת from his own hand and puts it on Joseph's hand. In the parallel line he clothes Joseph in 'fine linen' (בגדי־שש) and puts a gold chain (רֶבֶר הַזָּהָב) 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 [δακτύλιος], 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 (חֹתֵם Nif.) by Haman with the king's signet ring טבעת. Such a privilege was granted conditionally, however. When Ahasuerus realised how wicked Haman's plan was, he had the ring removed from Haman (עבר 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 (אֵין לְהָשִׁיב, 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 → חֹתֵם, there cannot have existed a major difference between the two types of seals. The Egyptian word *db'wt* from which טבעת 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 טַבְעָה occurs are generally dated rather late (see on Isa. 3:21 e.g. Wildberger 1972, 136-7) and טַבְעָה does not occur in epigraphical Hebrew from the time of the monarchy, it is possible that טַבְעָה started to supersede חוֹתָם as a general term for the signet ring in later Biblical Hebrew. The circumstance that חוֹתָם 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 חוֹתָם was reserved for the gemstone whereas טַבְעָה 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-כְּלֵי זָהָב) as a tribute for the building and the service of the tabernacle. Among the jewelry were rings (טַבְעָה). 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 (וְטַבְעָה וְכוּמָז). After a siege the people thank God by offering him articles of gold (כָּל-יְזָהָב, Num. 31:50). In this text in one colon armlets, bracelets and signet rings (אֲצַעְעָה וְצַמִּיד טַבְעָה) 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 וְזָהָב וְכֶסֶף וְנְחֹשֶׁת (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 טַבְעָה 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,

34; 37:3, 5, 13, 14, 27; 38:5, 7). 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 → חֹתֶם, so טבעת inspired the PN טבעות '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 טבעת as a loan word from Egyptian *db^cwt* 'signet ring, seal' (cf. Hannig & Vomberg, *SP*, 574), which in turn is derived from Egyptian *db^c* '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 טבע Qal 'to sink into', Pi./Hi. 'immerse', must therefore be seen as an early denominative of טבעת, just like the verb חתם from → חֹתֶם/חֹתְמָה.

COPTIC: Sahidic *tebbe*, 'seal' (Lambdin 1953, 151; Westendorf, *KH*, 221).

AKKADIAN: Some authors (e.g. Lambdin 1953, 151; Klein, *CEDHL*,

240) refer to Akkad. *ṭimbu'u*, *ṭimbū(t)tu* which would also occur in some inventories of precious items in the El Amarna letters. However, nowadays the word is transcribed as *tibbuttu* / *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 *ṭb't* is used in broken context: *wh'tmm bṭb'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 (→ חֹתֶם/חֹתָמָה).

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: *ṭb'ʿ*: 'a seal, a signet, the gem of a signet, the print of a seal, a sealing, being sealed, and a signature'.

CLASSICAL ARABIC: *ṭāba/i'* 'signet ring' (cf. Freytag, *LAL*, t. 3, 38).

ETHIOPIC: Cf. Geez with metathesis: *'ataba* 'to seal, make the sign of the cross' (Leslau, *CDG*, 75-6).

5. Ancient Versions

Ⲅ and other Greek versions: If translated, it was rendered as *δακτύλιος* – *GELS-L*, 95: 'ring, signet ring'.

ⲱ^T: Renders invariably by *'sqh* 'ring' (Tal, *DSA*, 649).

Ⲯ: The rabbinic Targumim always translate טבעת by עִזְקָא 'ring'.

ⲥ: The Peshiṭta does not make use of the obvious Syriac cognate *ṭb'ʿ* (see above). It distinguishes between *'zqt* 'ring, signet-ring' (Gen. 41:42; Exod. 35:22; Num. 31:50; *CSD*, 409) worn on a finger, *zqzqt* '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 *qwrqs* 'ring, clasp, buckle' (*CSD*, 499) could be used (Exod. 28:23, 24, 27, etc.).

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

In mSot. 1:6 a woman is described as wearing ornaments of gold and chains of gold and nose rings and finger rings (*ṭabbaʿat*). 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 without a seal (*ṭabbaʿat šeʿēn ʿalehā*).

7. Illustrations

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

8. Archaeological Remarks

→ חֹתָם/חֹתְמָה.

9. Conclusion

In contrast to the more general term → חֹתָם/חֹתְמָה the word טַבְעָה 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 טַבְעָה 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 טַבְעָה (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

For bibliography on seals and sealing in general → הַתְּמָתָה / הוֹתָם.
 Furthermore: Alonso Schökel, *DBHE*, 290: ‘anillo, sortija, esp. el anillo del sello’ – *DCH*, vol. 3, 342: ‘ring’ – *EM*, vol. 3, 67-86 – *GB*, 271: ‘Siegelring ... bei P v.d. Ringen am ḥōšen, etc.’ – *HAHAT*, Bd. 2, 416: ‘Siegelring des Königs ... Frauenschmuck ... Halterung an Priesterkleidung u. an kultischen Geräten’ – *HALAT*, Bd. 2, 353: ‘Siegelring, Frauenschmuck, Ring’ – W.W. Hallo, ‘“As the seal upon thine arm”: Glyptic Metaphors in the Biblical World”, in: *Ancient Seals and the Bible* (Occasional Papers on the Near East, 2/1), Malibu 1983, 7-17 – *HAWAT*, 133: ‘Siegelring ... synekd. erweitert: Ring übhpt’ – *HCHAT*, Bd. 1, 459-60: ‘Siegelring ... Frauenschmuck ... Ring überh.’ – Klein, *CEDHL*, 240 – Korpel 2006: M.C.A. Korpel, ‘Seals of Jezebel and Other Israelite Women in Authority’, *Journal for Semitics* 15 (2006), 349-71 – *MHH*, 370: עִיגוּל עֲשׂוּי מַתְכָּה – *NIDOT*, vol. 2, 338: ‘ring, signet ring, ring for the poles of the ark’; see also *NIDOT*, vol. 2, 325 – S. Schott, ‘Wörter für Rollsiegel und Ring’, *WZKM* 54 (1957) 177-185 – Loewenstamm, Blau, *TLB*, vol. 3, 287: ‘ring made of metal ... signet-ring’ – Gesenius, Roediger, *TPC*, 542-3: ‘sigillum, annulus signatorius ... a viris et mulieribus in manu dextra gestatus ... annulus quivis’ – H. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, Bd. 1: Jesaja 1–12 (BK, 10/1), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1972.

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