

For Love Is Strong as Death¹

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In 1975 Yochanan Muffs discussed "joy and love as metaphorical expressions . . . in cuneiform, ancient Hebrew, and related literatures."² It thus seems appropriate to honor him with a comparative treatment of that most metaphorical of Biblical celebrations on the theme of love, Song 8:6a: "Make me as the seal upon thy heart, as the seal upon thine arm, for love is strong as death, passion hard as hell." I have already devoted two articles to this half verse, taking my cue from its first two metaphors.³ But it is the defiant challenge of the third one that has most intrigued modern interpreters, from Franz Rosenzweig to Marvin Pope, as I noted in my contribution to the volume in honor of the latter.⁴ The link between the first two metaphors and the third has proved a particular *crux interpretum*, and one for which I proposed a solution that has met with considerable criticism, but seems vindicated by new discoveries. In what follows I will address the criticisms before evaluating the new evidence.

In 1985 I wrote:

(W)hat does the simile mean? Must we eliminate "the seal upon thine arm" as a meaningless doublet, as a mere repetition of "the seal upon thy heart"? Should we understand the "seal upon thine arm" as a signet ring on the hand? Some commentators would favor one or the other of these interpretations.

But the comparative literary materials from Mesopotamia, as well as the archaeological data regarding ancient seals, allow us to salvage the text as it stands, without these strained interpretations. Just as the Assyrian letter uses the seal around the neck as a metaphor for intimacy, so too in the Song of Songs, the beloved wishes to be as intimate with her lover as the *two* seals worn by him. One of these was the seal around his neck which rests on his heart. The other one was carried on his wrist, not on his hand. The former can be pictured as a cylinder seal worn in the Mesopotamian manner—mounted on a pin by which it was hung from a necklace. The latter could be a cylinder seal, as reconstructed above from the story of Judah—mounted on a pin hanging from a bracelet. Or the seal on the arm could be

1. Presented to the 202nd meeting of the American Oriental Society, Boston, March 29–April 1, 1992.

2. In J. Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: for Morton Smith at Sixty* (Leiden, 1975) 3:1–36; cf. idem, "Love and Joy as Metaphors of Volition in Hebrew and Related Literatures, Part II: The Joy of Giving," *JANES* 11 (1979), 91–111. Both now reprinted in idem, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York/Jerusalem, 1992), Part III.

3. "'As the Seal upon Thine Arm': Glyptic Metaphors in the Biblical World," in L. Gorelick and E. Williams-Forte, eds., *Ancient Seals and the Bible*, Occasional Papers on the Near East 2/1 (1983), 7–17 and pl. xii; "'As the Seal upon Thy Heart: Glyptic Roles in the Biblical World," *Bible Review* 1/1 (1985), 20–27.

4. "The Birth of Kings," in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (Guilford, Connecticut, 1987), 45–52, esp. 45.

a stamp seal hung from a bracelet of a type known from excavations in Israel. . . .

But what is the connection with the second half of the verse? How does the image of the seal bridge the gap between love and death?

Here we may appeal to a further and largely neglected function of Mesopotamian glyptic, namely as funerary offering. . . . It may well be, then, that in the Song of Songs, the beloved seeks not only the physical intimacy of the seal on heart and wrist, but also the status symbol function assumed or retained by the seal in burials: Even as this function of a seal perpetuates the owner's standing in death, so the beloved declares that her lover's role will outlive him, his status as her lover will persevere even in the grave. It is in this sense that "love is strong as death."⁵

Some of my arguments had already been anticipated by Morris Jastrow in 1921,⁶ and many more by Elena Cassin in 1960,⁷ as I realized when her article was republished in 1987.⁸ And the Early Dynastic IIIA figure of a woman from Nippur, which I used to illustrate the wearing of a cylinder seal on a bracelet,⁹ has meantime even served as the cover of a volume on Mesopotamian medicine!¹⁰ More to the point, it is reproduced, together with my interpretation, in Othmar Keel's 1984 study of the metaphors of the Song of Songs,¹¹ and in his commentary on the Song of Songs published two years later.¹² In the former study, he even concedes the possibility that "the seal upon thy heart" may refer to a cylinder seal.¹³

Elsewhere, Keel has been less charitable to my interpretation. In his review of the earlier (1983) formulation of my views, he stressed the vast predominance of stamp-seals (including scarabs) over cylinder seals in excavations in Palestine/Israel, and their prominent role as amulets. Citing Pope, he regards the seal(s) of the simile as a "seal-amulet." The beloved's love, "like the amulet, strengthens the powers of life and keeps the powers of death away. It is thus a counterweight to death, as strong as death itself."¹⁴

To this it may be objected that the Bible is rich in allusions to amulets, metaphoric and otherwise.¹⁵ Thus the phylacteries to which Pope alludes are to be worn on the hand and between the eyes according to the familiar prescription of Deut. 6:8. In the metaphoric language of Proverbs, the commandments are to be worn at the throat (3:3; 6:21) or on the fingers (7:21) and written on the tablet of the heart (3:3; 7:3) or worn on the heart (6:21). Had the author of Song of Songs

5. "Seal upon Thy Heart," 25f.

6. *The Song of Songs*, 232 and n. 2.

7. "Le sceau: un fait de civilisation dans la Mésopotamie ancienne," *Annales E.S.C.* (1960), 742–51.

8. *Le Semblable et le Différent: symbolismes du pouvoir dans le Proche-Orient ancien* (Paris, 1987), 267–79.

9. "Seal upon Thine Arm," pl. xii (1), but correct the caption there to read "ca. 2500 B.C."; "Seal upon Thy Heart," 25.

10. Pablo Herrero, *La Thérapeutique Mésopotamienne* ed. Marcel Sigrist (Paris, 1984); cf. *ibid.*, [4].

11. Othmar Keel, *Deine Blicke sind Tauben: zur Metaphorik des Hohen Liedes*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 114/115 (1984), 114–19, esp. at nn. 428 and 437, and 187f., figs. 122f.

12. Othmar Keel, *Das Hohelied*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare AT 18 (Zurich, 1986), 246.

13. *Deine Blicke sind Tauben*, 114f., n. 426.

14. *JAOS* 106 (1986), 308f.

15. I am grateful to E. L. Greenstein for reminding me of some of the Biblical passages cited. Cf. now also Muffs, *Love and Joy* (above, n. 2), 53 and 59, n. 12.

wished to create an amulet-simile, he could have followed these examples. That the seal *could* serve as an amulet, at least in Mesopotamia, was explicitly indicated in both my treatments, citing B. Goff each time.¹⁶

In subsequent publications, Keel has maintained his position and further questioned mine. In 1990, for example, he wrote in reference to our verse: "The beloved functions like a seal-amulet, which keeps noxious influence at bay and promotes healing powers. That is why the lover is to make the beloved his own as an amulet."¹⁷ Apparently still unaware of my 1985 reformulation, and alluding more particularly to my interpretation of the seal, cord, and staff left by Judah by way of a pledge to Tamar (Gen. 38:18, 25) as a reflection of the cylinder seal mounted on a pin and worn on a necklace in the Mesopotamian style, he added in a footnote:

W. W. Hallo, like many others, proceeds quite thoughtlessly from the proposition that we must be dealing with a cylinder seal. On the basis of this erroneous presupposition he then assumes that the "staff" must refer to the "pin" on which, on occasion, one supposedly "skewered" cylinder seals in order to be better able to roll them. This explanation, arguing quite one-sidedly from the point of view of the Asiatic Near East, must be designated as deviant against the background of the archaeological, iconographic and epigraphic data, which document seal and staff as marks of distinction.¹⁸

And he concludes by drawing the following moral: "The interpretation of Israelite-Judaic culture demands a constant regard for *both* of the great neighboring cultures."¹⁹

Given these and similar strictures, it may be well to note that my interpretation has meantime moved out of the realm of conjecture and into that of fact, depending, of course, on how the new archaeological evidence is interpreted. Admittedly it relates so far to Mesopotamia only, and to its Sargonic period at that, so the question remains whether it may be used to illuminate a Biblical passage so distant from it in time and space. But experience teaches that such gaps tend to shrink or even close in the light of still further discoveries.²⁰

16. "Seal upon Thine Arm," 13 and n. 15; "Seal upon Thy Heart," 26 and n. 23.

17. "Die Geliebte wirkt wie ein Siegelamulett, das die schädlichen Einflüsse fernhält und die heilvollen Kräfte fordert. Deshalb soll der Geliebte sie sich als Amulett zu eigen machen"; Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Altorientalische Miniaturkunst* (Mainz, 1990), 91.

18. Ibid. "W. W. Hallo geht wie viele andere ganz unreflektiert davon aus, dass es sich um ein Rollsiegel gehandelt habe. Aufgrund dieser falschen Voraussetzung vermutet er dann, mit dem 'Stab' sei wohl die 'Nadel' gemeint, auf die man Rollsiegel gelegentlich 'aufgespiesst' hätte, um sie besser abrollen zu können. Diese Erklärung, die ganz einseitig von einem vorderasiatischen Gesichtspunkt aus argumentiert, muss vor dem Hintergrund des archäologischen, ikonographischen und epigraphischen Befundes, der Siegel und Stab als Würdezeichen dokumentiert, als abwegig bezeichnet werden."

19. "Die Interpretation der israelitisch-judäischen Kultur verlangt einen standigen Blick auf die *beiden* grossen Nachbarkulturen." Ibid. 92, n. 4.

20. The case I have long made, e.g., for relating the prayer of Hezekiah (Isa. 38:10-20) to the tradition of Sumerian letter-prayers has been considerably strengthened by the discovery of a bilingual version of one of them in an exemplar dating from the seventh century B.C.E.; for the latest edition see R. Borger, "Ein Brief Sin-iddinams von Larsa an den Sonnengott . . .," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen: I. Phil.-hist. Klasse* (1991), 39-81.

The new evidence comes from Nippur, the religious capital of Sumer and Akkad, where excavations have been conducted under American auspices since 1888, and specifically under the University of Chicago since 1949. The eighteenth post-war season, in 1988–89, was led by McGuire Gibson, and he reported on it in a preliminary fashion in the *Annual Report* of the same year.²¹ Among the most significant finds was one described, in his own words, as follows:

The second grave, found in the court, was of an adult whose skeleton had turned almost completely into powder. . . . At the neck of the skeleton, we found a gold band. Above the head was a copper pin. We discovered at the shoulder a magnificent green stone cylinder seal with a presentation scene, easily recognizable as Akkadian in style and date. It had probably been on a wooden-shafted pin that had held the cloak together. At the waist were an axe, a spear, two more pins, and another extraordinary cylinder seal. The second seal, of rock crystal or quartz, had a scene of heroes fighting animals.

The two seals had identical inscriptions, establishing the identity of the skeleton as LUGAL. DUR, the Scribe.²²

Gibson goes on to suggest that the larger of the two seals, showing a combat scene and worn “at the waist,” was the official seal of the owner, while the smaller one, showing a presentation scene and worn “at the shoulder,” was his personal seal. It is possible to cite recent studies to support the conclusion that different styles of seal design identified different ranks in society, at least in the period preceding the Sargonic period,²³ though whether we can distinguish a particular style for private seals remains to be proved. It is not till the Ur III period, succeeding the Sargonic period, that there are enough different seals and seal impressions attributable to any one given owner to tackle this question; the evidence being assembled in this connection suggests that for the most part seals changed over time, that is, each seal was in use for only a limited time, as indicated by seal impressions on dated tablets. Whether the relatively frequent change of seal by any one individual reflected the need to renew them when worn down from frequent use, or the desire to keep up with the latest developments in style, or in the titles and dignities of the owner, remains to be seen.²⁴

A further question was raised by Gibson, namely whether “personal seals were always worn on the upper body and official seals were worn at the waist”; but he concluded that “there are too few other examples of well-recorded, published graves of the Akkadian period” to answer this question.²⁵ The next season, however, already furnished an answer of sorts, and it is negative. The nineteenth

21. W. M. Summer, ed., *The Oriental Institute Annual Report: 1988–1989* (Chicago, 1990), 9–17.

22. *Ibid.*, 13f.

23. Cf. esp. W. L. Rathje, “New Tricks for Old Seals,” *BM* 6 (1977), 25–32, who showed that, in the Early Dynastic III period, contest scenes probably belonged to “individuals who held low-level positions with administrative duties in economic and military hierarchies” while higher ranking officials tended to have seals with banquet scenes (p. 29).

24. All these questions are being studied by Rudolf Mayr on the basis of the seal impressions of neo-Sumerian Umma. Note, however, that according to D. Collon, *ZA* 82 (1992), 158, “Akkadian seals were too large for easy rolling and there is, indeed, little evidence for their administrative use; they were probably far more indicators of prestige and items of jewellery.”

25. *The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1988–1989*, 14.

season, in 1989–90, turned up other Akkadian burials in the identical tomb, including one which Gibson interprets as that of a woman. In fact he regards her as very likely the wife of Lugal-DUR. She was buried with a single seal, of the “official” type, i.e., with a contest scene, but it was found at her shoulder. According to Gibson:

Ordinarily, the official-style cylinder seal would argue for its owner being a male, but the inscription on the stone had been erased in antiquity, probably causing a crack that mars the seal. I would suggest that this cylinder had been the official seal of the husband of this woman. At some point, the seal was going to be re-carved and it cracked. The woman then received it to wear as a piece of jewelry.²⁶

At the 1991 meeting of the American Oriental Society, Augusta McMahon reported on the entire tomb, suggesting that Lugal-DUR’s was the “final skeleton” buried in it.²⁷ I need not dwell further on the details of the burials and turn instead to the conclusions they permit us to draw, however tentatively.

At least in the instance of Lugal-DUR, the body was interred with two seals, of different design but identical inscription, one at the shoulder and one at the waist. The seal at the shoulder could have been mounted “on a wooden-shafted pin that had held the cloak together,” as Gibson surmises (above), or on a metal precursor of the fibula serving the same purpose.²⁸ It may even turn out to have been attached to a necklace by means of a loop around its middle, as on the contemporary stele of Naram-Sin.²⁹ The seal at the waist could similarly be pictured as having been worn on a bracelet at the wrist. Whether we can generalize from this one example to a funerary custom valid throughout the ancient Near East remains to be seen, but to the extent that further discoveries confirm it, we have here a visible prototype of the burial of two seals with their owner to which the Song of Songs passage seems so clearly to allude.

In conclusion, it may be worth noting that recent discussions of Mesopotamian glyptic have begun to pay more attention to some of the features addressed in my own studies. Dominique Collon, for instance, has devoted an entire chapter of her admirable work on cylinder seals to the question of “How the seals were worn.”³⁰ She notes specifically that “seals could either be worn on pins which were used to secure garments, or they could be part of a string of beads which hung from such pins. They are frequently found in graves.”³¹ And while she is here speaking of Early Dynastic times, there is no reason given to suggest fundamental changes in these patterns thereafter. Even more recently, Martha Haussperger has discussed one of the most popular glyptic themes of the “classical” period, the presentation

26. McGuire Gibson in *ibid.*, 25.

27. “An Early Akkadian Tomb at Nippur.” See American Oriental Society, *Abstracts of the 201st Meeting, Berkeley, March 3–6, 1991* (Ann Arbor, 1991), 39.

28. Cf. Hallo, *JAOS* 87 (1967), 66, s.v. Fibula.

29. Cf. H. Sauren, *OLP* 13 (1982), 48 (5). It can, however, be argued that the king is wearing a bead rather than a seal (Irene Winter, orally).

30. *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago, 1987), 108–112.

31. *Ibid.*, 110. For a shell inlay from Mari illustrating the latter possibility, see Harvey Weiss, ed., *Ebla to Damascus: Art and Archaeology of Ancient Syria* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 155, fig. 39.

scene,³² and has devoted a section of her study to the mounting and wearing of cylinder seals.³³ Although she regards the pictorial evidence as inconclusive, she deduces from grave finds that seals were attached by a string either around the neck or at the wrist.³⁴ In the Larsa-period graves from Ur, she noted burials with hematite seals tied to the wrist and a further, unscribed seal, between the feet of each skeleton.³⁵ And she cites P. R. S. Moorey to the effect that females were buried with their husbands' seals and vice versa.³⁶

Perhaps future discoveries will also illuminate the closing metaphors of Song 8:6.³⁷

32. *Die Einführungsszene: Entwicklung eines mesopotamischen Motivs von der altakkadischen bis zum Ende der altbabylonischen Zeit*, Münchener Vorderasiatische Studien 11 (Munich/Vienna, 1991).

33. "Aufhängung und Tragweise der Rollsiegel," *ibid.*, 45–48.

34. "An der Schnur um den Hals oder an das Handgelenk geknüpft," *ibid.* 46.

35. *Ibid.*, 48.

36. "What Do We know about the People Buried in the Royal Cemetery (of Ur)?" *Expedition 20* (1977–78), 24–40.

37. Cf. for now Keel, *Das Hohelied*, 249–51.